

Federer backing the bid

Tennis great Roger Federer tells Richard Eaton why he is supporting squash's bid for inclusion at the 2020 Olympics and recalls his time as a regular player

Roger Federer, regarded by many as the greatest tennis player of all time, has thrown his support wholeheartedly behind the campaign to get squash into the Olympics.

The backing of Federer, one of the world's most famous and recognisable sportsmen, is a significant boost to squash's chances at the International Olympic Committee selections, the outcome of which will be known later this year.

Federer has in the past been a regular squash player, still follows the sport and is clearly an enthusiast. His readiness to lend his name, immense popularity and status to the lobbying for the 2020 Games emerged after a meeting between

him and Nicol David at an ATP World Tour tournament in Rotterdam in February.

The record-breaking seven-times World Open champion and the record-breaking 17-times Grand Slam winner got on extremely well, their friendly relationship helping to trigger an initiative which saw Federer agreeing to back the bid.

More than that, it elicited genuine warmth for a sister racket sport from the master of another and sincere superlatives from David in return. Quite a lot of publicity for squash's Olympic bid followed immediately. But there may be more from Federer.

The extent of his enthusiasm became further evident when I popped a couple of questions to him a couple of weeks later

when he was competing in Dubai.

"I used to play it as a kid with my dad on Sundays if we had time or he had time. I always had time when I was younger," Federer said with a smile, which hinted he would like to have more time for squash.

"I always enjoyed it and I played up until about six years ago – not actively, but when I had a chance and I wasn't too tired. It's been a few years now. I hardly play any more just because of safety reasons. But I've always thought it was a great sport."

The basis of Federer's support then became clearer. "In Switzerland back in the 80s, when I was growing up, it was a big thing," he said. "Everybody was playing and it was very recreational. Now it's sort of badminton that has gotten better.

"So I think it would be a huge boost for squash if it were in the Olympic Games. Automatically, big countries like Russia and others would all of a sudden invest more in squash and the game could take off.

"Then, who knows? I'd personally be happy if it would get the call for the Olympics."

Intriguingly, Federer agreed that squash had made a contribution to his tennis. It was suggested to him that squash might have helped develop a capacity to retrieve better, especially in situations where he was forced wide.

"Maybe, yeah. For me it was always very natural, more natural than badminton," he answered. "I never played badminton much as a kid, except maybe on the beach.

"Squash has been a very natural game for me. I've always enjoyed playing racket sports, or (any) ball sports for that matter, for coordination. I think sometimes you can see when I play tennis that I do play a bit of squash as well."

A couple of weeks before, it had become evident that as soon as Federer met David, there was a rapport. It was relaxed, casual and, according to David, easy to have a laugh.

Federer made a remarkable effort to make time to talk with David and with England international Lauren Briggs, because it was a day on which he had a match, a press conference and other pre-agreed commitments, as well as family and friends to keep satisfied.

"I didn't want to get in the way, but he still agreed to talk with us and still gave his full endorsement," said David, who was delighted with the commendation for squash which resulted.



Tennis superstar Roger Federer underlines his support for squash's Olympic bid with world champion Nicol David

"Squash is a wonderful sport," Federer said. "I think it deserves to be in the Olympics. They run a great tour with great personalities. I'd be very happy for them personally."

It underlined the increasing ambassadorial skill of David, who quickly recognised how significant Federer's backing could be. "It's a dream come true for squash," she said.

"He was brought up playing squash and loves the game. He wants to see another racket sport become part of the Olympic Games. He's giving his own time to support the bid. His making this effort is such a bonus for the squash big picture. This could have a real impact."

Paradoxically perhaps, a bond may have been created by the fact that David's meeting with Federer happened on a day when he was surprisingly beaten. Despite this, he apparently met and spoke with people in a manner in which he hid his disappointment very well.

After-effects from defeats have sometimes been an issue for David. She has occasionally admitted to feeling down for a day or two after losing an important match, so she was both impressed and fascinated with how Federer dealt with the setback.

"It was just so interesting what he had to go through," she said. "Lauren and I were amazed at how good he was to us. He had so much to do, and yet he was very gracious and still gave us his full endorsement."

"He absolutely handled himself really well the whole time. He didn't show he was feeling down. He didn't bring any of us down. Instead, he lifted the discussion.

"He managed to lose really well. He realised what needed to be done and showed us how to do it. And he just moves on. I think that's what I learned from him."

How fortunate for squash that Federer and David got on so well! The immediate benefit was having one of the world's great sporting diplomats telling media people that it would be "amazing" for squash to get into the Olympics.

Later David, Briggs and New Zealander Joelle King met other members of the Federer team, including his agent Tony Godsick and his children, and one of his coaches, Severin Luthi, and his physio Stephane Vivier.

Meanwhile, Federer wanted to know more about how squash functions, asking questions about the tours, the rankings and the players. He thought that racket sports should "stick together and support each other", and added that he would try to bring his squash racket next time they met.

It suggests that a game between David and Federer could conceivably happen. There is, though, less than six months in which to arrange it, if it is to have a significant promotional effect.

"It's fantastic that someone of his calibre is supporting us and doing it genuinely because he likes the sport," David concluded. "He plays it and knows exactly what's going on. Having Roger Federer supporting us is a huge plus. But we still have a lot of work to do to keep the momentum going."

There is indeed. More than that, the last phase of a campaign can sometimes be the most important.

Squash advocates and supporters, with David as one of their leaders, will present the sport's case to the IOC in St Petersburg in September. There, decisions will be made about the location of the 2020 Olympics and which one extra sport is to be brought into the programme.