

TAKING TO THE STREETS

Getting rackets in hands is the first step to solving squash's participation crisis. Mike Dale meets Marcel Straub who's doing just that through his revolutionary Street Racket concept

So much of squash's current participation crisis boils down to numbers: players, courts, coaches, advocates, sponsors, money, publicity... there's simply not enough of any of the ingredients needed for the game to grow.

We know squash is a fabulous game, but the barriers to people discovering it are numerous – not least getting people to enter a (dark, sweaty, expensive, members-only, elitist) squash club in the first place.

Marcel Straub, a former Swiss squash international, has invented an accessible and addictive form of racket sport which kindles people's love for the game – and hopefully their desire to find their nearest court.

Street Racket consists of over 400 games that can be played solo, in pairs or larger groups, up against a wall or on a flat surface, on courts marked out in seconds with paint or chalk.

In a typical Street Racket game, played with a bespoke padel-sized racket and bouncy ball, the striker tries to hit into his or her opponent's zone, or hit targets on a wall or floor. To create long rallies, volleys and downward shots are not allowed, but that aside, there are few rules.

There is lots of movement, development of motor skills and intensity and complexity of the games can be adapted so every player finds the right level of challenge. The Street Racket mantra is 'anyone - anytime - anywhere'.

An example from their large (and expanding) catalogue of games is to draw nine numbers in squares on a wall and below it on the floor. That creates many competitive or cooperative variations, for example both players try to hit each number rising in sequence, or one player hits any number and his opponent then tries to match it.

Many games take place in Street Racket's



signature 'Swiss court' (with square zones arranged in a cross-shape). Four players each stand in a different square and hit the ball into the other sections. The squares can be coloured and as each player hits, they call out a colour for the next person to hit into. It's simple and fun, yet tests cognition, quick-thinking and skill execution.

Straub tells *Squash Player*: "I want more people in the world to get motivated to step into a squash court, but they will only do that once they see that racket sports are fun and that they can do it - then they want to know more and do it again.

"Our game is about fun, hand-eye coordination, movement and control. You get long rallies, it's never about hard hitting and it doesn't disturb the neighbours!" It is sustainable, versatile and can be used in schools and universities to enhance academic learning, with elements of maths, language or general knowledge included.

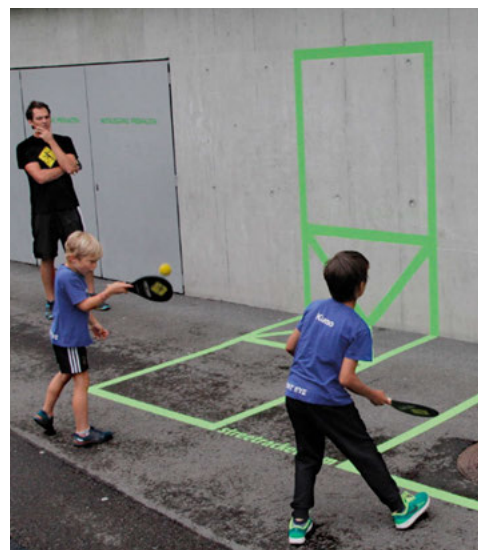
Straub (former head of school PE for the city of Zurich) and his wife and co-founder Rahel have made rapid progress in embedding the concept in schools and universities across Switzerland and Germany. There are 2000 permanently painted courts and 80 trained coaches in Swiss schools, villages and workplaces.

Street Racket is played in 30 countries including America, New Zealand, Pakistan, India, Iran and most of Europe. Advocates include Dutch football legend Marco van Basten. Lars Harms, Switzerland's former world No.41 squash player, called Street Racket "the perfect grassroots approach and an amazing barrier-free concept" giving federations of all racket sports "a magnificent tool at hand to look to a brighter future".

Straub, who grew up in the squash club his parents built, became a PE teacher and was troubled that racket sports were delivered so badly in schools, with cumbersome equipment which took ages to set up

and lots of 'dead time' fetching balls or standing still.

It was whilst doing charity work promoting table tennis in a developing country that Straub had his brainwave. With no tables, money or infrastructure, he was forced to innovate, use any surface and take the sport into the streets.



He started Street Racket as a hobby, then he and Rahel quit lucrative jobs to promote it full-time. With four kids, he admits it was a "big leap" and Covid-19 hasn't helped, but he is utterly determined to make it a success.

"What we've got is a dynamic, grassroots approach to racket sports," he says. "Street Racket is a great way of starting a lifelong love of the game."

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