

CALL OUT THE ARMY



Ian McKenzie witnesses England's young squash players on an unexpected training course – Operation Iron Racket

Elise Lazarus yanked on a rope, while Grace Gear wacked it with an axe handle. Georgina Kennedy's hands were a bit sore. Fleeting, she wondered how this would help her squash strokes, but then refocused quickly. The task at hand was to get the rope as taut as possible, so that the raft wouldn't break up as they paddled to the island.

Richie Fallows was missing his mobile phone and he was hungry. Those were the two things that troubled him the most. Army rations just didn't cut it for a young professional squash player used to heaping on the calories and then burning them.

"I've used up all my rations but saved a few nibbles," Kyle Finch said – and it was still just after lunchtime.

Kennedy explained what the young squash players had been doing: "We slept on a hill in the rain, went to bed at 1am and were up at 5am. I've been through most of my rations. We went for a long hike this morning. I'm a bit tired now."

This wasn't quite what the young England Academy players were expecting when they turned up at Surrey Sports Park for their three-day squash-training course.

On arrival, players were provided with a secure car park and told they would not need their rackets or mobile phones, which were packed away.

A bus was waiting to take them on a trip

– destination Sandhurst Military Academy (the British Army's officer training facility). This would be a different type of squash training. Squash kit was swapped for military fatigues, squash shoes for Army boots, there was an induction, a route march and a shelter had to be built for the night.

How did this all happen? England Squash had developed a relationship with the Army whereby national coach David Campion and England Squash coach Paul Carter worked with the Army Squash Academy at Manchester's National Squash Centre and at Aldershot Barracks.

"We held a three-day camp for the Army at the National Centre and the ideas came from that. Essentially, we wanted to make them [the Academy players] feel uncomfortable in a way that would raise their self-awareness and to help develop them as people. Sandhurst is a world-class environment and we can all learn so much from this experience," Campion explained.

This may seem a bit of a jump, but if we had to write down the qualities of a squash champion, what would we put higher up

our list – fit and fast or exceptional mental resilience? Once you start thinking in a broader sense about what qualities are needed, you can see the line of thinking behind what initially seemed a strange training regime.

The British Army has core values, of which there are six: courage, self-discipline, respect for others, integrity, loyalty and selfless commitment. Each was covered in separate briefings and discussions during the operation.

These values are developed through activities, which the Army call command tasks. These activities were not meant to be comfortable; they were meant to be challenging.

The first lesson for the new recruits was navigation, a skill that they would use in subsequent activities.

They then set about organising their accommodation for the night – an Army basha or, as the rest of us call it, a tarpaulin – and building a campfire for cooking their rations.

Then the new skills were put into action with a night navigation task, which kept them up to 1am. The recruits rose at 5am for 'tabbing', a loaded march over distance with a task at the end of the stage. This all took place before the day's 'activities'.

The command tasks, which are aimed at solving both physical and mental problems, started with crossing a chasm.

The next task was to make a square out of a long rope – not too difficult, but try it blindfold!

Then there was a maze – or navigating a ‘minefield’ – in which the participants returned to the beginning if a mistake was made.

A swim test followed, to check that participants were ready for (and could safely perform) the next activity – building a raft and paddling it. Barrels, planks of wood and cordage were supplied and teams of 6-7 set about the task. When the raft was built, it had to be paddled around an island and landed on a beach, where the key to retrieving the ingredients to give to the Army chef for their night meal would be found.

Rations were the boil-in-a-bag type, but included a capsicum and a water bottle.

Participants would need to build a fire to dry out after being wet and cold.

The day’s rations and snacks had tended to go early and inevitably participants’ performances deteriorated through lack of food. The Army calls the results of being angry and hungry – ‘hangry’. The idea was to show players how they performed when they were tired and stressed.

As one of the Army staff said: “After a while, they would hit a wall in energy levels.”

There was no let-up in the activities. A gun run followed the next morning, the aim of which was to move a simulated artillery



Curtis Malik, Charlie Lee and Kyle Finch work out how to get through a minefield while their colleagues look on

piece two miles over rough terrain and a river crossing.

Captain Rosie Hamilton, a former young England player, who had devised the operation, explained that the Army was not about to let the new recruits manhandle their precious artillery equipment, so simulated equipment it was.

The point of the unfamiliar activities, she explained, was to see how participants handled them. The operation also provided new mental and emotional challenges.

There was a team element and leadership was encouraged.

Maybe it was questionable how relevant the navigation skills were to on-court navigation, but developing mental resilience under pressure is a useful sporting ability.

After all the activities there was a peer review on each participant’s strengths and weaknesses.

Capt Hamilton explained: “You can’t develop as a person if you don’t know what to develop. It is all about self-awareness. There is an opportunity to get honest feedback from your peers. That doesn’t happen often. It is up to them what they take from this experience.

“Perhaps in future, when they are in a rough situation on court, they can look back and say ‘This is a piece of cake compared with what I faced and overcame on Exercise Iron Racket’.

“Your comfort zone expands the more you challenge it, so we are trying to expand what they are comfortable with and almost make them comfortable with being uncomfortable.”

“If you want to be a successful squash player or soldier, you have to push yourself beyond what is easy and safe, and look beyond that.”



Georgina Kennedy and Grace Gear work out how to rope barrels and planks together to make a raft