

WILTSHIRE CURED

The size of the task in front of Dax Mellor became crystal-clear when he organised his first Wiltshire county junior training day in 2012. The grand total of young players keen enough to turn up to the first organised coaching session held in the county for years was three – and two of them were Mellor's own children.

**MIKE DALE**

discovers how one man's dedication has rejuvenated the county's junior squash scene

To his relief, three more turned up later. They were triplets. "I said to their father 'Congratulations, you've just doubled the amount of junior squash players in the county!'" he recalls.

Once upon a time, Wiltshire had a decent pedigree in junior squash (yours truly scraped in at no.5 during the mid-90s), but before Mellor got involved, organised participation had dwindled to virtually nil. Feeble infrastructure was partly to blame. In what is one of England's largest counties, there's only one recognised squash club left, Wessex in Swindon, and that doesn't have a junior section. All the other courts are either municipal facilities or belong to the Ministry of Defence, schools or colleges.

"There really wasn't any activity taking place at all. No junior programmes, coaching, competitions, no inter-county matches, nothing. Basically, I was starting from scratch," reflects Mellor.

By the following year, 2013, Mellor had organised a county closed championship, entered a team in the County Cup (an event for 'minor' counties and B teams) and organised some friendlies. Furthermore, attendance at county training sessions had swelled to 20.

All this was fitted around his day job in the RAF, but later that year he went to Afghanistan for six months. On his return,

he left the military and dedicated himself full-time to Wiltshire's young squash players. "It was our breakthrough year," he says.

That breakthrough came from Mellor delivering squash in primary schools and setting up junior programmes at nearby squash courts, then linking the two together.

He started with an eight-week programme with 60 kids in two primary schools in Marlborough, delivered virtually free of charge. Amazingly, 48 of those 60 children were sufficiently inspired to join Marlborough Squash Club's junior programme (the typical take-up from in-school programmes is around 25%).

Over half of those 48 are still playing, with many now in the county's under-13 squad. There are currently eight coaching sessions a week and 145 children playing at least once a week in Marlborough. Three years ago that figure was zero.

"The first task is selling it to schools," says Mellor. "I emphasise to head teachers and parents that squash contains a lot of skills that are transferable to other areas and from other areas. They learn the fundamentals of movement, the ready position, creating space, using height, agility, balance and the coordination required for hitting the ball.

"You've got to market it as a rounded, beneficial programme with a squash

theme, rather than simply a squash programme."

The next part is the pathway from schools into local clubs, as Mellor explains: "You've got to have an inspiring coach, of course, but the structure has to be right, so you've got something to offer everyone and they all feel special.

"The sporty, multi-talented kids need to be shown a pathway that will engage and motivate them – there's the school team, then the county team and the inter-counties competition.

"Equally, there will be children who aren't sporty or competitive, whose parents probably just want something to distract them from their computer screens. You've got to provide something for them that's fun, inclusive and places them with people of a similar age and ability.

"In the fourth week of the six-week programme at schools I let parents know there's a taster day specifically for their child at a local facility."

The initial success in Marlborough has now been replicated in Swindon, Salisbury and Chippenham, all spawned by those crucial initial primary school visits. Coordinators have been assigned to three different districts of the county to deliver in 22 schools (so far) and convert that into regular participation at local public courts.

Another important step was Mellor's success in persuading the County Sports Partnership to include squash in the school games programme, which ensures its place on the curriculum of even more local schools. "That was extremely hard work. It was a bit like getting squash into the Olympics!" he says.

Mellor's ingenuity is evident elsewhere too. He invited performance coach and former PSA Tour player Jesse Engelbrecht to develop and mentor all the county's level two coaches, so that each district of the county receives the best possible standard of coaching.

The recent closure of South Marston Squash Club in Swindon saw the county teams lose their home, so Mellor has set up a grand prix series at venues around Wiltshire. Recently, he took a gang of 30 players on the train to Bristol for an inspiring day at Hadrian Stiff's Elitesquash training centre.

He also organised a girls-only 'squash and pamper day' with two neighbouring counties, which saw 60 girls enjoy a spa, treatments and a leisurely lunch in between sessions on court. "That typifies my philosophy," says the 44-year-old.

"Squash is the constant, but packaging other things around it makes it fresh and keeps people engaged."

It's still early days, but this grass-roots graft is already yielding some fine crops. Cameron Stratton (one of the triplets from that first training session) is excelling in Millfield school's first team, Calli Smith recently won the U17 Winchester Open, Talia Eastlake was Bath Open U11 champion in February and Sophie Bolland recently won the U13 Bournemouth Open.

"Sophie was one of the kids I delivered to in primary school three years ago. She'd never held a racket before in her life. She was so keen that she helped me set up the mini-squash wall in the playground and wanted to play more afterwards. Now she's representing the county and competing in European events. It's phenomenal," Mellor reflects.

His efforts haven't gone unnoticed. "The job Dax has done here is unbelievable," says Ken Nicholls, a level two coach and Mellor's coordinator in the east of the county, following his move to Swindon from Berkshire just over a year ago.

"When I came down here and saw the numbers, I couldn't believe it. You can tell Dax was in the logistics department of the RAF; he's highly organised, motivated and compelling.

"I can only echo what Jesse Engelbrecht told me after his first session here: very soon Wiltshire are going to be a force to be reckoned with."



"You've got to have an inspiring coach"

DAX MELLOR'S FOUR STEPS TO COUNTY JUNIOR SUCCESS

1. DO AN AUDIT

"Unless you know what you've currently got, you won't know where to start. I visited all Wiltshire's 29 facilities and whilst I found no junior activity taking place, there was squash being played; it just needed coordinating – club nights, box leagues, beginners' nights, ladies' squash, juniors, team squash, coaching etc."

2. START SMALL

"Our success in Wiltshire initially all started from those two primary schools in Marlborough. Identify an 'easy' opportunity first and that demonstrable example will convince others of your value."

3. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES

"There's no point getting kids hooked on squash if there's not a structure and opportunities for them to play and progress. Make everyone feel special by providing something for all ages and abilities."

4. MARKET SQUASH EFFECTIVELY

"Squash is a great product; we just need to be smarter in how we sell it. Emphasise its wider benefits and 'package' it according to your audience."

For more information, go to wiltshirejuniorsquash.co.uk