

SQUASH AT THE HUB

Rod Gilmour takes a look at the University of Warwick's new £36 million Sport and Wellness Hub, where squash is at the forefront

The Hub includes six state-of-the-art Courtcraft Innov8 panel courts, one of which has a movable side wall



Warwick and Kenilworth Premier Squash League (PSL) team trio – Raphael Kandra, Sarah-Jane Perry and Iker Pajares Bernabeu – are delighted after testing their new courts. The team topped the Northern Division of the PSL and will play home games at the new centre

There is nothing like being ‘front and centre stage’ when it comes to design – and that is exactly where squash has been placed at the University of Warwick’s new state-of-the-art Sport and Wellness Hub.

Warwick and Kenilworth are now aiming to capitalise on their successes as a burgeoning Premier Squash League (PSL) team by attracting both elite athletes and new players to the sport.

With the Hub, which was opened in April, the university plans to become the most physically active campus community in the UK by 2020. You only have to walk through the facility’s doors to capture that feel and the university’s aspirations. A climbing centre features to the left, while, to the right, large windows look down on its innovative new squash courts. Talk about a vibrant, active entrance.

“With the positioning and the way it has been designed, squash is now so visible and accessible,” says Steve Townsend, head squash coach of Warwick Sport at the University of Warwick.

“Our major USP is the location within the centre. There is a club feel and the openness towards squash means that everyone who walks into the centre sees us. That is special.”

The Hub comprises a sports hall, swimming pool, fitness suites and flexible studio spaces, outdoor 3G sports pitches and netball courts. It is also the official training

ground of Coventry’s Wasps Netball Super League team. This project was Courtcraft’s largest ever sports contract where they not only installed six innovative squash courts but also over 3,500m² of Boen Sports flooring.

At the front and centre of the £36 million facility lies the squash courts, which already play host to top-class squash, after the University of Warwick tied up with Kenilworth Squash Club to form an elite squad, which has just completed its second season in the PSL, finishing top of the six-strong Northern Division.

The placement of the courts is perhaps a nod to squash’s overall success in Warwickshire, which has a “booming” culture, according to Townsend, thanks to clubs which employ committed coaches. They are now seeing numbers increase because of it.

Having overseen squash at both the University of Warwick and Kenilworth over the years, the PSL partnership was implemented by Townsend, the 2013 England Squash Coach of the Year, who has studied and coached at the university since 1991.

“My remit is to improve the student and staff experience at Warwick, to increase participation, to make links in the comm-

unity and, last but not least, to run a performance programme, so that athletes can fulfil their sporting potential at the same time as fulfilling their academic potential,” Townsend explained.

One of his chief tasks at the Hub is to support the university’s ambitious 2020 goal by growing squash and racketball [squash 57] at Warwick, while overseeing the British talent coming through its PSL team, who include the likes of Nick Wall and Harry Falconer.

Furthermore, Warwick will offer squash scholarships and is now ready to rival universities such as Birmingham and Nottingham, which have similar multi-million-pound elite set-ups.

He said: “Having studied at Warwick and then coached here for many years, I was fantastically excited to hear that the university was going to invest in sport and in squash in particular. For me to be appointed to run the performance programme and to grow the sport at Warwick is a wonderful opportunity and challenge.

“The university is investing heavily in squash, with the vision of being one of the strongest, if not the strongest, university programme in the coming years – and we’re confident we can achieve this.”

All six courts were built to World Squash Federation (WSF) technical standards. There is room for 90 spectators on the show courts, while players will be able to

choose how they play, with adjustable tin heights.

Both the university and Courtcraft say that these courts will help to develop talented young players and introduce a new wave of people to the sport thanks to courses and lessons available at the centre. It is, as Courtcraft says, a "Premier Division squash facility that stands out in the UK".

Of course, traditional plaster courts still have their benefits, but, on closer inspection, Innov8's panel systems clearly have their advantages.

Firstly, the overall installation costs are considerably cheaper using the panel system technology against block and plaster, while the longevity and durability of the playing surfaces are far greater. This hasn't simply been an overnight implementation. The Innov8 courts took three years of research and development to reach a system that can - importantly - be manufactured in the UK and installed in any configuration of squash-court project.

The court facility at the Hub, which will see regular use through lessons and courses for students and the general public, consists of a doubles court with a manual movable wall and a bank of four courts arranged in a linear fashion, with the moving wall in courts 3 and 4.

Testing of the Innov8 Wall Panel System by Courtcraft and the WSF involved using a squash cannonball machine firing continuous balls 3,000 times from a two-metre distance, at approximately 100mph, into a one square-foot (30sq cm) target area.

The idea here was to test against wall degradation, simulating a 10-year period. With testing complete, results revealed that the panel-board system and paint were completely resistant to degradation, which left Courtcraft to assert that it not only simulated up to 10 years' play in the service area of a front play wall, but also that the level of solid durability surpasses traditional plaster systems.

Along with the Innov8 system, a sprung Boen squash surface was also installed in each court, along with Ellis Pearson glass walls and doors.

In a noteworthy message to all club administrators, the overall testing underlines better court lifespan, while wall repairs and replacement will be kept to a minimum if the courts are kept in the right environmental conditions.

"Courtcraft has been using its technical know-how to design and build squash courts for over 20 years and is proud to have built the next generation of squash courts to help develop our future squash players," says Courtcraft director Alex Bell, who urges club owners to visit the university to get a feel for the courts and design.

The entrance of the University of Warwick's new £36million Sport and Wellness Hub



"This gives confidence for new facility owners when taking ownership of their new courts, as they will last a long time."

So, now the key question: how do the courts play? Feedback from players told Courtcraft that the court characteristics have fast play, clear acoustic rebound noise and consistent rebound.

University of Warwick and Kenilworth players Sarah-Jane Perry - who is unbeaten for five years in the PSL - Raphael Kandra, of Germany, and Iker Pajares Bernabeu, of Spain, were the first players to hit on the courts.

Perry, who lives only a few miles from the facility, says: "The building is absolutely fantastic. It's quite difficult to balance having enough space for spectators and making sure they are close enough together to generate atmosphere, but they have done that really well.

"The lighting is really good, which is important, and the wall and flooring have been finished well.

"Sometimes people can get put off because the squash courts are hidden out of the way and are separate - but that's not the case here; they are front and centre stage."

With the Innov8 system, first-class facilities and squash at the heart of the Hub, Townsend has certainly been given a head start in his quest for growth.

And soon he may not be the only one enjoying the trappings of Courtcraft's technology, the company having already constructed facilities in diverse places such as an RAF base hangar to a venue on a Scottish island.

Bell revealed that there are over 30 major construction projects in the pipeline for 2019/20 in the UK, either at tendering or contract stage.

These number in size from one to eight courts, with over 50 per cent being tendered to have Courtcraft's new wall panel system courts built.

"This is a healthy sign of a growing sport getting serious investment in new facilities at leisure centres, colleges, schools, clubs and private individuals," he pointed out.

WHAT THEY SAY

Thomas Smith, managing director of Courtcraft: "We have built a top-tier facility at Warwick to help develop the next generation of top-tier players. If you are thinking of getting new courts installed, then get Courtcraft Innov8 Wall Panel System courts, British-made and British-built."

Warwickshire head squash coach **Steve Townsend**: "The ethos of the Hub is to be open and accessible to everyone, and the glass-backed courts will give everyone who visits the Hub a chance to see how dynamic our sport is. We want people from across the local area to get involved with squash and these courts will help us to do just that."

Lisa Dodd-Mayne, director of sport & active communities at the University of Warwick: "The Hub is more than just a building - it will transform and change people's lives. It will also transform sport on our campus, but it is also open to members of the public and local communities, to take advantage of one of the finest facilities in the region."

PSL player **Raphael Kandra**: "The courts are right in the centre of the club and feel like home already."



WHAT IS AN INNOV8 WALL?

- A sandwich construction of super high-density board attached to an aluminium and steel sub-frame
- The void is filled with aggregate to aid ball-rebound response and acoustics
- Extremely durable squash-court paint on the play surfaces finishes the walls, along with bespoke aluminium out-of-play capping pieces
- A World Squash Federation-tested and accredited product
- For further information see courtcraft.co.uk
- Tel: 01942 881 500