



CHERISH OUR COACHES!



Danny Lee, head pro at St George's Hill for over 30 years, says coaches must be the foundation of a squash revival

Fully-supported coaches can revive the game, says Danny Lee

The UK squash scene in the late 1970s and 1980s was exciting and vibrant: new commercial clubs with ambitious owners juxtaposed with members' clubs of all shapes and sizes, often change-resistant but excited nonetheless to be part of the revolution.

The adult tournament scene was thriving with sometimes three or four events per weekend, most under the auspices of the Squash Rackets Association and counting towards a national ranking, a list that by the mid-80s included an unsurpassed depth of standard that lasted until the 1990s.

Of the four million players that squash attracted at its peak, most were men. The women's game was mostly separate, but nonetheless healthy, and was showcased from 1982 onwards on the portable courts that staged the British Open. Junior tournaments were fairly haphazard until the early 80s when huge numbers of new young players created a big demand for events and ranking lists.

From around No.15 downwards in the national rankings many players coached to supplement their income. There were pros in the commercial clubs, churning out the hours on court, but also stringing and selling in their pro shops.

The UK was the hub of the squash world and both the tournaments and local leagues attracted players from around the globe, many of them settling and several taking up coaching posts.

Squash was taking off in Europe, particularly in Germany and France, but also Sweden, Finland, Austria and Switzerland. There were venues galore, busy tournament calendars and well rewarded coaching jobs which attracted both novice opportunists and experienced pros.

Globally the game was at its peak in terms of participation and the promise of improved TV coverage which finally made squash a true spectator sport brought genuine excitement.

In one enormous country, though, the message wasn't getting through. There was very little softball played in the USA but a couple of hardball greats used to come and play a few tournaments on the PSA (then ISPA) tour.

I'm unsure of the catalyst, but as the squash boom receded in the 90s, with commercial owners reducing courts and selling facilities, clubs and universities in the United States started converting their hardball courts to in order to play the international game.

Most of America's squash courts were in sustainable old-style sports clubs and colleges so there was little chance of them being lost to commercial whims. Middle-class Americans enjoyed the new game with its longer rallies and, crucially, softball squash became an integral part of university sports programmes.

The game has gradually grown stateside as it has spread from the north eastern states and there is still plenty of growth potential.

Crucially, coaching and a strong programme are seen as an integral part of a successful squash section in the USA and this has created a huge demand for professional coaches.

The American appreciation of sporting talent is well known as is their recognition that excellence should be highly rewarded, not negatively negotiated to demotivating levels of remuneration.

The alarming result for squash of this unbridled enthusiasm and growth in North America has been the 'talent drain' across the Atlantic. Literally hundreds of top-class professional coaches have moved to the USA and one can link their absence to squash's demise in their former homelands.

The game is the same. It's still a great workout and a fantastic sport to play. Where a quality pro is installed, squash still can thrive.

The tide can be reversed but the recovery process will be long and gradual, particularly in the UK. So many ex-playing professionals of a great standard aged between 25 and 70 have been lost and the game collectively has done nothing to stop them or entice them to stay. Imagine where we would be if the attitude of club committees and management had been different and if more value had been placed on the experience, knowledge and passion of our elite coaches.

Those who have resisted the lure of the dollar are either the few who were made to feel appreciated and rewarded, or who couldn't move because of circumstance.

One way to retain a talent pool could be to work really hard at building the university and school squash sectors back up. I'm well aware this suggestion may sound slightly elitist but I also believe in the altruism of the better-off squash players who enjoy giving back to the game. The member organisations of the Squash Education Alliance in the States bear testament to this.

It could be our only hope, but impetus must also come from our remaining clubs. Supporting and incentivising coaches, placing a genuine value on their expertise and trusting their inner drive to promote squash would at least give our sport a fighting chance.