



Veteran club owner **Steve Lewis** offers a personal perspective on what squash can learn from its bygone years of boom and bust

# LESSONS FROM THE PAST



## I was lucky enough to go to a school which had two (tatty) squash courts and a teacher who was sufficiently passionate about the game to want to show pupils how to play it properly.

As a result, I was a pretty good player by the age of 16 and played until I was just past 60, when my final match (four years ago for Buckinghamshire Over 60s) led to yet another injury and the decision to call it a day. I've since tried, and conspicuously failed, to master golf.

I became a junior employee at a commercial squash club in 1979. My duties were varied and almost entirely menial. Essentially, I have been doing the same ever since, although for the last 30 years I have been able to call the clubs in which I work my own.

In the early days, independent commercial squash clubs were an entirely new concept and there were no 'experts' to show anyone how to run them.

At the time (and this may be difficult to comprehend now) squash was not just popular, it was *the* sport to play. For some keen players, perhaps successful in some other field of business, it was fun to ride the wave by building and running their own squash club.

The clubs these people built provided only courts (typically between five and 10), changing rooms and a licensed bar, which was expected to provide necessary additional income.

As one of the better players in each of the five clubs I worked in before I founded my first club, I found it easy to settle in and find games to play. What I didn't realise at the time was that I was part of a system which led to the eventual demise of comm-

ercial squash clubs, and a massive decline in the sport's popularity.

In the absence of any experienced advice, these new owner/managers turned to the best squash players of their day for guidance. The result was that (with some notable exceptions) owners focused on the standard of play as their measure of success.

It was a disaster.

The better, more experienced players demanded (and were given) priority court bookings, mostly through team matches (the Herga Squash Club in Harrow, for example, once had 13 men's and ladies' teams in the Middlesex League alone). At such clubs there was at least one match at home every night of the week and the average non-team standard player would find it very difficult to book a court at any sociable hour.

The clubs were so elitist. Good players had constant access to the lion's share of the court bookings, so they became better. The lesser players and beginners were largely ignored. Local hierarchy was not based upon human merit but squash playing standard.

The eventual result was inevitable: 'Average Joe' became disenchanted and turned to other activities. The game ceased to trend and membership numbers dwindled. A gradual but significant decline had started. Commercial squash clubs quietly, relentlessly went out of business. There are now hardly any still trading in the UK.

Since the early/mid 90s court numbers have continued to dwindle. My five-court club in Windsor traded until its lease expired in 2013. It is now a senior living facility.

***Last year, I reduced the number of courts in my club in Marlow from two to one. I found it gut wrenchingly painful, but commercially myself and my business partners had no choice. That area is now being used by hundreds of new people for all manner of activities. Sadly, the case is proven.***

A squash court is a big area (on two floor levels) and caters for just two people – the space/occupation balance simply does not work commercially.

The lessons to learn are obvious.

- Squash remains a wonderful sport. It requires athleticism, co-ordination, quick thinking, determination, fitness and stamina. It can be played in all weather and takes less than an hour
- Squash is a really convenient way to exercise, compete and get a sporty adrenaline rush
- Squash will never again operate on a standalone commercial basis
- The future of squash lies in the members' clubs (and perhaps public leisure facilities).

Assuming enough courts survive, squash can continue to thrive, albeit never again as it was in the 1980s. However, there is one absolute pre-requisite – as per the teacher who kindled my love for squash, only great passion for teaching the young to learn the game will enable it to survive in any meaningful way.