

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Can outdoor courts lead squash into a brighter future? Mike Dale asks those pioneering the game's open-air revolution



If a child, adult or family wants to play tennis, there is usually a court in a nearby park. If they hanker for a game of badminton, they can buy a pop-up outdoor set. Table tennis looks fun – so just fix a net to the dinner table. What is the equivalent grassroots entry point for squash?

The answer, sadly, is that there isn't one. Squash, by and large, is just not accessible in bite-size form in the same way as other racket sports. This lack of a highly visible, easy initial 'pathway' into the game is one of many reasons why participation is in rapid decline.

The pandemic has, of course, only exacerbated the crisis. Squash, hardly the most Covid-friendly of leisure pursuits, has been hit hard. Reduced incomes, the rise in mental health issues and worsening levels of physical inactivity will make people even more disinclined to consider (or renew) a squash club membership.

It is for all these reasons that many people of influence within squash have started talking about outdoor courts. The theory is that open-air courts, placed in prominent locations with a high footfall, will make the game visible and accessible. Indoor squash courts are, by definition, hidden inside buildings, many of them members-only clubs or universities. We want to turn average members of the public into squash players, but *they need to see it to be it!*

Recognising this, the PSA Foundation has put together an outdoor court committee. Members include Carlos Schonenberg from

Squash Para Todos, whose four open-air concrete courts serve underprivileged local children in El Salvador, and Robert Gibraltar and Jeffrey Anschlowar from True Squash in New York, who have built a stunning outdoor steel court on the site of a welding firm.

The committee are starting pilot projects, including two outdoor courts in Chicago and a potential project in the UK, to test whether the concept works and investigate best practice.

Separately, *Squash Player* also understands that there are early plans in place for a permanent outdoor court in a prominent Birmingham location as part of the legacy programme for the 2022 Commonwealth Games.

So, things are happening. The important point to stress for existing squash players is this: outdoor community squash will not look like squash as we know it. The luxuries of a sprung floor, precise dimensions, a perfectly true bounce and even a back door aren't important to someone encountering squash for the first time (they have nothing to compare it to, after all!).

"An outdoor squash facility needs to be designed for the local community, not for

the current playing population," says PSA Foundation executive Jordan Jefferies. "Where necessary, we need to adapt the rules, adjust court line positions or change the type of ball used.

"Squash is the only racket sport to have not yet taken the game to the outdoors at community level. We need to bring squash to the communities, make it accessible, inclusive and in full view for anyone to have a go."

UK-based Melior Sports have designed two low-budget outdoor courts and have held talks with several interested parties about potential projects. Founder Nick Thompson said: "Somewhere squash has gone wrong is that every single court has to be precisely contoured and finished to a championship-standard. It's not actually good for squash.

"A tennis court in a public park bears little resemblance to Centre Court at Wimbledon. High-spec squash courts would actually be unsuitable for many outdoor projects. Outdoor squash is simply an outlet for people to experience the thrill, fitness and social benefits of a rebound sport, and whet their appetite to do it again."

This is a lesson the founders of Public Squash have learned through experience. The pioneering outdoor all-glass court they built for a six-figure sum in New York's Hamilton Fish Park in 2015 has been a great success, with people often queuing to play and spectators sitting on deckchairs to watch in summer.

However, given their time again, they admit they may have opted for a less high-calibre product. The court is currently out of use due to a smashed panel and damaged floor.

"We pretty much tried to build an indoor court outside," says co-founder Ryan Wall. "We needed to make something that was a little bit more durable. We're currently exploring other options to build a cheaper court. Even the best players can go on a slightly crappier court and still have a good game."

Fellow co-founder Alex Wessner adds: "People thought it was great because the court looked so beautiful – but how can you democratise a sport when the court is \$200,000?"

"This is about having fun – that aspect is what makes it successful or not. No-one cares about the cracks in the tennis or basketball court; they just play whenever they can find some time. They just want to be out there playing and taking in oxygen – it's good for the mind, the soul, relaxing after work and being out there in the community. Playing squash outside is the best!"

Not far away, in Manhattan, James Green, executive director of the Squash Center, has studied Public Squash's experience. He has raised funds for two self-designed outdoor courts costing just a projected \$70,000 fully installed. They plan to convert one of the city's 2,000 outdoor handball courts to build them.

"The Squash Center's mission is to make the sport more accessible. Outdoor courts are one of many ways to make this happen," says Green.

Mike Harris, a level 4 coach and head of performance and community at Edgbaston Priory Club in Birmingham, England, is also fully on board with the concept.

"Outdoor courts should be strategically placed within close proximity to existing clubs," he states. "The courts could be run in partnership with the council and local clubs, where the professional coaching team can deliver a comprehensive schools and community programme. The remainder of the time they could be available to the general public.

"The aim is that over time people who are trying squash outside will want to progress to trying squash inside, using clubs that are close by."



Squash Para Todos in El Salvador

Jefferies highlights one obvious sticking point. "Initial funding will be a challenge," he admits. "This is a relatively unproven concept and so it will take a joined-up approach from multiple trusted bodies to have a serious bid to make it happen."

With governing bodies and clubs so cash-strapped post-Covid, Jefferies suggests that grant or match funding from trusts, corporate social responsibility (CSR) schemes and government initiatives are more likely sources of support.

"It cannot be an outdoor squash court for the sake of an outdoor squash court," he warns. "You need to ask yourself what challenges local communities are facing

now and be clear how this is aiding the situation."

Where the resources to fund outdoor squash may come from may not yet be clear, but the concept is being widely embraced. "Outdoor squash will give people of all ages the opportunity to try a sport that has been hidden from view," says Harris.

"When people see these courts, we want them to be inquisitive, to be wowed and motivated to try something new, to pick up a racket and ball, and go and have fun. Only by increasing its visibility can the sport of squash begin to regenerate."



The Public Squash court in New York's Hamilton Fish Park