



TAKING SQUASH TO THE PEOPLE

Mike Dale discovers how a frustrated chef's epiphany has led to a whole community falling in love with squash

A year ago, Aron Harper-Robinson was in a rut. Working as a chef to subsidise a music career that wasn't taking off, and with a family to support, he felt "totally demoralised".

During a lunch break, he sat down and wrote a list of mantras for what he wanted to achieve with the rest of his life, including, 'Be your own person', 'Don't copy anyone', 'Get creative' and 'Trailblaze'. It led to an epiphany.

In his early 20s Aron had coached squash on a programme led by Yawar Abbas which engaged children from under-privileged areas in Manchester. Almost two decades on, it was that early experience which inspired his career pivot.

"I thought to myself, 'I'm better than this,'" said Aron. "I decided to go back to squash coaching but do it differently; totally blow the doors off it!"

Nine months on, Calder Community Squash CIC is flourishing, with programmes that use squash as a vehicle to enrich lives in under-served communities in Halifax, West Yorkshire.

Although Aron, 40, is based at Old Crossleyans Club, his success comes from taking squash to the people, not waiting for the people to come to the club.

"I think clubs are a trap," he says. "We've got to get creative and get out of the clubs to increase uptake in the game. 90% of people I bring in to Old Crossleyans never knew the club was there, and they only live round the corner."

'Squash at the Mosque' was Calder Community Squash's first programme.

Aron got youngsters hitting up against a wall in the car park of a mosque in one of Halifax's most deprived areas. The kids had fun and now the programme's name has been tweaked to 'Squash from the Mosque', with youngsters visiting Old Crossleyans to play twice a week.

That early success reinforced the importance of actively engaging communities on their own doorstep, putting rackets in hands giving them the opportunity to fall in love with squash.

'Squash and Scran' at a local youth club was his next venture. It draws on his knowledge of food preparation and nutrition to teach youngsters how to cook basic meals, combining it with street squash outside against the wall or rebound nets.

Aron is part of Rackets Cubed, delivering their model of squash coaching, maths, English and nutrition to children from nearby Warley Road Primary at Old Crossleyans once a week.

Partnering with International Mixed Ability Sports (IMAS), he has started mixed ability racketball classes for young people, including those with disabilities and special needs. They're called the Calder Crocs and training sessions are full of music, movement and fun.

A new project, 'We See You', engages refugees and asylum seekers in squash and relevant education opportunities, while 'Bounce Back' uses squash and physical exercise to support men experiencing mental health issues. One participant said: "At my first squash session my self-esteem was pretty low, but it has given me a real boost to be learning something new. Every session is different and always great fun.

It's a real antidote to the isolation during the pandemic."

Calder Community Squash is set to go on tour to educate other clubs in the art of outreach work so they too can break down barriers with their local communities and get more people from all sorts of different demographics on court hitting balls.

"I have yet to meet a kid who doesn't have a good time on a squash court," Aron states. "The more kids you work with, the more uptake you will get. You've just got to keep providing more opportunities that offer a pathway into the club."

All this innovation has attracted funding from the National Lottery, Sport England, Yorkshire Sport Foundation, England Squash and the Community Foundation for Calderdale. "The more creative I become, the more people want to come on board. The funding has given me lots of freedom to explore new avenues," says Aron.

He adds: "I genuinely believe that making these small changes to people's lives is utterly necessary because the bigger picture right now is pretty alarming and overwhelming.

"Over a lifetime you learn things that are important to you and it became clear I was really interested in trying to unite people and communities. Squash just happens to be my game and the vehicle I use to do that. Growing the game and showing it in a positive light to new audiences is a bi-product.

"It works in my favour that nobody seems to know what squash is, because they are learning something totally new. It's a joy. I'm mad passionate about it. It gives me a lot of satisfaction, especially considering where I was a year ago."



Aron Harper-Robinson