

RONNY WEARS IT WELL!

Mike Dale meets Ronny Vlassaks, the international squash coach often likened to rock legend Rod Stewart

Ronny Vlassaks is one of Europe's most highly-reputed and much-travelled squash coaches. He gets recognised wherever he goes – or rather people think they recognise him.

"People really think I am Rod Stewart!" he says. "They often stare and whisper. It's happened for 25 years, in airports and at tournaments. It doesn't bother me at all, but whoever I happen to be travelling with usually finds it strange. I like his music, but you won't find me at any of his concerts!"

Just like the world-famous crooner, Vlassaks spends plenty of time on the road. He lives in the village of Bocholt in Belgium and commutes every week to his two jobs – firstly 200km to Hoofddorp near Amsterdam, where he is head coach at the Dutch Squash Federation 24 hours a week, then onward a further 390km to Germany, where he is head coach at Paderborn Squash Club, the eight-time European club champions.

In various capacities he coaches some of Europe's finest players. When we speak, he has just finished a session with world no.9 Simon Rösner, whom he describes as "in very good shape and very motivated", having just returned from his first ever PSA World Series semi-final in Qatar.

Vlassaks has coached Belgian sisters Nele and Tinne Gilis since they were juniors, describing himself as "like a father" to them.

Swiss no.1 Nicolas Müller and Germany's world no.42, Raphael Kandra – both based at Paderborn – also receive his tutelage, as well as Latvia's Ineta Mackevica (WR88), a recent civil engineering graduate whose squash career is flourishing.

However, Vlassaks highlights Fleur Maas – European no.1 at under-17 level despite being only 15 – as one of the most promising juniors in the Dutch Squash Association Academy he runs with Tommy Berden, the PSA's chief commercial officer.

The 53-year-old squeezes in one more role – Belgian national coach, although as there's no national programme, this involves only a few coaching sessions per year and leadership at international team tournaments.

The Belgian's background is not that of your typical elite-level squash coach. He

didn't hit a squash ball until he was 26, having spent his formative years as a professional cyclist.

He won 176 races at junior and amateur level, and earned many podium finishes on the Andalusian and Mediterranean Tours, as well as victory in the 1988 Veenendaal-Veenendaal Dutch Classic.

However, disillusioned by the way professional cyclists were treated by their teams and by the widespread doping in the sport, he changed career completely after meeting a woman who at the time managed a squash club in Holland. He quickly fell in love with the game (and her – they later married).

"It was the physical side I liked most. You have to go for it full-paced," he says. "In the beginning, there were 65-year-olds with big beer bellies who beat me really easily. I thought 'this would never happen in cycling!' It annoyed me so much that I had to do something about it!"

He travelled to England to do his coaching courses and took just three years to get to UKCC Level 4, mentored by former England coach Paul Wright. He then got a job on the junior programme at the Dutch Squash Federation, before working in his native Belgium for 13 years. He then returned to Holland as national coach in 2010, as well as working privately with many top players.

He started at Paderborn in the summer of 2015 and his liking for the place, managing director Norman Farthing and chairman Andreas Preising is palpable. "It's the best squash club I ever saw in my whole life," he beams.

"Everyone breathes sport in the city and they support squash tremendously, even the mayor, who I have met four or five times."



Those receiving Vlassaks' expertise know the importance he places on perception. "Many players' problems come from seeing the action of their opponent too late," he explains. "Poor perception loses them time, making their racket preparation and ball-striking too rushed."

The cream of Europe's squash talent are fortunate indeed to benefit from the skill, enthusiasm and dedication of the man with the rock-star hair. Some guys have all the luck!



Ronny Vlassaks discussing a point with German no.1 Simon Rösner during a training session at Paderborn