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A challenge with targets on the front wall



THE ISQUASH REVOLUTION

Rod Gilmour talks to German entrepreneur Markos Kern about his interactiveSquash invention and predicts it could be the sport's future

Rod Gilmour meets his next opponent on the interactive court

“It is the image which drives you to a sport. You want to go out and be proud to say ‘I am a squash player’. You want friends to say ‘wow that’s cool; it’s faster than tennis’. At the moment, the reaction is ‘you’re so young; why squash?’”

German entrepreneur Markos Kern, a 35-year-old who has worked with some of the world’s biggest brands and even set up a surf school in North Korea, is doing his best to answer that question with his latest creation, interactiveSquash.

By his own admission, Kern is not a racket-sports player. The iSquash concept was conceived in Dubai last January, when a sandstorm cut short a planned clay pigeon session. Instead, he played squash for the first time with a friend. The hyperactive Kern took to the sport immediately.

It was a project with a start-up developer in Shanghai which then moved the iSquash

concept along. Trying to find a glass floor for an intelligent system involving LEDs he was working on for a company, a friend suggested he talk to ASB, the innovative squash-court manufacturer. Within three months the first iSquash prototype was developed and Kern’s company, Fun With Balls, was launched with eight full-time staff.

Now I’ve witnessed mindboggling rallies, marvelled at the fitness of the modern generation and seen how high-definition television output is changing the face of the game, but is this enough to drive new people to play the sport? No – which is why iSquash is such a revolutionary concept.

Billed as the world’s first digital sports court, iSquash’s software allows players to immerse themselves in both modern training methods and up to 25 games. Essentially, the ball is tracked with sensors, while players receive visual feedback from graphics projected onto the front wall via a ceiling-mounted laser projector. There are four cameras in all, while microphones and speakers pick up vibration detection.

Training programmes include modules entitled Longline, Area Focus, Butterfly, Training Wall and Area Chase, which aid precision, tactical thinking and agility. Each programme measures and then displays exactly where the ball hits the wall.

The front wall acts as a touchpad, with a home menu and profile page. Coupled with this, an iSquash app downloads data such as calories burned, hit/miss ratio and speed

and consistency of shots taken. There are also league tables on how other players are faring, which adds a competitive element. Coach Kenny Flynn uses the court at Nieuwe Sloot, a tennis and squash club in the Netherlands, and particularly likes it for coaching.

“The front wall can be divided into four sections from the tin to the out line,” he explains. “If you are doing a drive drill and teaching how to use the height of the wall, you can give instant feedback. The ball leaves an imprint for 10 seconds, so you can see where you were aiming and where you hit it.”

There are a whole range of targets – for example left and right sides, a big circle in the middle, high areas to aim your lob and rectangular boxes for your serve. Other features include a moving line, which provides a decreasing target that reflects the tightness of your drives. The idea is that hitting the front-wall targets will get the ball to land in the right area of the court.

“I am really excited about it as a teaching aid,” says Flynn. “It gives instant feedback and is visual. Solo practice can be a bit boring for some people and this makes it more interesting.”

The court can even count the number of shots achieved in, for example, the figure-eight practice. There is also a drop-shot target, giving instant feedback on where you are hitting the ball.

“In that respect, it is very good for new players, but also for serious players it gives instant feedback,” Flynn adds.

As well as training, the court provides a whole range of games for youngsters and introduces them to hitting a ball against a wall and then to squash.

Games include block squash, darts, memory, music, ocean and squash invaders. For someone who has spent over 30 years playing on some depressing-looking front walls, with low lighting on cold nights, the array of moving colours is an eye-opener.

“It is like being in an amusement arcade,” explains Flynn. “It is fantastic for kids and for kids’ parties.”

The court is not just for beginners and practice, though – it is also designed to give entertainment value with a squash racket in your hand.

“We want to push the sport much more into the modern age and make it more entertainment-driven. It should be fun to play,” says Kern.

He’s not wrong. I went in with an open mind and came away from two hours spent on court at a Munich club totally enthused as to



One of iSquash's children's games

the path iSquash could create for the sport. Kern says: “We have the benefit with squash that it’s always better to go into something with a big infrastructure. We know there’s been huge success in the past and we are trying to revive that. Squash has the players and heritage, but it is like a broken machine.”

So Kern set about “connecting the dots” with squash. “Instead of a white piece of paper, I like to start with a rusty, broken-down car and finding cool ways of repairing it,” he says.

“The sport should be in a position where hundreds of young people are realising that squash is a great sport. There’s something missing in that respect and nobody is putting in more that is being lost at the same time.”

At around €30,000, the installation doesn’t come cheap and no doubt some traditionalists will scoff at the whole concept. Yet Kern believes that squash centres across the globe – especially ones facing dwindling court bookings – will benefit.

“You don’t need to reinvent here,” he adds. “Why not make it more interesting, where you can achieve six or seven hours of play time per day on a court which has been existing already?”

The installation can be leased and, according to Kern, with the right average spend, clients will fill it. Some clubs may opt for a year-on-year business plan, spending around €1,000 per month. There are also different software pricings, with a premium service allowing advertising on the LED tin.

“What we are proposing is a complete change in the business model,” he explains. “More importantly, it is a door-opener and brings in a new audience who wouldn’t normally consider going into a club.”

So far, Fun With Balls has exceeded first-year goals and sold 18 systems globally, with six more on order. Kern says: “The big point is the strategic approach. It’s not

that we are trying to sell a product; we are trying to provide a whole sport and make it attractive to a completely new audience.”

It’s not hard to warm to Kern’s unerring vision; he is simply a firm believer that the model will help further the sport.

“My brain is over-active all the time,” he admits. “One thing I always disliked with my brand work is that you do this amazing creative stuff [his live-visuals company has worked with Mercedes Benz, Google and Hugo Boss, to name but a few], but it is the next car, phone or fashion line.

“I’m always looking for something that is truly scalable, rather than project to project. This has something that could be truly visionary, where I can stand behind it and be proud.”

The company is still in its infancy and the buzz has yet to gather global momentum, but iSquash isn’t just a gimmick. It could quite literally change the perception of squash for the better, at a time when the International Olympic Committee is seeking a younger generation. The task is getting governing bodies and – most importantly – clubs to buy into this extraordinary vision.

More information and videos:
www.interactivesquash.com

A MARKETING COUP

Nieuwe Sloot, a tennis and squash club in the western Netherlands, installed iSquash last month and an accompanying video has been viewed over 400,000 times on social media, making it a marketing coup.

The club’s Irish coach, Kenny Flynn, was sceptical at first of the technology. That soon changed. He had difficulty getting one group of girls to hit more than three shots along the wall. After several sessions on iSquash they were hitting upwards of 10.

The same has applied to recreational players too. “It’s not immediately obvious. Players simply have longer rallies and come off court having had far more fun,” says Marc Veldkamp, who purchased the system and rents it out to the club.