

DOUBLE THE FUN

Mike Dale visits a few of England's clubs where doubles is played and discovers that four on a court makes for a totally different ball game

In early September just under 100 keen squash players of varied abilities converged on the Racquets Fitness Centre in Thame, Oxfordshire. There was a buffet lunch, live music, a beer festival, T-shirts, trophies and £300 in cash prizes. A great time was had by all.

Nothing unusual in that, except that it was a doubles tournament. Naturally, that meant twice the number of entrants, twice the revenue for the club and – some would claim – twice the fun.

“For me as a club owner, doubles is a winner, because it doubles the amount of people on a court, doubles the entry fees into a competition and doubles the amount of people in the bar,” says Simon Martin, organiser of the Thame competition.

“I know that sounds a little cynical, but it makes sense for the prosperity of the club. A squash court is a big empty room and ultimately we need more people in it.”

Without a national doubles championships or league, and with few recognised local leagues, the popularity of doubles is a little difficult to ascertain.

There are certainly pockets of the country where doubles is taken seriously, especially at the RAC in London's Pall Mall and Surrey, Coolhurst and Roehampton in London, and Nottingham Squash Club, who all have doubles courts - either permanent structures or courts with moveable walls, allowing singles courts to extend to doubles dimensions.

The RAC's two doubles courts at Woodcote Park were built in 1989. Resident pro Daniel Zammit-Lewis calls them “a real asset to the club”, with over 50 friendly matches held every year against teams from Surrey and Sussex, and the Surrey Open Doubles each May.

“At first, doubles was seen as a nice way to prolong older players' squash careers, but the younger guys are starting to get into it,” he says. “It opens up different angles of attack and allows you to be a bit more daring, because you've got your partner to back you up if you fancy trying an outrageous winner.

“It attracts people not just because of the teamwork, camaraderie and banter, but because if they're up against a good pair, they have just as good a match as they would on a singles court – and they'll probably have a little bit more fun.”

Zammit-Lewis represented Malta in the men's doubles at the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, losing to eventual champions Australia with partner Bradley Hindle. He will compete at next April's Games on the Gold Coast too.



Doubles played on a singles court at the Racquets doubles tournament in Thame

“I spend half my time on a doubles court; I absolutely love it,” he says. “I find that it improves my singles play because you are constantly looking for different gaps, trying to outmanoeuvre your opponent and play an unexpected type of shot. When you go back to singles, there seems to be so much space by comparison and it almost seems easier to select the right shot.”

It is also a great leveller, according to Giles Clawson, squash secretary at Coolhurst in Crouch End, where there are two doubles and seven singles courts. “I won our annual doubles tournament this year and I was the weakest singles player of the four of us in the final. It definitely enables you to give better players a good game,” he says.

Martin says organising a doubles tournament requires general agreement about safety. He patrols the balconies, giving warnings about dangerous play. Goggles are recommended and the usual interpretation of the interference laws are relaxed, with anything other than the most blatant of strokes given as a let.

General consensus from those who play regularly is that doubles is fantastic fun, opening up new tactical options, encouraging more creativity and enabling two usually mismatched singles players to enjoy a competitive game. There seems little to discourage anyone from giving it a go – apart from the extra queues at the bar.



There is more room for doubles on the purpose-built doubles courts at the RAC at Woodcote Park in Epsom

DOUBLES DETAILS

- New Zealand are the reigning world women's and mixed doubles champions, having retained their titles at the World Championships in Manchester in August.
- Australia have won mixed doubles gold at four of squash's five Commonwealth Games and one women's doubles title. They also won the men's doubles at the Glasgow Games in 2014, ending a run of four successive England victories.
- India won their first Commonwealth Games squash gold in 2014 in the women's doubles, ending the domination of Australia, England and New Zealand.