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Building squash courts and developing juniors... in the midst of war



Two of the biggest problems in squash are lack of courts and not enough juniors playing the game. Dmitry Shcherbakov has solved both these issues - despite his nation being in the middle of a major war - by developing a junior program.

Dmitry built squash infrastructure in Ukraine from virtually nothing 15 years ago to 44 courts in a nationwide network of 63 Sport Life Fitness Centres. That accounts for over half the total number of courts in the whole country (including courts in private homes).

A former professional basketball player, Dmitry says it was "love at first sight" as soon as he tried squash. He became a coach, then played for the national team alongside the owner of Sport Life. Years later, he invited Dmitry (*pictured below*) to add squash at many of the centres across Ukraine - but with a different business model to the other facilities on offer.



Squash is 'pay and play' at all Sport Life Fitness locations. And anyone can buy a cheap 'Squash Guest' card which allows them to play squash at Sport Life Fitness Centres in any city in Ukraine.

They have 74 squash coaches across all their club locations - many of whom are former tennis, badminton or football coaches who Dimitry has re-trained. They each forge links with local schools and businesses to get new players through the doors.

Each month, different local groups are invited to the club. Dimitry says for every group of 20 that comes along and tries the game, around five will stay, play with friends and/or attend coaching or competitions.



Dimitry adds: "Squash is not like tennis. People don't know what it is. Squash isn't a game people like to watch, it's a game people like to play. So I invite them to Sport Life Fitness and get them to play."

Since the Russian invasion began in February 2022, participating in squash has obviously become more difficult. Many of Ukraine's best juniors have fled to nearby countries to continue training. Dmitry's own son, Dmytro, moved to Romania and then earned a squash scholarship to Trinity College in Connecticut.

However, Dmitry's determination to get children on court has not been dimmed by the war and the country's best squash role models having to leave. For the last two years, he has offered free squash coaching for over 100 school children at three academies in Kyiv, with courts and rackets donated free by Sport Life Fitness and coaches funded by the Ukrainian Minister of Sport.



"I hope in two, three or five years we will have very strong juniors who will play in ESF tournaments and will bring us good results," says Dimitry, who is also President of the Ukrainian Squash Federation.

That's not all. Since the Russian invasion, Sport Life Fitness has opened new clubs with five squash courts, as well as pickleball, badminton and table tennis.

"We have tried to keep developing squash in Ukraine as the war continues," says Dimitry. "We do what we can. Life has to continue. I have three more projects I want to complete too.

"At this moment, we can try to develop facilities, get more people playing squash and train more kids. But we live day by day. We don't know what will happen tomorrow. Every day there are bomb attacks. But as federation president I will do my best for the future of squash in my country."