

SFN Team · Nov 12, 2024

Best Practice of the month, Part 2: Insights from Steve Heatley of Dunlop

As part of our "Best Practice of the Month - Choosing the Right Squash Ball for Beginners" series, the Squash Facility Network (SFN) conducted an interview with Steve Heatley, Dunlop's Global Category Manager for Squash. The inside view from the leading squash ball manufacturer worldwide gave us valuable insights about the best strategy for selecting the right squash ball for beginners. In this exclusive conversation, Steve shares his experiences and unveils the secrets behind the various squash balls available on the market.



Dunlop’s Global Squash Manager Stephen Heatley

Steve Heatley's Journey and Experience

Steve Heatley has been deeply involved in the squash industry for years, witnessing firsthand the evolution of the game and its equipment. His role at Dunlop has placed him at the heart of product development and global squash initiatives.

"I've always believed that the right equipment can significantly enhance a player's experience, especially for beginners," Steve begins. "At Dunlop, we've seen how a simple choice like selecting the appropriate squash ball can make a huge difference in enjoyment and skill development."

The Role of Manufacturers and Governing Bodies

Steve acknowledges that manufacturers and governing bodies share responsibility in standardizing ball usage.

"We collaborate closely with the World Squash Federation (WSF) to align on equipment standards," he says. "But beyond regulations, it's about creating a cohesive message globally."

He continues, "Manufacturers like Dunlop must lead in education and product development. We're exploring ways to simplify our product names and make it clearer who each ball is for."

The General Product Range of Ball Manufacturers, Exemplified by Dunlop

"Historically, squash balls weren't standardized, leading to confusion and inconsistency in gameplay," he recalls. "We at Dunlop recognized this early on and took steps to create a range of balls tailored to different skill levels."

Reflecting on the historical development of squash balls, Steve explains how the industry has evolved to meet players' needs. Using Dunlop as an example, he outlines the general product range offered by ball manufacturers:

- **Blue Dot (Intro Ball):** "We designed the blue dot ball for absolute beginners. It's 12% larger and offers a higher bounce, making it easier to hit and keep rallies going. This ball helps new players build confidence."
- **Red Dot (Progress Ball):** "As players improve, the red dot ball, slightly larger by 6%, provides a stepping stone. It still offers a generous bounce but introduces a bit more challenge."
- **Single Yellow Dot (Competition Ball):** "This is the standard size ball suitable for most club players. It strikes a balance between bounce and control."
- **Double Yellow Dot (Pro Ball):** "Intended for advanced and professional players, this ball requires significant skill and generates less bounce, demanding more from the player."

Understanding the Challenges Faced by Beginners

Steve emphasizes that despite the variety of balls available, many beginners unknowingly use equipment that hinders their progress.

"I've visited countless clubs where beginners are handed a double yellow dot ball by default," he laments. "This ball is designed for high-level play and can be incredibly frustrating for newcomers who struggle to keep it warm and bouncy."

He shares an anecdote to illustrate the issue:

"At a junior tournament in Yorkshire during a cold January morning, under-11 players were given double yellow dot balls. The courts were cold, and these young players couldn't generate enough heat to make the ball responsive. It was disheartening to watch. A single yellow dot or even a red dot ball would have transformed their experience."

The Impact of Temperature and Environment

Steve points out that environmental factors significantly affect ball performance.

"Temperature plays a huge role," he explains. "In colder climates or during winter months, even seasoned players might find the double yellow dot ball less responsive. For beginners, it's nearly impossible to enjoy the game under these conditions."

He adds, "In countries with warmer climates like Egypt, players might default to the double yellow dot because the temperature helps keep the ball lively. But globally, we need to be mindful of how environmental conditions impact play."

Strategies for Facilities: Steve's Recommendations

Drawing from his extensive experience, Steve offers practical advice for squash facilities worldwide.

1. Stock a Variety of Balls

"Facilities must ensure they have all types of balls readily available," Steve advises. "This availability allows players to choose the ball that best suits their skill level and the day's conditions."

2. Educate Staff and Players

"Education is crucial," he emphasizes. "Front-desk staff often hand out equipment without understanding its impact on gameplay. Training them to recommend the right ball can enhance the player's experience dramatically."

Steve mentions Dunlop's initiatives: "We've developed 'Use the Right Ball' posters and materials that facilities can display. These resources guide players in selecting the appropriate ball."

3. Implement a Clear Ball Strategy

"Clubs should adopt a unified approach," he suggests. "For example, designate the single yellow dot as the default ball for most club play and reserve the double yellow dot for advanced matches and professional players."

4. Consider Environmental Conditions

"Adjust your recommendations based on the season and court temperature," Steve recommends. "In colder periods, encourage players to use a ball with a higher bounce to maintain enjoyable gameplay."

5. Starter Packs for Beginners

Steve shares an innovative idea: "We've considered offering starter packs containing different balls. This allows beginners to try each one and discover which suits them best under various conditions."

Success Stories and Positive Outcomes

Steve shares encouraging examples of facilities implementing effective ball strategies.

"In the UK, some retailers now stock all four types of balls equally," he notes. "One retailer reported that 50% of their sales are double yellow dot balls, while the other 50% comprises blue, red, and single yellow dot balls. This balance indicates that players are accessing the balls suited for them."

He also highlights clubs with successful programs:

"At the Northern Club in Newcastle, coach Richard Vitty has developed an excellent junior program. By introducing kids to the appropriate balls, he's fostered a thriving squash community with over 250 children playing weekly."

Challenges and the Path Forward

Despite positive developments, Steve recognizes ongoing challenges.

"There's still a lack of consistency globally," he admits. "In some countries, beginners might only have access to double yellow dot balls. In others, alternative balls exist but aren't promoted."

He emphasizes the need for collective action: "It's not just about Dunlop or any single entity. Coaches, facility managers, retailers, and governing bodies must work together to promote the right practices."

Steve remains optimistic about the future of squash. "Even with competition from sports like padel and pickleball, squash has unique qualities that attract players," he asserts. "By enhancing the beginner's experience, we can grow the sport."

He concludes with a call to action:

"Let's make squash accessible and enjoyable for everyone. By ensuring beginners have the right equipment and support, we're investing in the sport's future. Together, we can nurture a new generation of squash enthusiasts."

Steve Heatley's insights shed light on the critical importance of selecting the right squash ball for beginners. His experiences underscore how a simple change in equipment can significantly impact player enjoyment and development.

In the next week, the SFN will continue to explore insights and recommendations from experts on the topic of squash ball selection. At the end of the series, SFN will run a webinar on the 28th of November 2024. Don't miss this webinar, where you'll have the chance to engage directly with experts and learn more about best practices in squash ball selection.

Join the upcoming SFN webinar to shape a winning strategy for selecting the best ball for beginners. Secure your spot now and be part of this important discussion!



Best Practice of the Month: Choosing the Right Squash Ball for Beginners

28 November 2024, 16:00–16:45 CET | Webinar

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