

mpdale · Nov 29, 2023

# How to make school kids into smiling squash players!

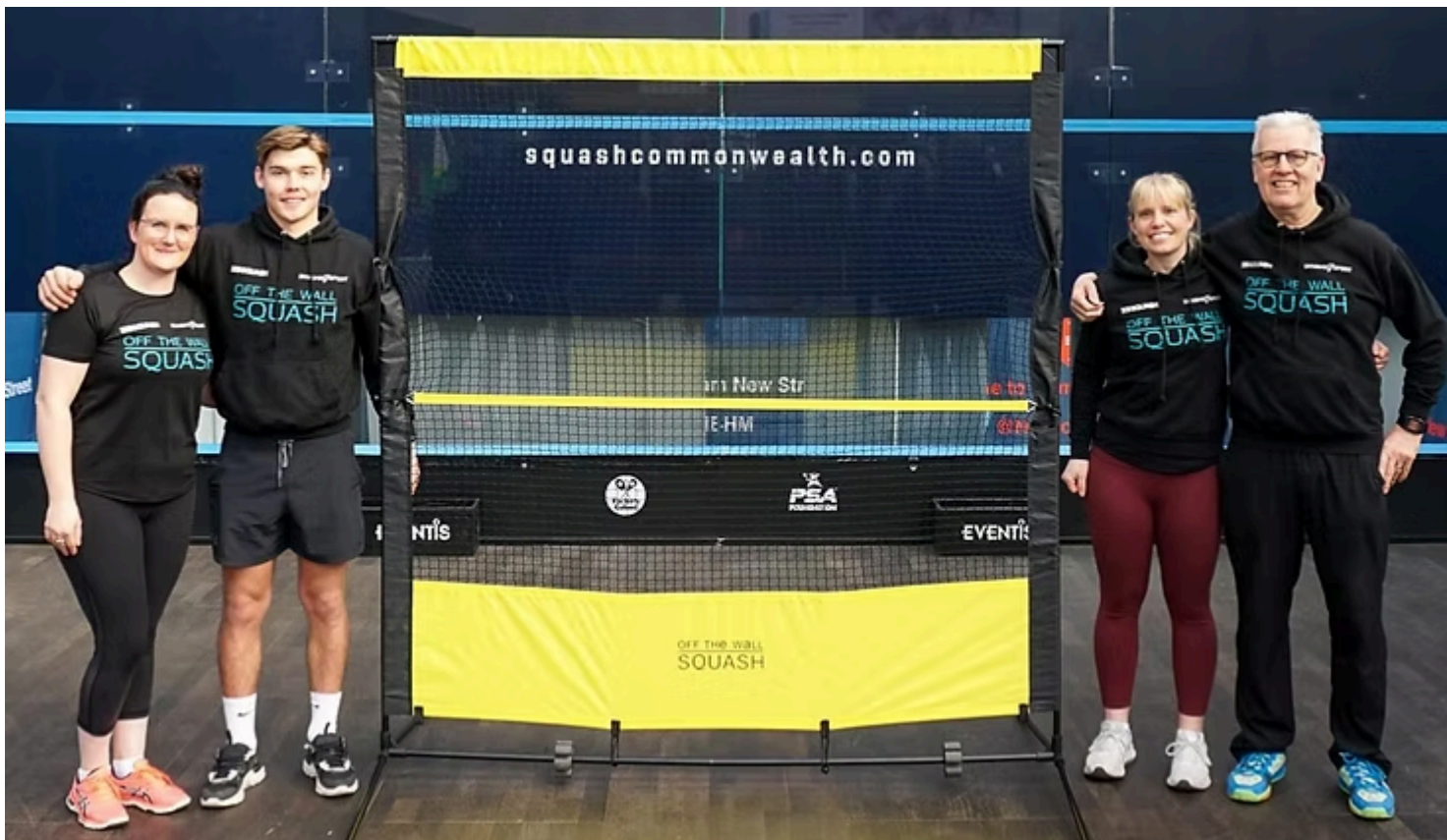


In many squash facilities across the world, the average age of members is creeping up every year. As knees get creaky and players reluctantly retire, the need for younger blood in the building gets more and more acute.

The great news for venues in this position is that there are thousands of potential young squash players right on the doorstep in your local community. Getting them through the front door is the hard part, but there are many examples across the world of venue managers and coaches who have achieved it. The Selby family from [Off The Wall Squash](#) in Essex, England, are one of the best.

For over 10 years, Paul and Karen Selby, their daughter Lauren, sons Elliot and Daryl (all former pros), Emily Ison and a dedicated coaching team have worked tirelessly to build junior participation at their academy by delivering squash coaching to over 2,000 kids in primary schools across Essex and Suffolk every year.

Off The Wall offer initial six-week courses for pupils in Year 3, 4, 5 and 6 (ages 7-11). The course consists of five weeks of in-school activity which teaches pupils the five fundamental shots (drive, serve, boast, drop, lob) by hitting balls against large rebound nets (pictured below) in playgrounds or school halls.



In the sixth week, children go to the club - the six-court Corporal Budd VC Gymnasium in Colchester (known as 'The Garrison' as it's situated in an army base). There, they get used to playing on a proper court and enjoy fun games.

After that, the best and most enthusiastic kids are selected by their schools to enter the Roman Cup (usually two boys and two girls per year group, although some schools enter more).

Over the years, the Roman Cup has grown into a massive competition and has become a gateway into the sport for many juniors who have later become members at the Off The Wall academy and played competitively.

This term alone (autumn 2023), 94 children in Year 5 (9-10 year olds) and 120 children in Year 6 (10-11 year olds) played in the Roman Cup - that's 53 teams in total. In January and February, it's the turn of Year 3 and 4 pupils and numbers will be equally massive.



It starts with a first round, and children are then placed into categories (gold, silver, bronze, copper) for a finals weekend two weeks later. Rules on serving are relaxed to suit some of the younger children: the half-court line is extended right up to the tin using red tape and serves only have to cross the line, rather than land in the opposite back corner. Players are allowed to bounce the ball and serve. Matches are played using a red Dunlop junior ball. There are prizes for the winners, runners-up and most improved players. Many schools call it the highlight of their year.

All players are then invited to come along to a month's free coaching with the Off The Wall academy. Many take up the invitation - all of them enjoy it, and some of them stick with it. This process is repeated year after year.

**Here are the crucial statistics:**

- Around three-quarters of Off The Wall's 140 junior academy players are graduates of the primary school programme and played in the Roman Cup
- Each year, about 40-50 become regular players at The Garrison as a result of the school-to-club pathway
- From the initial 2,000 kids engaged in schools, that's a success ratio of around 2%

Off The Wall are extremely proud of this 2% ratio. It shows the scale and hard graft that's needed to plant enough seeds that eventually grow into a handful of enthusiastic young squash players.

The effort is well worth it: not only are they spreading awareness of squash, Off The Wall's academy players feature heavily in Essex county junior squads and the England national rankings.



*So how can other venues replicate this model?*

It all starts with an initial approach of schools and emphasising the benefits that squash can safely deliver to pupils and its value within the school's PE and sport curriculum.

Next is the appropriate paperwork and identifying potential sources of funding, which can come from the most unlikely places (in England, for example, there is funding available for community initiatives that are located within 10 miles of landfill sites).

Funding will go towards delivery staff and, of course, equipment which needs to be appropriate for a younger audience (rebound nets, bouncy balls, rackets).



The prospect of being in a school hall facing 30 children who have never heard of squash might sound terrifying, even to the most experienced coach. You'll need lessons plans, teaching tips, warm-up games and a fully-planned session.

You'll then need to develop a smooth pathway from the schools into your club and learn how to run inter-school competitions.



Luckily, the Selby family has designed a workshop to guide others through each stage of this process - the [Off The Wall Primary School Workshop](#). They have delivered the workshop to several cohorts of coaches in England and Denmark and two attendees have now started their own schools programmes in east London and Leicestershire.

Off The Wall Director of Coaching, Paul Selby (pictured above), said: "Many elite coaches wouldn't have a clue how to deliver the sport to a room full of primary school children - but we know that's what it takes to grow the game and keep squash clubs alive.

"Our workshops give coaches all the skills and tools they need. There is no reason at all why clubs in England and any other country can't replicate our successful model. It is bloody hard work, but our sport is at a precipice. We've got to do something about it - so that in 10 years it's extremely valuable."

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*To find out about another successful school squash programme, see our case study on Hasta La Vista in Wroclaw, Poland [here](#).*