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LA28: Why the Athlete Quota Was Reduced – And What It Means for Squash



The decision to include squash in the LA28 Olympics marked the culmination of decades of tireless advocacy by the global squash community. This hard-won victory finally brings one of the world's most physically demanding racquet sports onto the Olympic stage.


However, the announcement that the athlete quota would be set at just 16 players per gender (down from an initially proposed 32) has prompted intense discussions within squash circles about the implications of this reduced allocation.

The SFN takes a closer look at the International Olympic Committee’s strategic framework—particularly the IOC Agenda 2020—to better understand the reasoning behind this decision. By analysing the broader goals and constraints shaping modern Olympic planning, we can draw valuable conclusions about squash’s role in LA28 and what this moment could mean for the future of the sport.

IOC Agenda 2020 – Reforming the Games


The Olympic Games have historically struggled with uncontrolled growth. Overcrowded Olympic villages, strained infrastructure, and stretched resources become increasingly problematic. Additionally, excessive athlete numbers risk diluting global media coverage, reducing attention for individual sports and weakening the spotlight that is crucial for smaller disciplines like squash. Furthermore, each additional athlete generates roughly \$25,000 in direct costs—covering accommodation, meals, transport, and essential services.

These and other experiences motivated the IOC to introduce the extensive reform initiative known as IOC Agenda 2020. Unanimously adopted at the 127th IOC Session in Monaco in December 2014. The agenda 2020 comprises 40 targeted recommendations designed to enhance sustainability, efficiency, flexibility, and forward-thinking adaptability of the Olympic Games.



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A key pillar of Agenda 2020 is the introduction of new sports. The IOC recognises that fresh disciplines can be powerful tools to modernise the Olympic programme and connect with new audiences. This strategy is guided by three main priorities:

- **Youth Engagement** – Welcoming action and urban sports to resonate with younger generations.
- **Geopolitical Balance** – Including globally popular sports to ensure regional and cultural representation.
- **Programme Flexibility** – Allowing host cities greater influence over the event lineup to reflect local interests and legacy goals.

This creates a balancing act for the IOC: opening the Games to exciting new sports while keeping the overall size and scope manageable.

IOC Quota Policies

As part of IOC Agenda 2020, the International Olympic Committee established a strict athlete cap of 10,500 participants for the core sports at the Summer Games. To stay within this cap while still allowing for innovation, the IOC introduced rotational flexibility—new sports can be added, but this often requires reductions in quotas for existing disciplines. Athletics, for example, has lost over 100 athlete slots since 2012.

The IOC also prioritises gender equality, youth appeal through more urban sports, and cost-efficient, compact competition formats. These priorities directly influence which sports are added and how quotas are distributed.

LA28 – Largest Olympic Games Ever

Olympics	Additional Sports Added	Athletes	Strategic Significance
2016 Rio	Golf, Rugby Sevens	198	Marked the return of golf after a 112-year absence and introduced rugby's faster seven-a-side format
2020 Tokyo	Skateboarding, Surfing, Sport Climbing, Karate, Baseball/Softball	474	Represented the most expansive addition of new sports in modern Olympic history, focusing heavily on youth appeal and urban disciplines
2024 Paris	Breaking, Skateboarding, Surfing, Sport Climbing	248	Scaled back from Tokyo while retaining youth-oriented urban sports
2028 LA	Cricket, Flag Football, Squash, Lacrosse, Baseball/Softball	698	Most ambitious expansion yet, blending traditional team sports with emerging disciplines

The combination of core and additional sports brings the total number of athletes at LA28 to 11,198—making it the largest Olympic Games in history. The decision on the additional sport at LA 28 reflects strategic considerations: cricket’s vast global following (over 2.5 billion fans), the importance of flag football for the U.S. market, and efforts to retain popular sports like baseball and softball. Squash and lacrosse are beneficiaries of this flexibility—gaining Olympic entry despite the overall quota restrictions.

Squash was not alone in experiencing athlete reductions due to the rotational flexibility. For instance, the men's Olympic football (soccer) tournament was reduced from 16 teams to 12. These reductions across various sports suggest that the decision to limit squash to 16 athletes per gender was not primarily related to factors within squash itself but driven by broader IOC strategic and logistical considerations.

Ensuring Squash's Olympic Future after LA28

The biggest challenge for squash after its long-awaited debut at LA28 is clear: to avoid being a one-time Olympic sport and instead establish itself as a lasting part of the Olympic programme. Fortunately, squash has several key strengths that align strongly with the core principles of the IOC’s Agenda 2020 .

Squash is an Urban Sport – Aligned with Olympic Strategy

Urbanisation and youth engagement are central themes of the modern Olympic movement. Here, squash has a powerful and perhaps underrated advantage.

- Space Efficiency: Squash courts can be built almost anywhere—underground garages, rooftops, vacant buildings—making them ideal for dense urban areas.
- Accessibility: With low equipment costs and simple facility requirements, squash is already used in community programs across cities worldwide.
- Visual Impact: High-profile glass court exhibitions in urban hotspots (like New York’s Grand Central Terminal or outside the Pyramids of Giza) demonstrate squash’s potential to create electrifying moments that rival other urban sports in spectacle and crowd engagement.

As the IOC continues to favour sports that can energise cities and connect with youth, squash is well-positioned to thrive within this urban narrative.

Squash is a Tool for Social Mobility

The Olympic movement is increasingly embracing sport as a means of driving social change. Numerous initiatives—across boxing, athletics, basketball, and table tennis—highlight how sport can reach underserved communities, provide education, and offer life-changing opportunities.

Squash is already playing a role here through various Urban Squash programmes, which combine court access with academic tutoring, mentoring, and equipment libraries in inner-city areas. These initiatives are active in many cities like New York, Johannesburg, and Mumbai, helping to build not just players, but better futures.

Mixed Events – A Strategic Opportunity?

To secure squash’s long-term Olympic presence, it’s time to explore new strategies that align more closely with the IOC’s evolving priorities. In the recent IOC Executive Board press conference on April 9th, gender equality and inclusivity were once again confirmed as top priorities. One area receiving particular attention is the rise of mixed-gender competitions. Sports like archery, athletics (mixed relay), table tennis, rowing, and gymnastics are increasingly integrating mixed formats—demonstrating a clear IOC preference for events that promote gender balance and teamwork.

This trend offers a real strategic opportunity for squash. The sport already lends itself well to mixed play, both in terms of format and fairness. By exploring and piloting mixed-gender events at major competitions, squash could further align with IOC priorities and increase its appeal. Embracing this direction could significantly strengthen its case for permanent inclusion.

Squash’s Role in Inclusion – And the Road to Brisbane 32

By scaling impactful initiatives and improving how their stories are told, squash can present itself not only as a high-performance racquet sport, but also as a powerful tool for inclusion, education, and social mobility. This aligns directly with the IOC’s evolving priorities and offers squash a unique value proposition within the Olympic ecosystem.

Now, the responsibility lies with the sport’s leading institutions—the **World Squash Federation (WSF)** and the **Professional Squash Association (PSA)**. It is up to them to consistently communicate squash’s strengths: its adaptability to urban environments, its potential for mixed-gender formats, its proven social impact, and its entertainment value.

These qualities must be clearly presented to the **Brisbane 2032 Organising Committee**, which will shape the next Olympic programme. With a unified strategy and clear messaging, squash can go beyond LA28—not as a guest appearance, but as a sport that truly belongs on the Olympic stage.

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