

mpdale · Jan 29, 2024

# How 'NextGen' competitions keep squash vibrant at Dublin's West Wood Health Club



The squash courts at West Wood Health Club in Leopardstown, Dublin are so over-subscribed that the club is building a €1.5m seven-court facility next door this year to cope with demand.

The Leopardstown club is the only one in West Wood's chain of six health clubs in Ireland that offers squash. The club has around 10,500 members, of which around 400 play squash regularly. Although that's only 4% of its membership, squash 'punches above its weight' within the club because of the vibrant community that has been created amongst the players.

Part of the reason for that camaraderie and sense of togetherness is a concept called NextGen, created by Ed Dunne, the club's Racquet Sports Manager (pictured above, far left).

NextGen is a competition format scheduled over a whole day on the club's three courts every five or six weeks. Ed organises players into groups of six of a roughly equal standard. Those six players all play each other on rotation for 12 minutes each, with a 90-second rest before they play the next person. The sessions lasts around an hour and a quarter.

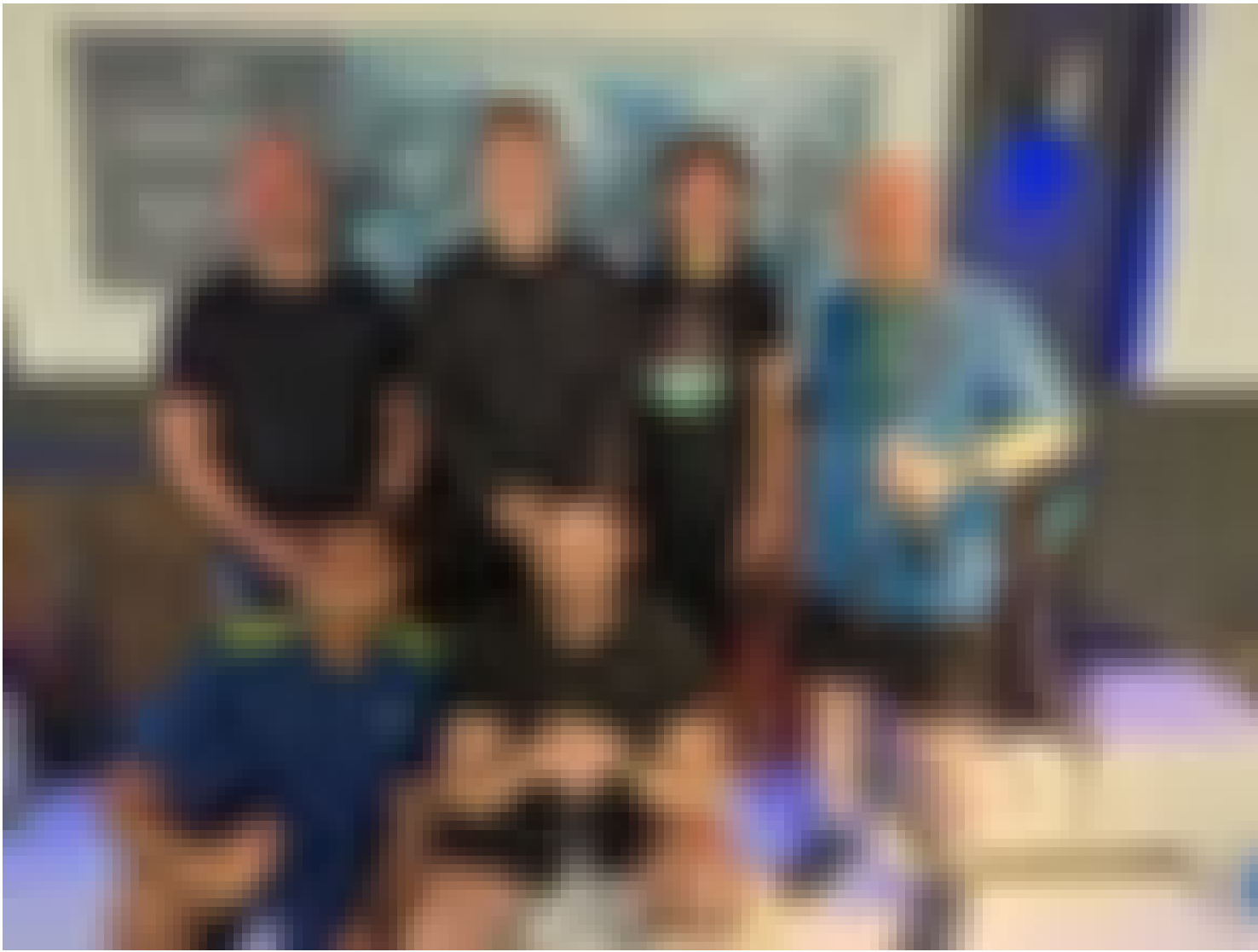
When the six players are all ready to start across the three courts, Ed blows the whistle and they begin. The player who's winning when the whistle goes after 12 minutes wins and earns points. If scores are level, it's sudden death.



In each match, both players are given three 'powerballs' each. If they are behind and receiving serve, a player can call a 'powerball' and if he or she wins that rally, they earn two points. Ed notifies players when 10 minutes have elapsed, and no powerballs can be used in the final two minutes.

Over the course of the day, there are five or six NextGen rounds (each with players of a different standard). Every player in each group of six plays for a team (all No.1s are one team, No2s are another team etc) so every point counts towards a team total. At the end of all matches, there are individual and team prizes, provided by Dunlop. Everyone then heads to the local pub for drinks and a buffet.

Ed says: "After a NextGen session everyone is absolutely shattered - but happy! It's a great way for all players, from beginner to advanced level, to get five good games, meet new people and bond together.



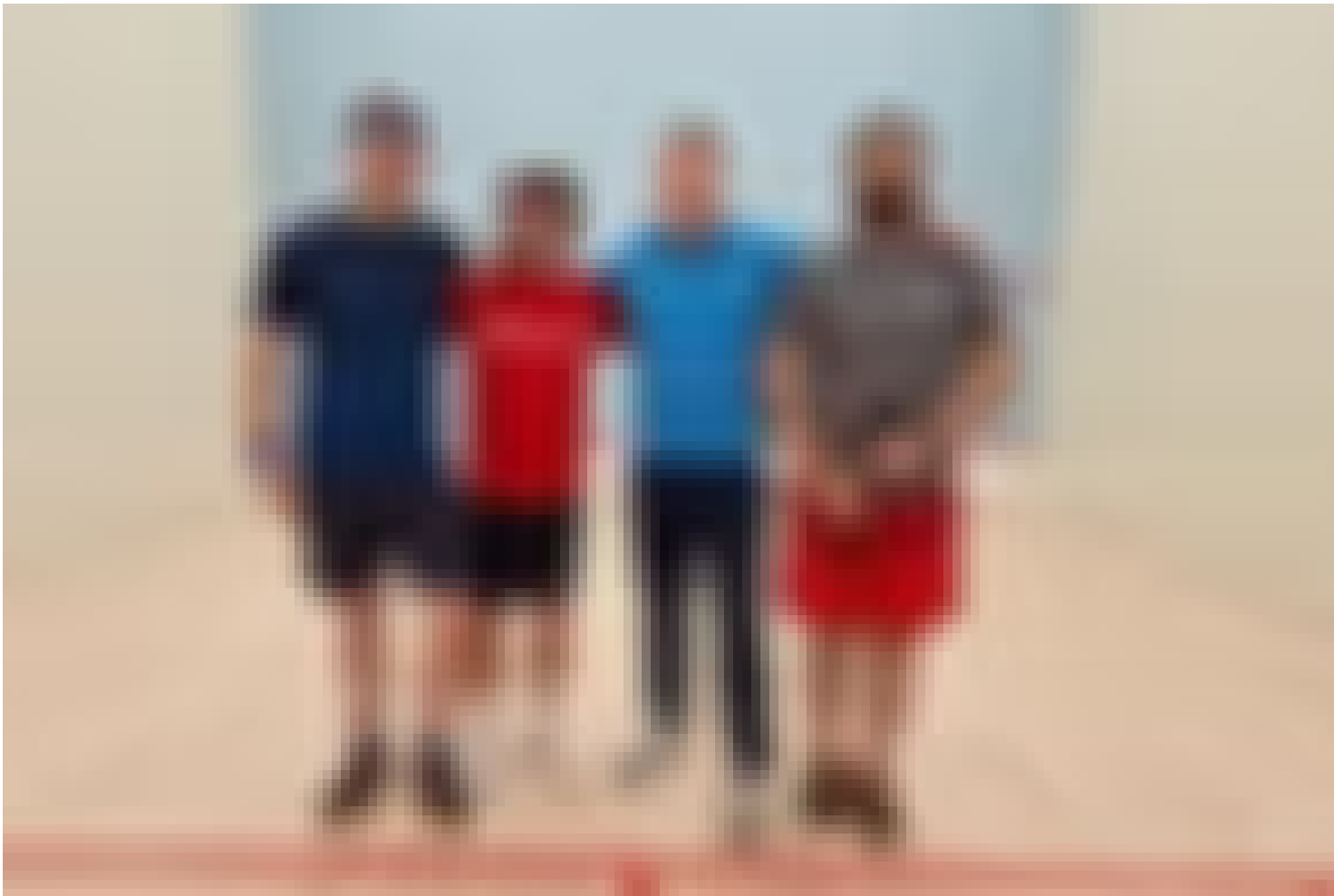
"The format means all players know the start and finish time and can plan it around the rest of their day. You finish absolutely exhausted, you've potentially met five new people, had five decent games, swapped numbers and arranged to play again. It works a treat.

"The NextGen sessions are always jammed. Players are always asking me, 'When's the next one?'"

NextGen was introduced five years ago and has helped squash thrive at West Wood Leopardstown to such an extent that club management are investing in a new squash centre next door. It will feature six glassback courts and an all-glass court which they hope will host tournaments such as the European Club Championships in future. It will also have seven padel courts, so together with the existing 13 tennis courts, it will become a rackets centre of excellence.

Despite its comparatively small participation numbers compared to gym users, squash will play a big part in the club's future - and that is down to the community that NextGen and the box leagues have created.





Ed explains: "We are a small percentage of the membership but we get a huge amount of attention.

"At the squash courts, there's atmosphere and enthusiasm, people chatting and getting along. We don't have that anywhere else in the club. On the gym floor, people listen to their earphones and focus on what they're doing."

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"As a result of that, when potential new members visit, the first thing we'll do is bring them down to the squash courts. They see atmosphere, camaraderie and fun and it immediately puts a smile on potential new members' faces. It start the tour off in a positive way. They think, 'I must try that!'"

Like all big gym chains, West Wood take measurements and feedback at various stages of a members' journey. Their statistics show that 1 in 7 members now ask about squash, compared to 1 in 20 a few years ago.

Members pay around €90 per month and everything is free to use (gym, classes, tennis, swimming and squash). The welcoming community vibe at the squash courts ensures those members are retained for years. In contrast, the average gym member leaves after 13 months - and sales and marketing resources are needed to attract new ones.

"Squash players don't leave - it's as simple as that," says Ed. "It took a bit of time for the club to recognise that, but they see it now - that's why they're investing so heavily in the new courts. The community, the atmosphere and camaraderie that squash can create is the best advert for the club brand."