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Breaking the Mold: How Northern Squash Club Built a Thriving Junior Program



Richard Vitty, an England Squash Level 4 Qualified Coach with 40 years of coaching experience

In the landscape of English squash clubs, it's rare to find a member-owned establishment with a robust junior program. Yet, Northern Squash Club in Newcastle defies this norm. With a history dating back to the 1890s as a rugby club and the addition of four squash courts in 1956, the club has evolved into a vibrant community hub. Today, it boasts around 450 members, with an impressive junior membership exceeding 200.

At the heart of this transformation are four dedicated coaches, each specializing in particular coaching areas. Leading the charge is Richard Vitty, an England Squash Level 4 Qualified Coach with 40 years of coaching experience, who is the driving force behind the junior program.

The Philosophy: It's Not Just About Squash

"The secret is getting the product right, and the product isn't squash. The product is the session that those kids come and do," says Richard. This philosophy underscores the club's approach to junior coaching. Recognizing that young children might find traditional squash challenging and possibly discouraging, Richard emphasizes creating sessions that are fun, engaging, and tailored to their abilities.

"If you get two new kids, seven-year-olds, give them a double yellow dot ball and a couple of adult rackets and say, 'Go and play squash,' they can't do it. They won't do it again," he explains. "They want a session that they really enjoy and it's fun. They must think, 'Well, okay, I did what I can do. I had a good time. I want to go and do it again.' To me, that is what junior coaching is all about."

Attracting Juniors: Community Outreach and Festivals

Northern Squash Club's success in attracting juniors stems from proactive community engagement. Each autumn, the club collaborates with local schools to deliver racquet and ball-based physical education lessons to about 1,000 children. These sessions are designed to introduce basic racket skills in a fun and accessible way.

"They don't play squash; they don't even hit a ball against the wall," Richard explains. "I tell them what squash is. We do a fun warm-up, and then I get them doing 'keep-ups'—just with a racket and ball, keeping the ball up in the air. We might do it forehand, backhand, alternating, or bouncing the ball on the floor with the racket."



Nick Matthew coaching workshop at the Northern Squash Club

This initiative not only introduces squash to a broader audience but also strengthens the club's ties with the community. Following these school sessions, the club organizes four festivals at the club, attracting approximately 150 kids. These festivals provide children with a taste of the sport in a lively and supportive environment. From these events, the club typically adds 15–20 kids to their junior squads. “We are particularly proud of the fact that around 50% of our junior section are girls!” adds Richard.

Creating Hours for Juniors: A Detailed Look at the Program

What sets Northern Squash Club apart is its comprehensive and well-structured junior program, which has grown significantly over the past decades. Starting with just a one-hour session on Saturday mornings, the program has expanded to a full day of coaching.

"We are coaching all the way from nine in the morning till five in the afternoon, using three courts," Richard explains. "There's always one court free for the members. We use three courts and have about 100 kids each Saturday."

Due to the high demand and a lengthy waiting list, the club decided to introduce additional beginner courses on Sunday afternoons as well.

Session Structure

Each hour-long session follows a consistent format:

1. **Quick Warm-Up (5 minutes):** The session begins with a brief warm-up to get the kids active and ready.
2. **Introduction of the Shot (5 minutes):** Richard introduces the squash shot of the day, providing a quick demonstration and a key trigger point for the kids to focus on.
3. **Practice (10 minutes):** The children are split into groups of four and head to their courts to practice the shot, with specific drills designed to reinforce the day's lesson.
4. **Supervised Matches (35 minutes):** The bulk of the session is dedicated to playing matches in pre-set leagues. This not only enhances their skills but also adds a competitive and fun element.
5. **Fun Warm-Down (5 minutes):** The session concludes with a fun game or race, ensuring the kids leave on a high note.
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As one session wraps up, the next group arrives, and the process begins anew. This efficient use of time and resources allows the club to cater to a large number of juniors without compromising on the quality of coaching.

Membership and Accessibility

Understanding the importance of accessibility, the club has implemented a welcoming membership system. Kids can sign up for a seven-week course without initially being members. After completing the course, they are encouraged to join the club, with membership fees kept affordable at £25 per year—a cost subsidized by the club to encourage participation.

Ball Usage and Coaching Strategy

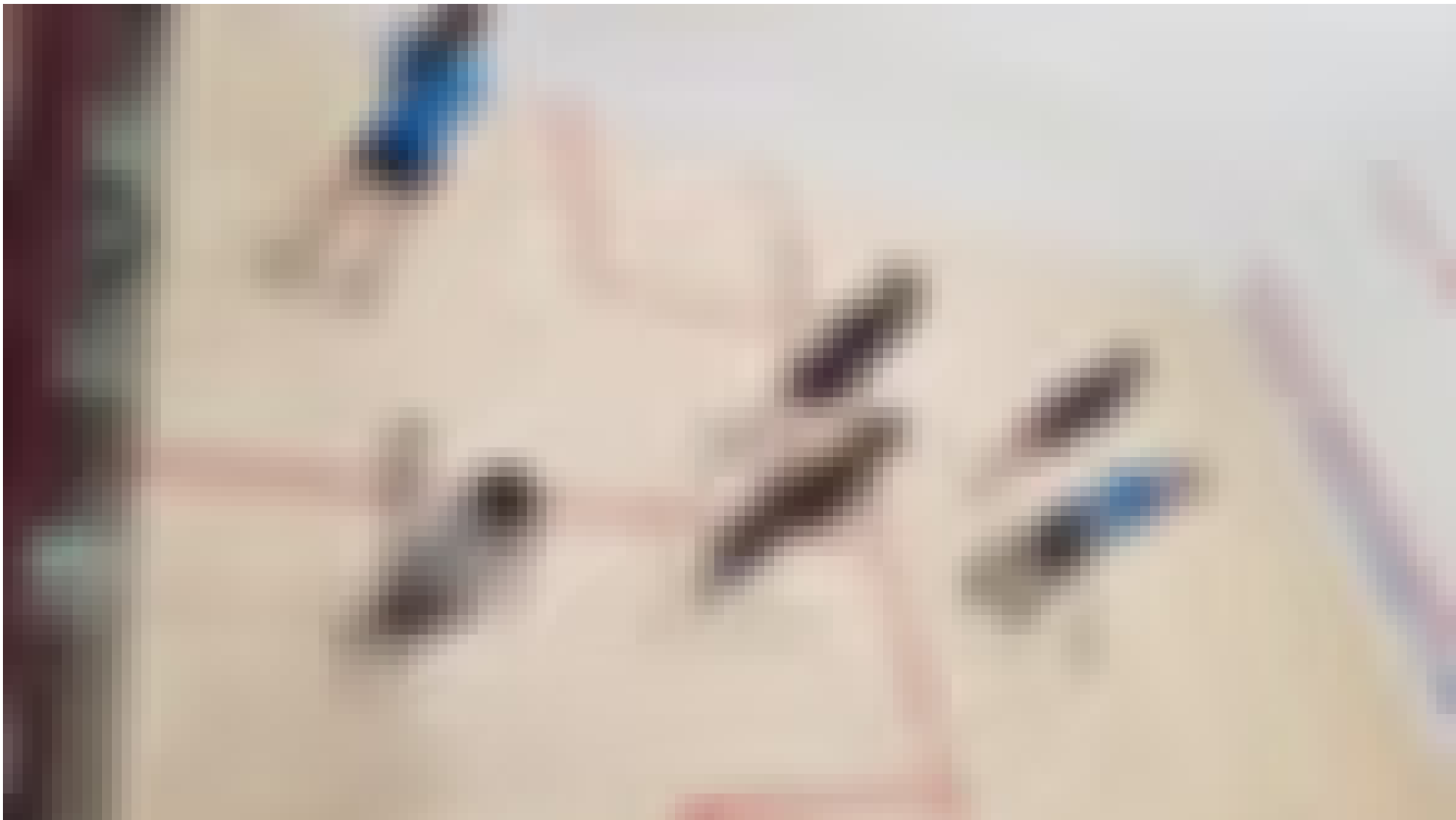
"Our club is within the main building of the rugby club, so it's a very warm building. We keep the courts really warm," Richard notes. "Therefore, we are using single yellow dot balls. But I'm also keeping one warm in my hand, and as soon as I see one cooling down, I'm swapping it."

The club employs a thoughtful approach to equipment, sometimes starting beginners with the Orange Dunlop improver ball, which is slightly bouncier and easier to handle. Most of our juniors quickly transition to single yellow dot balls, facilitating a smooth progression as the kids' skills improve. For those who might struggle initially, mini squash balls are available to build confidence and competence.

This attention to detail in coaching strategy reflects Richard's commitment to making squash accessible and enjoyable for all skill levels.

Performance and Competitive Success

An important byproduct of Northern Squash Club's expansive junior program is the development of competitive players who excel at regional and national levels. Richard explains that out of the 200 juniors, about 20 boys and 20 girls participate in midweek squads after school, forming the club's performance athletes. Most of these juniors play for the county, compete in regional and national tournaments, and represent their schools in competitions. The club collaborates with local schools to enter teams in national schools competitions, resulting in numerous titles won.



The performance squads doing some drills

"When you have a good junior program, not all of them, but this is the basis to be also successful in competition," Richard says. "It's a byproduct of having a lot of kids playing. If you've got a big base for the pyramid, then the peak of the pyramid is higher."

This emphasis on both grassroots participation and performance excellence showcases the club's holistic approach to junior development.

Impact on the Club and Future Plans

The junior program has revitalized Northern Squash Club, fostering a lively and inclusive atmosphere. Many parents of former juniors remain active members, contributing to a strong sense of community. The success of the program ensures a steady flow of new members, balancing out those who move away or pursue other interests.

Looking ahead, Richard plans to continue the outreach work with local schools and maintain the high standards of the junior program. "We want to ensure that we always have new kids coming in to keep the program vibrant," he says.

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Conclusion

Northern Squash Club's junior program is a testament to what can be achieved with passion, dedication, and a community-focused approach. By redefining the "product" from merely playing squash to providing enjoyable, engaging sessions, the club has cultivated a thriving junior membership that is rare among member-owned clubs in England.

As Richard aptly puts it, "They must think, 'I had a good time. I want to go and do it again.' That, to me, is what junior coaching is all about." It's a philosophy that not only grows the sport but also enriches the lives of the young players who walk through the club's doors.

For more information about Northern Squash Club's junior program, please visit their website [here](#).