

mpdale · Apr 8, 2024

# How Pay & Play reversed Doncaster Squash Club's fortunes



Squash match in progress at the Doncaster Squash Club

Just before the pandemic, Doncaster Squash Club flipped its business model from a members' club to a pay-and-play facility with an open door to the community. The move was controversial, but the impact has been remarkable.

Previously, the club had survived thanks largely to the generosity and hard work of its long-standing member Les Close and a handful of volunteers. It has four courts, a gym and a bar, but it had what co-director David Cooke calls "an elitist culture." Although it was not malicious or hostile, the atmosphere was not conducive to welcoming new members. There were just 27 regular players - including only one woman. There are now over 1,100 registered players.

Previously, members paid £86 (100 Euros) per year which allowed them to book courts for only £3. However, the club had no system to track who had actually paid their membership fees. The club was also paying £12 to register each player who played in local England Squash-sanctioned competitions such as the Yorkshire League and Sheffield and District League (so for that £86 per member, the club in effect received only £74) . Les was often using his own money to fund repairs and re-fill the beer barrels. It was unsustainable.

Things started to change when Les partnered with David Cooke - an entrepreneur and fitness coach with a background in the British Army. Les supported and empowered David to fulfil his vision for a club that welcomed all demographics from its local community, encouraged children and adolescents to take up the sport and not just cater for those who could afford the annual membership and had been there for years.

Les and David became co-directors and changed the club's business model to a Community Interest Company (CIC) - essentially a commercial model where all profits made are invested back into the club. They removed the annual membership and instead made it £5 per person to book a court - with anybody welcome through the door.

The decision was unpopular amongst many pre-existing members, but David felt it was absolutely necessary. "The membership system was pushing more people away than it was welcoming them," he says. "It was like an old cliquy golf club environment. If Les wasn't around, new people weren't necessarily made to feel comfortable. No new members or children were joining."

### 'THE CULTURE STARTED TO CHANGE'

David and Les reached out to local businesses and schools and cross-promoted squash to their gym members and social media followers. They also applied for funding from local and national bodies. A small grant of £200 from England Squash enabled them to run free women's squash sessions on Saturday mornings. That one previous female member finally had some company!



The Doncaster Squash Club has a strong and growing female presence today

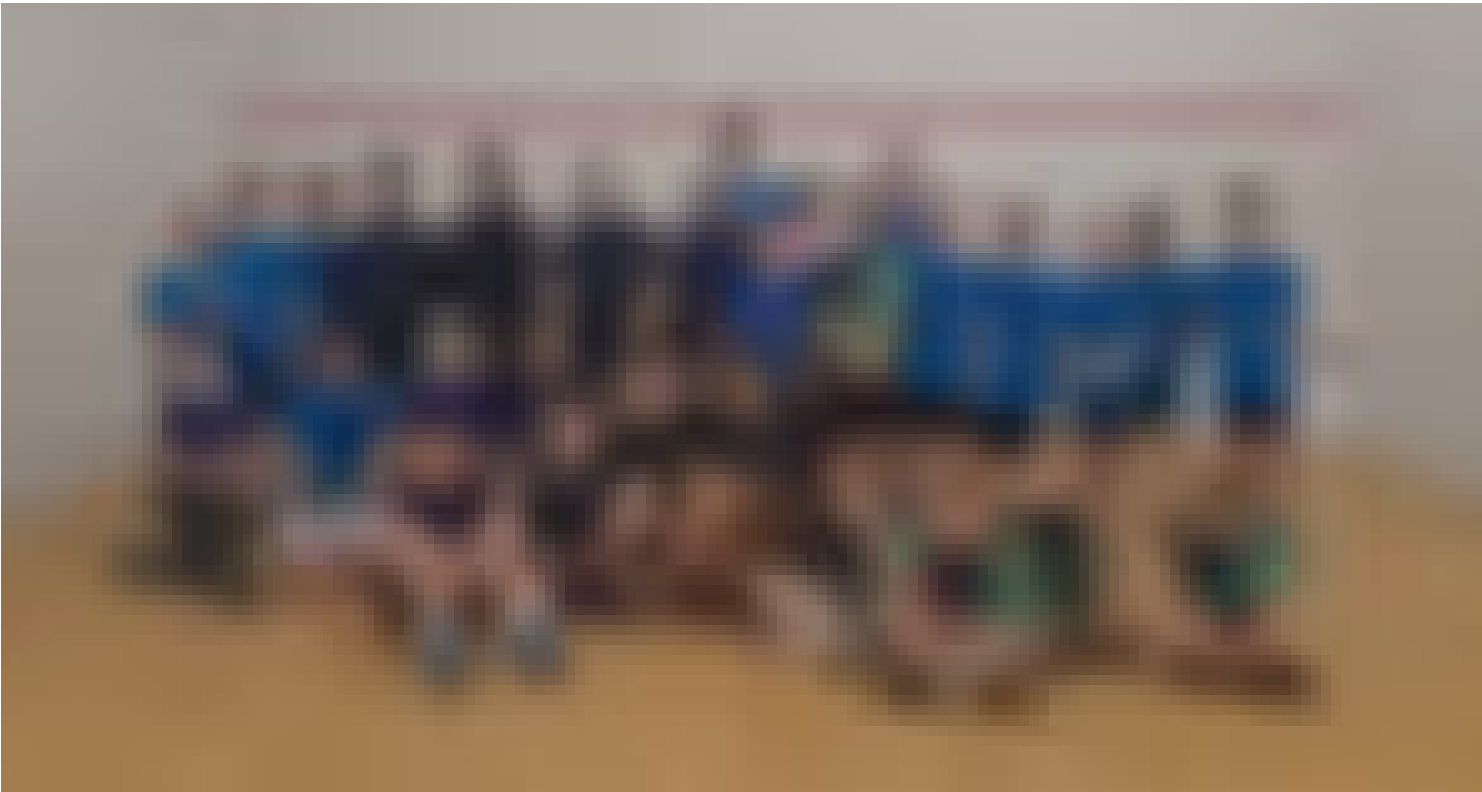
"We spread the word that everybody had the opportunity to come and play. The elitist culture started to change and become more welcoming," says David. Soon, 100 new regular players were coming through the doors.

Around this point, Covid-19 began. Although it was a financial setback, David spent that period creating an online court booking system. The pandemic also gave them a fresh perspective. From his military background, David was already aware of the power of sport and community in combating mental health issues such as PTSD and anxiety. The pandemic increased need in the wider community for a mental and physical release. It strengthened Les and David's determination to create an environment where people could find not just sporting activity but a welcoming community which would ease people's sense of isolation and lack of social interaction.

Since the pandemic, the club's development has been turbo-boostered. From a membership of around 150 (only 37 of which were regular players), the club's new Playtomic database now has 1100 registered players. "We used to celebrate when we had 12 court bookings per night [across the



four courts]; now we're getting an average of 16 bookings per night," reveals David.

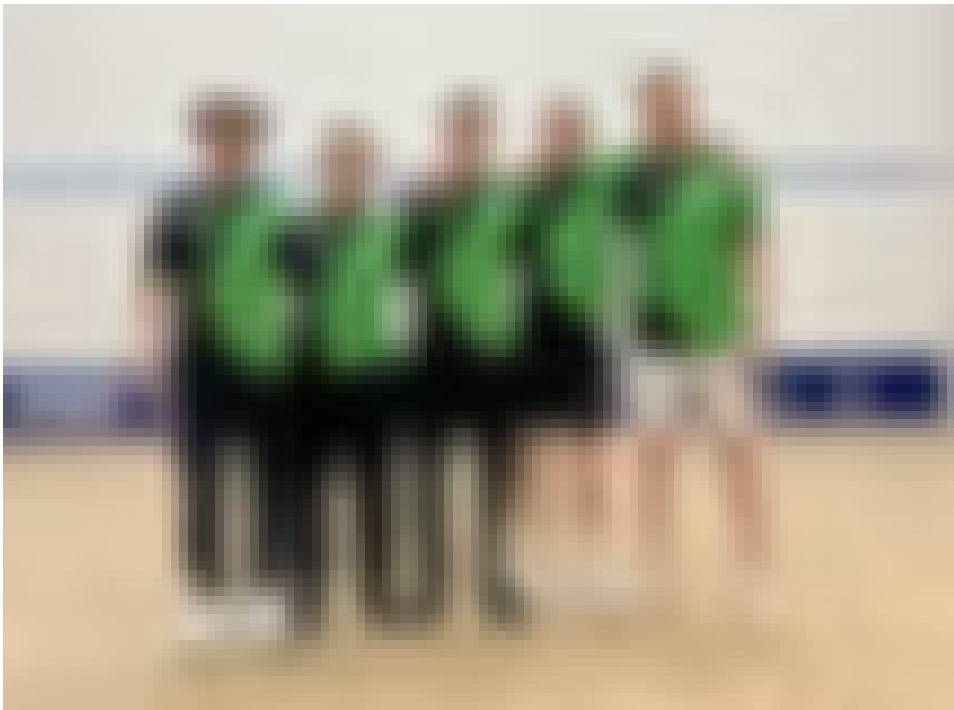


Juniors now form a significant proportion of those numbers.

Long-standing member Ted McQueen has grown the junior programme to 40 players. The club recently hosted its first Sheffield and District junior competition for Under-13 and Under-17s. "Everyone who came saw how Doncaster Squash Club is growing - it was a proud moment," David smiles.

DONCASTER'S SQUASH ROLE MODELS

The upturn in participation has come through Doncaster's investment in coaches but also role models to inspire juniors (and adults) to improve their game.



Doncaster's coaches

New Zealand international Joel Arscott has become a coach and the club's Yorkshire Premier League team captain. Simon Herbert, current world No.55, and England Masters player Darren Lewis have also become very influential figures. The club attracted top 20 PSA players Joel Makin and Patrick Rooney and recruited Scotland No.1 Greg Lobban to represent them in competition too, plus young English talent such as Toby Ponting and Asia Harris, veteran Lewis Doughty and young overseas players such as Willz Donnelly and Brett Schille.

In March this year, Doncaster Ghosts (named after its sponsor who breeds perigrine falcons) [won the prestigious Yorkshire Premier League title](#) for the first time in its history - a great source of pride. "We used those guys to put squash on the map in Doncaster," said David. "Those players create a real buzz and inspire the next generation," said David

"We use them as coaches and role models to inspire club squash and youth squash. We've now gone from three to six teams and two more are waiting to join local leagues when we can get them regular court time."

It hasn't always been an easy ride for Les and David to change the club's fortunes around - but the pair have no regrets about removing the membership model and opening the door to the local community. "Our membership fee was actually relatively cheap," says David.

"I've spoken to people at other clubs where fees can be up to £400 per year. That just puts people off. We would be very reticent to go down that membership route again.

"The club has now become a melting pot of people. There is no more elitism or cliques; it is now an open-door club where people can enjoy the gym, playing squash and a thriving social scene. We have upset a few people by making these changes, but I don't mind that when there has been such a positive outcome."

*Dave Cooke told Doncaster Squash Club's story during a Squash Facilities Network session at the PSA Foundation's Squash Summit in Birmingham in June 2024. [Read more](#)*

[Read more about Doncaster Squash Club on their Facebook page](#)

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