

Markus Gaebel · May 27

Spotlight on Austria: The Story Behind the Austrian Squash Challenge



A stunning full-glass squash court stands at the heart of Europark Salzburg, surrounded by curious shoppers and vibrant mall life.

When passion meets perseverance, something remarkable can grow — even in challenging environments. One of the most inspiring examples of this in the squash world today comes from Austria, where **Aqeel Rehman**, 19-time national champion and tireless squash advocate, has been quietly building one of Europe’s most engaging grassroots squash initiatives: the **Austrian Squash Challenge**.

Aqeel’s Story: From Moosstraße to the National Stage

Aqeel’s squash journey began in the now-defunct Moosstraße courts in Salzburg, where he first picked up a racket in 1991. From those humble beginnings, he rose through the ranks to dominate Austrian squash for nearly two decades. Yet, what stands out most about Aqeel isn’t his personal success — it’s his candid acknowledgment of what his record really says:

“I’m not proud of being a 19-time national champion. It’s actually a sign that something’s wrong. It means we’re lacking a new generation.”

This honesty defines Aqeel’s approach — both as a player and now as an ambassador for the sport.

Squash in Austria: A Sport in Crisis

The Austrian squash scene is in trouble. Facilities are aging, the youth pipeline is thin, and institutional support is minimal. As Aqeel puts it,

“There are barely any new facilities. Where squash is still played, it’s often because of individual enthusiasts keeping things going.”

Knowledge about how to actually manage squash facilities has eroded. And crucially, there's a missing sense of long-term vision — something Aqeel is determined to change.

Salzburg, where he is based, is a case in point. Despite being a wealthy region, it's a cultural and not a sports-centric city. That makes new developments incredibly hard. Yet Rehman persists — looking for opportunities, advocating for change, and, where possible, taking matters into his own hands.

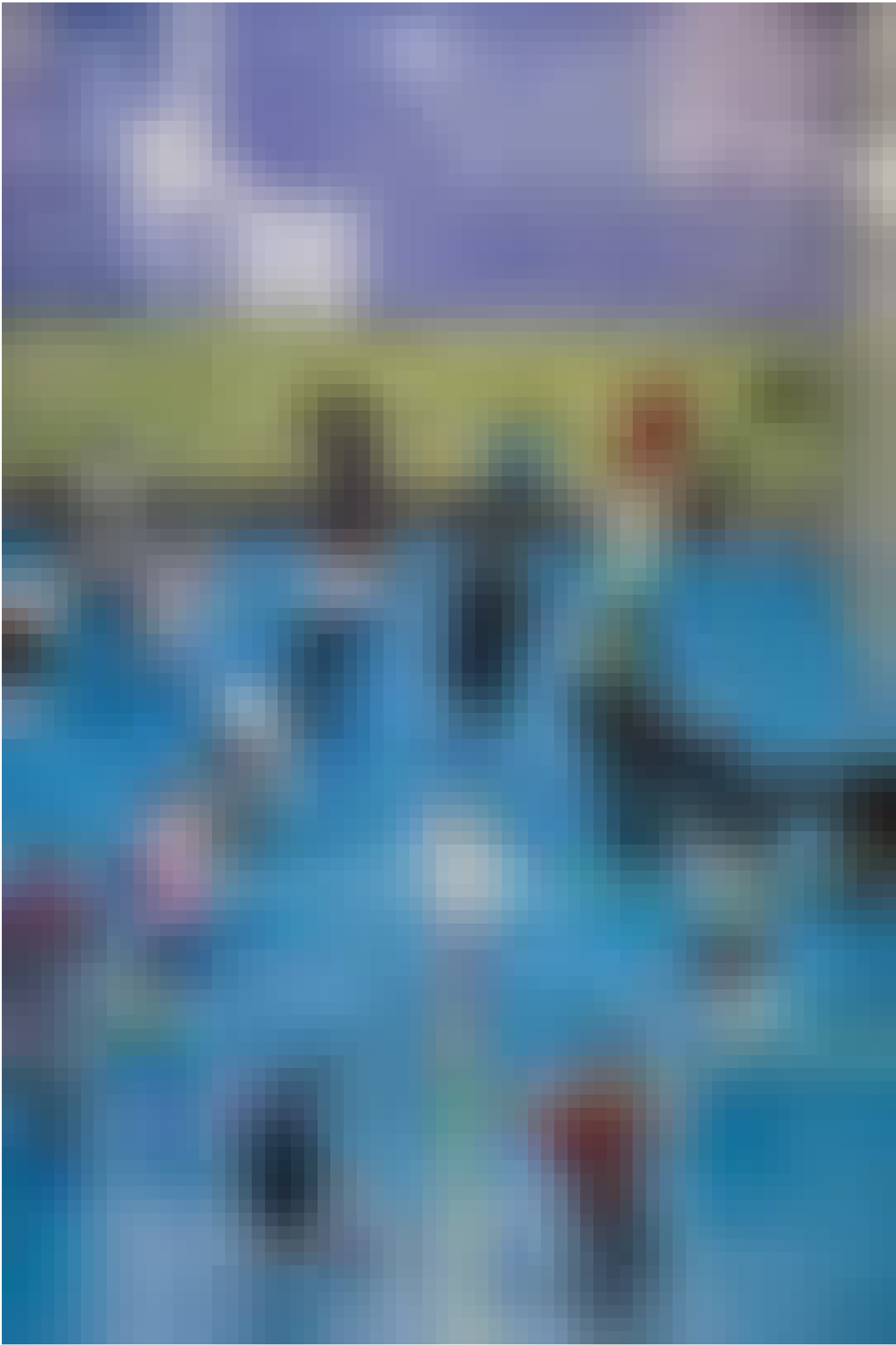
The Austrian Squash Challenge: Squash Meets the Public

At the heart of Aqeel’s mission is the Austrian Squash Challenge, a vibrant, two-week celebration of squash held in Europark Salzburg, one of Austria’s busiest shopping centers. With over 30,000 daily visitors, Europark offers an unparalleled opportunity to bring squash to people who’ve never seen it before.

The event’s centerpiece is the Mozart Open, a PSA-sanctioned tournament for both men and women. While the prize money — most recently set at \$6,000 for each draw — may not attract the sport’s very top players, that has never been the point. As Aqeel explains, the true goal is to connect with the public — and for that, high-level spectacle isn’t required.

“For most spectators, it doesn’t matter whether the world number 10 or number 100 is playing. What matters is the energy, the visibility, the experience.”

The Austrian Squash Challenge is designed to demystify squash, to make it accessible, and to position it as an exciting, everyday sport — not just an elite one.



Kids & School Days - Aqeel Rehman on court with the kids (pic: Jasmin Walter)

The real magic of the Austrian Squash Challenge lies in its broader program:

- **Kids & School Days:** Hundreds of schoolchildren are invited to try squash for free.
- **Celebrity Matches:** Renowned Austrian athletes — including world champions and Olympic medalists from other sports — step onto the court for special exhibition matches.
- **Public Engagement:** Passersby can spontaneously try squash, win prizes, and interact with players.
- **Legacy Outreach:** All participating children are invited to follow-up youth training sessions, with many joining the local squash club in Salzburg.

The numbers speak volumes: In 2025, over 400 children got on court during the Challenge. And the event doesn’t stop at visibility — it actively feeds into sustainable grassroots growth.



Sports Stars on Court – Celebrity Squash Match at the Austrian Squash Challenge in Europark Salzburg - Front row (left to right): Aqeel Rehman, Franz Müllner – “The Austrian Rock,” multiple world record holder in extreme strength feats, Andrea Fischbacher – Olympic Champion in Super-G (2010), World Championship bronze medalist (2009), three World Cup victories, runner-up in the 2008/09 Downhill World Cup overall standings, Manuela Stöckl – Professional dancer and winner of *Dancing Stars* (2007). Back row (left to right): Andreas Prommegger – Snowboard World Champion (parallel events), multiple overall World Cup winner, Peter Hochkofler – Italian national team ice hockey player and professional for HC Bolzano, Lilli Brugger – European Championship medalist in air rifle shooting, Andrea Zarfl – Multiple-time Austrian judo champion and national team athlete.

Aqeel’s Vision: Beyond the Court

Looking ahead, Aqeel wants to go further. He envisions:

- **Building long-term squash infrastructure** by combining sporting expertise with solid management.
- **Developing new squash courts**, if and when opportunities arise, even in a sport-unfriendly real estate climate.
- And above all: **making squash matter again** in the minds of the Austrian public.

The goal isn't to host a World Championship or chase elite dreams. Instead, it's to embed squash into daily life, so that kids grow up knowing the sport, adults recall playing it, and squash earns back its relevance. As he puts it,

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“Even if a child only hits a squash ball once at age 10 — if they remember it when they’re 18, that already matters. Awareness is the first step.”

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Partners That Believe

A key pillar of the Austrian Squash Challenge’s success is its strategic partnership with Europark Salzburg. This is far more than a typical venue rental — in fact, Europark provides the venue. It’s a true collaboration built on shared vision. Recognizing the unique value of hosting a dynamic sporting event, Europark actively supports the Challenge with comprehensive marketing, logistical, and infrastructural backing. From LED displays and professional seating to mall-wide digital signage and targeted promotions, Europark embraces squash not just as a sport, but as a cultural experience that enriches the entire shopping environment.

And it pays off. Sponsors return. Families stop and watch. The buzz builds. And for two weeks a year, squash is visible, alive, and thrilling — right in the middle of a shopping mall.

Conclusion: Why This Matters

What’s happening in Salzburg is more than a tournament — it’s a blueprint. It shows what’s possible when heart, structure, and community come together. In a country where squash is struggling, the Austrian Squash Challenge proves that meaningful change is still possible — one child, one court, one conversation at a time.

At the SFN, we believe this kind of local heroism deserves a spotlight. Aqeel Rehman is not just Austria’s top player — he’s a visionary facility builder. And we’ll be standing beside him, supporting this journey in every way we can.