

mpdale · Nov 24, 2023

Squash, fitness and fun make a perfect recipe at Kaifu Lodge



The mix of squash, fitness and a vibrant social scene has proven to be a successful recipe for Kaifu Lodge in Hamburg, Germany, since 1982.

Like many others clubs that have existed since the sport's heyday of the 1970s and 80s, the club has seen many changes and has had to adapt as squash's fortunes have ebbed and flowed over the last 40 years. However, unlike other venues which have closed their doors, Kaifu Lodge has remained buoyant.

The magic lies in having a centre that fuses squash and fitness but doesn't treat each clientele group as two different sets of customers. Co-founder Conny Hasselbach, who was General Manager for 36 years, says: "We regard our people as fans, not clients or members."

Kaifu Lodge began with 18 courts and basked in squash's popularity of the 80s and 90s - but importantly, it did not solely cater for the 'yuppie' stereotype that characterised so many players back then. It developed links with local schools, trained teachers to deliver squash coaching and ran a huge annual schools championship. It also hosted competitions between local businesses (both large and small) which attracted an astounding 150 teams.

Conny's squash expertise and passion was undoubtedly crucial. He was German champion in 1979/90 and was manager of the German national and youth teams. He also wrote a squash book, *Training, Technique, Tactics*, which sold 75,000 copies.



Equally vital was his co-founder and key investor, the entrepreneur Michael Grau (who is still CEO of the club now into his late 70s). Under the pair's stewardship, Kaifu Lodge's 18 courts were often booked up completely, particularly on Sundays when they were full from 9am until 10pm. "Unbelievable!" says Conny, looking back fondly.

Then, as we know, squash's popularity began to decline from the 90s onwards - and gyms began to become more popular. Luckily for Kaifu Lodge, Conny and Michael had recognised the importance of offering a variety of activities and had included fitness facilities from the very beginning.

Conny says: "Initially the club was designed purely for squash, but I said, 'This is not enough.' We made some space for fitness and that was to prove a very golden decision later. Our best year in terms of turnover per court was 1995. It stayed high until 2001 when people focused more on fitness. We extended our fitness offering and we stayed on the right path."



Although the next 15 years would see further extensions of the fitness facilities, which included converting 10 squash courts, it was the squash scene that remained at the club's heart. The courts remained in the centre of the club, so everybody had to pass by them to access the restaurant, bar, fitness centre, children's play area, spa and beauty salon.

"I remember when we were building a new storey on top of the club and we had to close the courts for several months," says Conny. "After a few days, the fitness members started complaining that the club was so boring with nothing social going on. That's what squash does for the club - it gives the club an atmosphere and is so important for the food and beverage, with a big bar and summer terrace."

Conny makes the point that squash players adopt a totally different attitude towards their activity than gym users - and that creates a unique atmosphere and many fringe benefits. He explains: "At other fitness centres, people go to their class or workout and hardly talk to each other, then they leave, often without taking a shower. In squash, the people talk - in the changing rooms, in the gallery, in the shower and in the bar. They have at least a drink, if not more. They have a different attitude. They do it because they like to have this feeling of being in a community all playing the same sport.

"But at our club, the fitness members like this atmosphere. That's what makes the club very interesting for them to be there two or three times a week. And it means we can take a few more euros from them every week as they stay longer and spend more."

Back in the day, the club's restaurant sold 120 meals a day. Although that figure is lower today, it is still predominantly based on squash, with 60% of the restaurant's turnover coming from squash players.

The key to the vibrancy of the social scene is regular events - tournaments, fun events and some legendary and sometimes outrageous parties. The courts are decorated and used as mini discos with DJs, podium dancers and over a thousands revellers. "They can get wild!" laughs Conny. "Our fitness people especially like to show off."



He adds: "Why should a sports club be different from your normal social life? If you go for some food or a few drinks, you go to a place where you know there are nice people, offering good food in a nice place. You've got to have a good offer! This is not a secret.

"It's all about work and enthusiasm. You've got to talk to the people - find out what they want and respond to what they tell you. We treat our staff and members fairly and do everything we can to make sure people don't think we are a****les! After all, we all know that if something is bad they tell 10 people about it, if something is good that might only tell one person! Identification with the club is very high at Kaifu Lodge.

"We encourage open-minded, fear-free conversations with staff. Members can say what they want. We take criticism seriously and we always try to find staff who match to our guests in their age group, character, friendly and open-minded. Other clubs have people who don't even like sport and just do their job."

Kaifu Lodge runs an incredible 280 fitness classes per week (70 per day) with an average of 25 people in each class. Its squash courts are booked on average six or seven times per day.

The club is a model for the commercial success and unique benefits that squash can bring to a sports and fitness club (or vice-versa). Conny feels the main reason why it isn't being replicated more widely is a "lack of courage" from investors.

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"From the beginning must come the courage of the investor and the management to do something because they believe in it. That is what's missing nowadays. Nobody is prepared to go into it and invest the money to try to make something a bit special. I'm sure it would work if people would go for it, but they don't believe in themselves or have the ambition. Combined centres involving squash can work and they are absolutely necessary for our sport. After all, without courts we will not have players."