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Nicol Squash: Lessons from Our Squash Facilities Journey



The team behind Nicol Squash: Peter Nicol and his wife Jess Winstanley

Former world champion Peter Nicol MBE may have his name above the door, but [Nicol Squash](#) is very much a partnership. The Scottish squash legend and his Canadian wife Jess Winstanley opened a four-court facility in New York in 2021 and are about to open a ground-breaking squash, padel and pickleball centre in New Jersey. The Squash Facilities Network sat down with Jess to talk about what she and Peter have learned on their journey so far as squash facilities operators.

Peter and Jess are deeply embedded in the squash world. Peter won four Commonwealth Games gold medals and was the first ever British player to become world No.1; Jess's mother Melissa was Tour Director for the World Professional Squash Association in the 1980s and with business partner [John Nimick](#) runs some of the biggest PSA World Tour events in the U.S., including the Tournament of Champions and several editions of the US Open.

After Peter's retirement as a pro he was an event promoter with Eventis Sports Marketing and co-founded the online coaching tool [SquashSkills](#). After he and Jess moved to New York, they leveraged their combined squash contacts book to run weekend squash coaching camps at a nine-court facility in Brooklyn.

"Lo and behold, we loved it," says Jess. "That really led us to where we are today because, without any risk, we started to create a community by forming lots of strategic relationships. We had this niche cornered without needing to do any marketing. This is squash's superpower - word of mouth is huge and you don't need to compete against a ton of noise."

We Lacked the 'Ego Mindset' to Seek Investors

Within a year and a half, their weekend side project of running squash camps was surpassing the revenue from SquashSkills. At that time, the Nicols had a newborn son, were new to New York and had no financial backing. They were building a business on personal credit cards. Looking back, Jess reflects that even in those lean times they could still have built their own facility, but lacked the "ego mindset" and self-confidence to look for investors.



Peter Nicol coaching at Nicol Squash in New York

EARLY VENTURES INTO SQUASH FACILITIES

Instead, they looked for facilities to partner with and came upon a huge complex at the Moses Brown School in Rhode Island. The facility had formed a partnership with SEA programme Squash Busters and agreed for the Nicols to open a for-profit club at the school based on a revenue share.

Not Jumping into Something Where You Will Not Be Present

Jess and Peter brought in Irish coach Arthur Gaskin to run the club and its programmes. Jess reflects candidly: "We ultimately did not do a good job of supporting Arthur and running that facility. Our management and structure were not up to par because we didn't have any standardised operating procedures (SOP's).

"All our experience was in in-person management. We could not get it to a place where it was financially self-sufficient by having an organisation and full-time staff. It was a great learning experience of not jumping into something where you will not be present, unless you have a full business structure underneath you."

A year into that venture they formed a similar working relationship with what was then called Manhattan Community Squash Center, now known as Open Squash. On that experience Jess stays tight-lipped, but is keen to stress to anyone going into any partnership the importance of having a "really, really good legal team in advance of the signature moment."



A lot of fun at Nicol Squash in New York

NICOL SQUASH, NEW YORK

Building Community is Essential to Avoid Marketing Costs

The Nicols' next step was opening their own facility, Nicol Squash, which has proudly stood on 42nd Street in Manhattan for the last three years. Prior to opening, they had built up a local network through the summer camps and their ventures at Moses Brown and Open Squash, which together with Peter's reputation in the game, were big advantages.

Jess states: "Building community and having people who are behind you are essential, otherwise you have to spend on marketing, which in our world of squash generally won't make you enough money off the bat - unless you have a very strong backer. However, I do think that an element of naivete is good - as long as the founders are hungry, energetic, smart and resourceful.

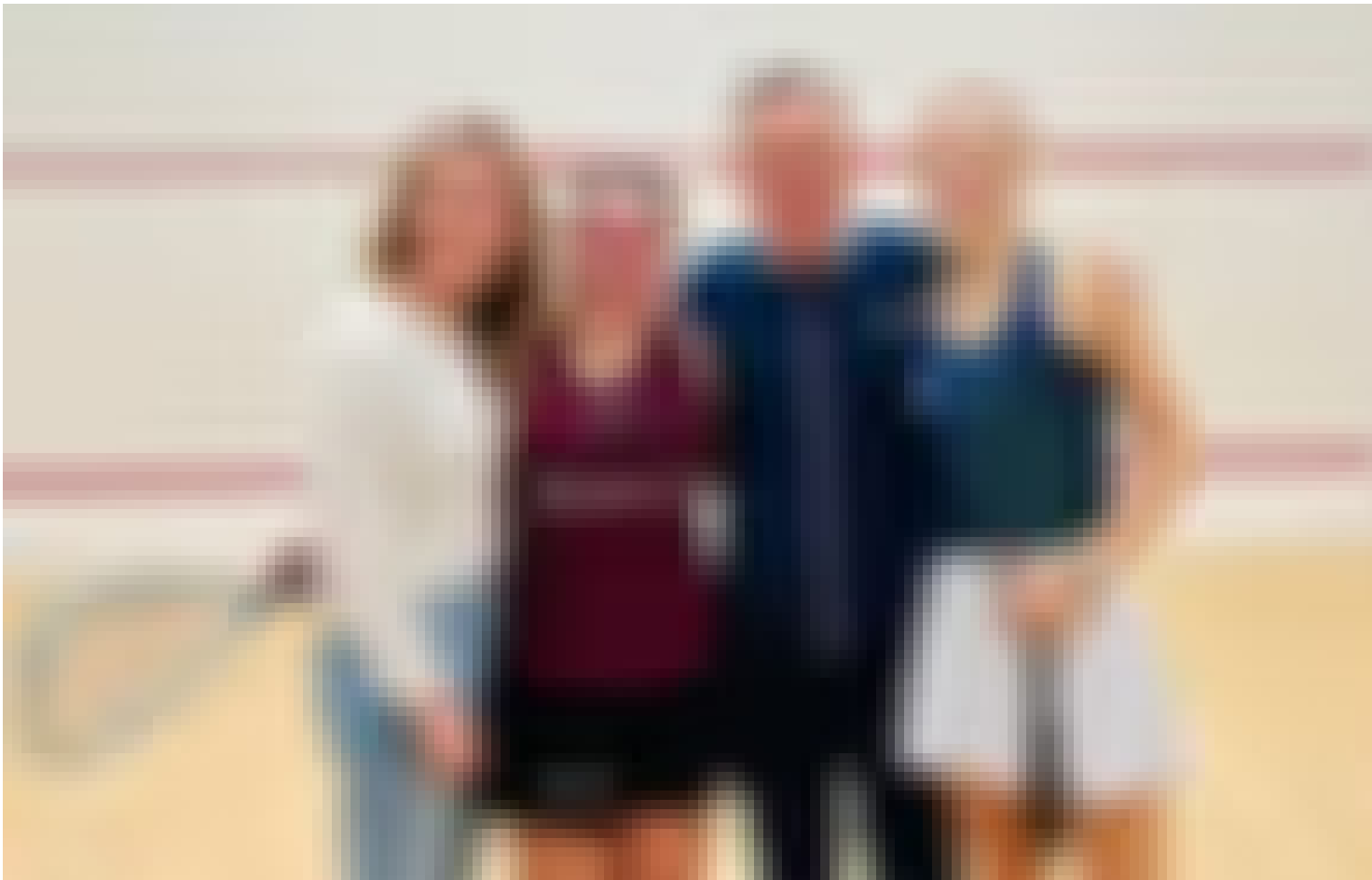
We Understood Our Gaps and Invested in SOPs

"I think we had a pretty good level of experience by the time we opened Nicol Squash, but we also understood what our gaps were. In our case, those were around SOP's and structures - so I immediately set forth on hiring people to fill those gaps. I had some really great experiences working with some consultants, but the first thing that I did was invest in our SOPs. I recommend that to everybody."

We Wanted to Change the Perception That Squash Is Out of People's Price Range

Nicol Squash has four courts, a fitness suite and bar and turns over around \$2million per year at a net operating profit of around 10%. It has around 300 members (split roughly equally between juniors and adults) with pay-and-play also available to anyone who walks in.

Jess reveals "a big learning point" from how they set up their membership model in Manhattan: originally, they put monthly membership at \$250 with no charge or limits on court usage. "We made it all-access because we wanted it to appear like a gym membership, which is something our potential customers would recognise," explains Jess. "In New York and the U.S., the vast majority of squash facilities are private and most people think it's out of their price range. We wanted to change that perception."



Peter Nicol and Jessica Winstanley with pro players at Nicol Squash

A Big Learning Point: Unlimited Court Access Is Risky with Limited Courts

But allowing people to play as often as they want, whenever they want, is a risky business when you only have four courts. Slowly, they had to tweak the rules; for instance by adding a small fee for court bookings and setting a ceiling of one peak-time court reservation per day.

Building an Adult Community Is Totally Different

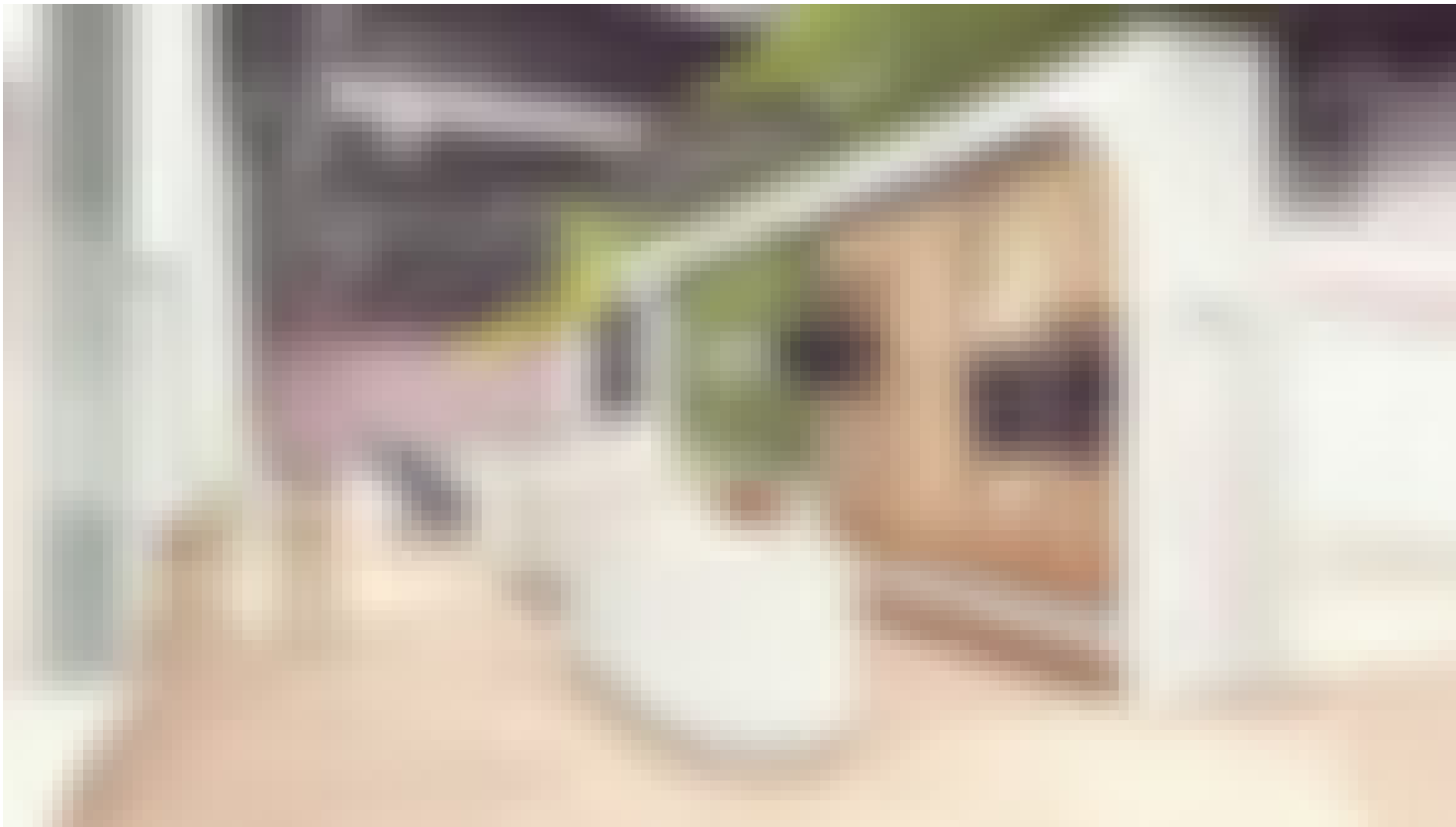
When Nicol Squash first opened, it didn't have any adult programming at all. Like many American facilities, its focus was solely on juniors. It soon became apparent that building and serving an adult community was totally different. Initially, they prioritised programming (coaching sessions for different standards, club nights, ladies' nights, box leagues and all manner of junior programmes) which is very labour-intensive. They hadn't factored in typical adult squash player behaviour of simply booking a court and playing, requiring no intervention from coaching staff. These are lessons they intend to take into their next project...

NICOL NEW JERSEY

Staff Turnover Is Very Expensive, So We Offer Strong Salaries

The Nicols' next venture, opening soon, will have four pickleball courts, three squash courts and two state-of-the-art indoor padel courts. Two additional outdoor courts for padel and pickleball will be added in early 2025.

Pickleball's incredible popularity in the U.S. needs no introduction, and although padel is more nascent in the States, it's a game Peter has fallen in love with. Playing padel is very expensive in the U.S., and Jess and Peter want to change that.



The new facility Nicol in New Jersey, opening scheduled for December 2024

New Jersey will be a public club with a low annual membership and a **SFN** court fee which Jess believes is a stronger financial model. Mindful of the fact that staff turnover is very expensive, they are offering a strong salary package and want to form a very strong team to encourage retention.
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Jess has also learned to focus on profit rather than revenue. "Historically, I just wanted to do more and more, invest in marketing and get more people into the sport," she explains. "All I used to focus on was revenue. But in New Jersey and beyond, I'm very focused on profit."

I Will Never Build Another Location on Debt Financing

The club will be located in a 20,000 sq ft centre in the Fort Monmouth area of New Jersey that they will rent. "I will never build another location on debt financing," Jess says. "It's the most stressful, stressful thing. That's another really important piece for anyone out there that is getting into the business or is looking to expand."

"[Whether you buy or rent] depends on your goals. If you want to be in the business for 40 years and have only one location, [buying] may be viable. But we are not building this business to necessarily be in it for that period of time, so renting suits us."

Jess admits that she cannot wait to see how the more nuanced model of a multi-rackets club unfolds. She says: "I wish I could fast forward and speak to myself in a year's time to see what advice I give then!"