

Markus Gaebel · Apr 2

The Rise and Prospects of Padel in Italy – Lessons from the Development of Squash

The following article summarises a conversation between Carlo Ferrara, Research & Data Analysis Manager at the International Padel Federation, and Markus Gaebel, founder of the Squash Facilities Network. The two discuss the development of padel in Italy, draw parallels to the squash boom in the 1980s and 1990s, and explore possible future scenarios for the sport.



Boom and Decline – The Development of Padel in Italy



“...the boom in Italy or Sweden often lasts three to four years – and then only those who truly love padel remain.”

Carlo Ferrara explains that padel in Italy experienced a rapid rise about three to four years ago, largely driven by a “fashion effect.” However, growth has since slowed, partly due to the emergence of new sports trends. According to Ferrara, what remains are mainly those players who see padel as a permanent part of their lives.

Markus Gaebel draws parallels to the history of squash: it too saw significant growth in the 1980s and 1990s, which later subsided, leaving behind a more stable core community. Gaebel points out that this is a well-known pattern across various racquet sports. He refers to booms in Sweden, the USA (racquetball), and Europe (squash), where rapid expansion often led to sharp declines.

Parallels to Squash: Why Management Is the Key Issue

“Management is always the crucial point. At the beginning, it's enough to open in the morning and close at night. But later, you need a strategy.”

Gaebel emphasises that sports booms quickly stagnate if professional management is not established after the initial euphoria. This is where federations come into play.

Ferrara also sees deficits within the Italian Tennis Federation, which is officially responsible for padel: “The Federazione Italiana Tennis is currently doing very little for padel... They focus more on tennis. Even school programmes for padel are being neglected.”

Both agree that the lack of know-how in club management, marketing, and strategic planning leads to major problems once the hype dies down. Gaebel mentions that this development has been seen in many countries when a sport became popular too quickly, but the people in charge had no long-term strategy.

The Role of Federations: Independent Padel Structures vs. Tennis Federations

“When tennis and padel are under the same organisation, but the leadership only knows tennis, padel will always remain secondary.”

Ferrara explains that padel in Italy falls under the Federazione Italiana Tennis, now renamed Federazione Italiana Tennis e Padel. However, he sees little concrete initiative to actively promote padel. Rather, he considers the current approach to be politically driven, pointing to a similar situation in squash, where tennis federations often tried – and failed – to manage both sports simultaneously.

He talks about a lack of data, poor youth development, and declining interest in schools. In contrast, Spain's padel officials broke away from tennis long ago, which helped padel grow to now have more active players than tennis.

Economic Factors and Figures on Padel in Italy

“Anyone founding a club needs at least four courts for a stable business model. Fewer than four makes things difficult.”

Both Ferrara and Gaebel stress that the financial sustainability of a padel club depends largely on the number of courts, whether they are indoor or outdoor, and other location-specific factors. Ferrara explains that many facilities in Italy have only one or two courts, often located in hotels, resorts, or public institutions. As a result, the average number of courts per club is only about 2.6–2.7. In his view, a financially viable club must have at least four courts. Italy's varied climate also influences court construction: “In the North, up to 75–80% of the courts are now indoor. In the South, it's the opposite.” The integration of a bar and additional amenities such as fitness areas is also key to long-term profitability. “Tennis has shown that purely outdoor courts generate less revenue over time.”

Figures, Data and Databases



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“Data is essential: I’ve built a data pool with clubs, courts, and providers so investors can see where a club is worth opening.”

Since 2018, Ferrara has developed a database containing all padel clubs and courts in Italy. It includes data on location, facilities, management, manufacturers, and service providers involved in building padel courts. He shares this information through platforms such as padelsearch.info.

This allows investors and club operators to understand where opportunities and competition exist.

Gaebel adds that detailed market and site analysis is just as important in squash to avoid poor planning: “Hype can be misleading – we need hard data on revenue per court and local demand.”

Outlook: Risks and Opportunities

“Either padel in Italy now develops professionally or we’ll see closures and empty courts.”

Asked about the future of padel in Italy, Ferrara responds with scepticism. Due to lack of support and the end of the fashion trend, he expects further club closures. He estimates that up to 1,500 facilities may shut down in the coming years: “Out of 9,730 installations, at least 1,000–1,500 are inactive or will be soon.”

Gaebel warns against ignoring the warning signs: without professional management concepts and independent structures, padel could follow the same path as squash in Italy, where very few locations remain active today.

At the same time, both see potential for a comeback: where solid site analyses, professional operators, and independent padel structures exist, the sport can thrive in the long term. International federations and networks like Ferrara’s work offer a valuable opportunity to exchange knowledge and promote sustainable projects.

Conclusion

The conversation between Carlos Ferrara and Markus Gaebel makes it clear that padel in Italy is currently at a crossroads. After a massive boom, it now remains to be seen whether the sport – like squash once did – can build new structures and implement long-term concepts following a phase of disillusionment. According to Ferrara and Gaebel, success will depend heavily on professional club management, solid data analysis, and a federation that truly represents the interests of padel. The lessons already learned in the squash world provide valuable guidance. “No courts, no players. But without management, no development.”

The future of padel in Italy will reveal whether the right course is set – or whether, like other past trend sports, it will mainly fail due to overly rapid growth and a lack of collaboration.