

mpdale · Dec 5, 2023

# Squash 57: Revitalizing Courts and Expanding Appeal in Squash Facilities



Squash 57, an innovative adaptation of traditional squash, is emerging as a vital asset for squash facilities, particularly in attracting and retaining older players who may find the physical demands of traditional squash challenging. Played on a standard squash court, Squash 57 (referred to in some countries as 'racketball') uses a significantly bouncier ball and a larger racket.

This variation offers a less strenuous yet engaging experience, making it especially appealing to older or less physically-able individuals. The key advantage of Squash 57 lies in its ability to facilitate longer rallies with reduced physical exertion compared to traditional squash. This accessibility extends the sport's appeal, potentially drawing in a demographic that might otherwise forego squash due to physical constraints.

One significant benefit of integrating Squash 57 into squash facilities is the optimization of court usage. Older players, particularly retirees, are more likely to use facilities during daytime hours, a period when courts are typically underutilised. By offering Squash 57, facilities can increase court occupancy during these off-peak hours, enhancing overall revenue.

Squash 57's popularity is evident across various European nations, with a notable presence in Great Britain. Some clubs in this region report Squash 57's popularity rivalling, or even surpassing, that of traditional squash. This trend underscores the game's potential as a revenue and membership driver. A prime example is Ebbisham Sports Club in Surrey, South West London, where fostering a Squash 57 community has proven to be a significant revenue generator.

Ebbisham has three squash courts, three tennis courts, three badminton courts and a small fitness area. It has over 400 adult members and more than 200 juniors.

Back in 2016, Ebbisham's then-Club Coach and Development & Membership Co-ordinator, Jo Robinson, set out to encourage members and non-members aged over-50 to learn Squash 57 as part of a '50+ Get Active' campaign run by Surrey Squash (the local county association).

Jo partnered with an organisation called University of the 3rd Age (known as 'U3A'). This is a network of over 1000 charities across the UK who create opportunities for older people to learn, have fun and make friends. It has over 430,000 members and they run local activities in most towns and cities.



Jo started weekly Squash 57 courses at Ebbisham and advertised them via the U3A's newsletters, meetings and website, as well as 'boosted' posts on local Facebook groups, and advertising via the local council, Surrey Squash and Active Surrey. She successfully applied for funding from the local council and the Active Surrey Sports Partnership which paid for some of the courts and equipment.

The sessions proved popular and expanded into two new weekly classes - a morning racketball beginners' group and an afternoon 'improvers' group. With up to 16 players in each class, demand soon grew through word of mouth, so the club began weekly 50+ Social Rackets Mornings (offering seven different racket sports for all abilities) and a charity Tai Chi group (held weekly on a squash court).

Although Jo was overall leader of the U3A groups, each class has an enthusiastic and friendly volunteer group leader who sends out weekly emails to encourage attendance and maintain the social connection between members.

There are now four weekly racketball classes, one social rackets morning and a charity Tai Chi group, with an average of 50-70 people attending each week. Sessions range from £2.50 to £5 (£2.92 to €5.83), resulting in thousands of pounds of extra income annually for the club. The classes have also increased awareness of the club in the local community.

Just as importantly, the strong friendships formed through these groups have led to members offering each other crucial mental health support, particularly during the Covid-19 lockdowns.



"Why is this club unique, instead of the norm?" said Gill, Group Leader of the beginners' racketball class. "Anyone can turn up and give it a try, without sky-high session fees or potentially intimidating expectations of ability, so they know they have found the right place for them. Ebbisham Sports Club gives an opening to those who have not got natural ability to participate, enjoy and reap the health and social benefits of sport."

Another participant, Phil, said: "I had not picked up a racket for 30 years, so coming back after all that time was a bit scary. However, there was a great range of sports and different standards that made it easy to fit in. Everyone seemed to have the same aim - to enjoy themselves and help others to do the same. Brilliant!"

Keith added: "My time at Ebbisham playing racketball and other racket sports three times a week, gives me a good workout... Having a coffee afterwards is the icing on the cake. I would hate to just stop playing and go home. We are all friends and Ebbisham has built a nice community."

According to Jo, the most crucial success factors are:

- An enthusiastic coach, member and/or staff member to co-ordinate, promote and advertise group sessions
- A friendly, respected Group Leader to send out weekly emails and promote social cohesion and organise occasional social get-togethers and events
- Setting an affordable and competitive session fee which 50+ people are willing to pay
- For the 50+ age group, a small club environment can be less threatening and more appealing to all ages and abilities for them to exercise and form friendships



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Jo (pictured above, kneeling down at the front), who is also a padel coach, added: "These classes really have made a huge impact on these seniors' lives. One lady joined the club straight away after 45 minutes of racketball! It just shows what instant pleasure that game can give people. For me, racketball is like padel - I don't think there are any others sports that are instantly as easy to play.

"Racketball really should be as big as padel, if only more people knew about it. It is a good physical workout, it can be played in singles or doubles and it is never rained off. Coaches in clubs should be promoting racketball alongside squash for the many benefits it provides."

Patrick Osborn, Chair of the WSF's Squash 57 Committee, agrees. He said: "These days, some multi-sport facilities are having to justify why they need squash courts - and Squash 57 can help massively with that.

"For a beginner, they don't need to warm up the ball, can have a good rally straight away and become engaged very quickly. A lot of squash clubs might say, 'We don't need it' - but I think they are missing an opportunity."

For more information go to <https://www.worldsquash.org/> - Squash 57