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# Junior participation is taking off in Sydney thanks to JETS Squash



Yan Sommer and Geoff Davenport are growing grassroots junior squash participation in Sydney against a backdrop of long-term decline in club facilities.

JETS Squash (Junior Emerging Talent in Sydney) run a range of programmes across two squash clubs, principally MAASH, a public multi-sports centre with seven squash courts. The other is a 10-court centre which has recently been sold and is under threat of redevelopment.

Squash participation and infrastructure in Sydney and across Australia is a shadow of its former glory in the 1970s and 80s, when the big cities had clubs on every corner and the Aussie flag dominated the top of the world rankings.

Like [Bradley Hindle's Daisy Hill Club in Brisbane](#), JETS Squash is a rare example of a thriving Aussie community squash club with packed courts and programmes for beginners, social players, advanced players and children. How have they managed to swim against the tide?



"Juniors are the key to everything," says Geoff (*pictured above, centre*), a former high-performance squash coach who transitioned to working at grassroots level two years ago to help address Australia's participation crisis.

The owner of MAASH offers discounted off-peak courts and gives Geoff and Yan freedom to run JETS Squash's youth programmes as they please. They return the favour by filling the courts with eager kids (and the bar with parents) making the venue a fun and vibrant place to be.

MINIS SQUASH

JETS began with a very deliberate decision to target junior school children, as many high school pupils have already discovered and committed to other sports. The key is giving them fun activities, letting them play and not focusing too much on technique. Older juniors (15-17-year-olds) are given coaching roles and become role models.

In the beginners' sessions there is a philosophy of "learning through play" (often called 'a game sense approach'). For instance, points are allocated for hitting the ball and hitting targets on the front wall, making learning fun and engaging. Once kids can hit the ball properly, they move up to the 'Improving Beginner Minis Squash' session to learn more advanced skills.


One Sunday per month, JETS hold a skill-based competition which gives kids at least three games with minimal hanging around in between. They use a bouncy Karakal ball. One coach takes two courts each and offers advice during the match. Again, the emphasis is on fun.

Yan says: "It's a great way to get kids used to competitions so they can progress to internal and external events. A junior round robin every Sunday not only allows the kids some fun match play but the mums and dads come along and play three-quarter court as well and they don't want to leave! The club feels more vibrant."

## NEW SOUTH WALES NOVICE CHAMPIONSHIPS


In 2021, JET Squash started a State Championship with a difference. This wasn't for the best kids in New South Wales - in fact, precisely the opposite. This was for any kid who can hit a ball, starting with those who cannot yet consistently serve or return serve.

*Download the NSW Novice Championships flyer below for full info*



Full 3 page Blue 2023 Novice Champs SQUASH poster.pdf

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The NSW Novice Championships started in 2021 with 48 entrants. It has grown every year since then and this year they're on track for at least 110 children.

The novice event features a minis section where a third junior sits at the back (the ball rarely reaches the back of the court) and keeps score.

Two coaches are allocated to each court for the entirety of the event to help all players during their matches. There is a carnival atmosphere with a barbeque, fairy floss, soft serve ice cream, popcorn and slushy machines. Kids receive a free t-shirt and goody bags from sponsors. "It's a huge vibe and they all want to come back," smiles Yan.

"You've got to make it fun to keep the kids interested enough until they are developing skills, having rallies and begin falling in love with the sport. You get them to a point where they want to do more - get one-on-one coaching and start playing more advanced tournaments."

**GREEN SHIELD**

Green Shield is a New South Wales regional team squash event founded by Neil Green in the 70s, which had shrunk from 15 regional teams to two - and Sydney couldn't raise a team. A few years ago, Geoff scraped together a Sydney team and convinced teams from North Coast, Southern and Hunter to take part too. They all travelled to Canberra and made up a total of around 80 players.

In the Green Shield there are U11, U13, U15 and U17 championships, with four in a boys' team and three in a girls' team. In each category there is a boys', girls' and overall title winner, as well as an overall winning region. It's a round-robin format that lasts from Friday afternoon until Sunday lunchtime. Each region gets its own t-shirts.





This year, a Sydney Metro team of 37 players (including 22 debutants) travelled by minibus to Hunter near Newcastle and stayed in two caravan parks. They won 11 out of the 13 titles, including the overall winning regional team. The competition had almost 150 kids overall - the majority of them low-level players.

"To get kids to commit to something like Green Shield you need to work reasonably hard to sell it to the parents, tell them how much fun it is and why it's beneficial to their child," says Geoff. "Once they see it and understand, then they'll come back."

The NSW Novice Championships and Green Shield are just some of the activities at JET Squash. Geoff and Yan are currently planning a free squash and homework scheme for young female refugees. Their battle to get more children falling in love with squash will continue despite Sydney's ageing, crumbling and under-funded facilities.

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"There are so few courts it's scary," says Yan. "I feel like time is running out for squash. We've got to roll up our sleeves and do as much as we can. Facilities are so important. It's not that people don't enjoy playing squash, it's because we don't have a big enough base for people to play it any more. The more young players we have, the better the case is for keeping courts going and building more."

[Read more about JETS Squash here](#)