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How one-wall squash is helping to grow the game in Luxembourg



Marc Thrill is on a mission to grow junior participation in squash - and his one-wall courts in Luxembourg are proving to be a perfect 'gateway' into the sport.

Marc has converted a disused climbing wall in a public sports hall in the town of Shengen into two squash 'front walls' which up to 75 players play against twice a week, supported by three coaches.

The first wall was only 3.5m x 3m - but that proved so popular that another one, full squash court-size, was added alongside it. Marc taped a coloured T on the floor and yellow lines to signify the side and back walls, for coaching purposes. He uses a red dot squash ball with juniors and a yellow dot with more experienced players.

Marc has also developed two versions of a mobile squash court that he sometimes uses at the sports hall. These can be dismantled and packed into the back of his SUV and assembled in public spaces. The mobile courts have appeared at sports festivals and open days in Luxembourg and Germany.

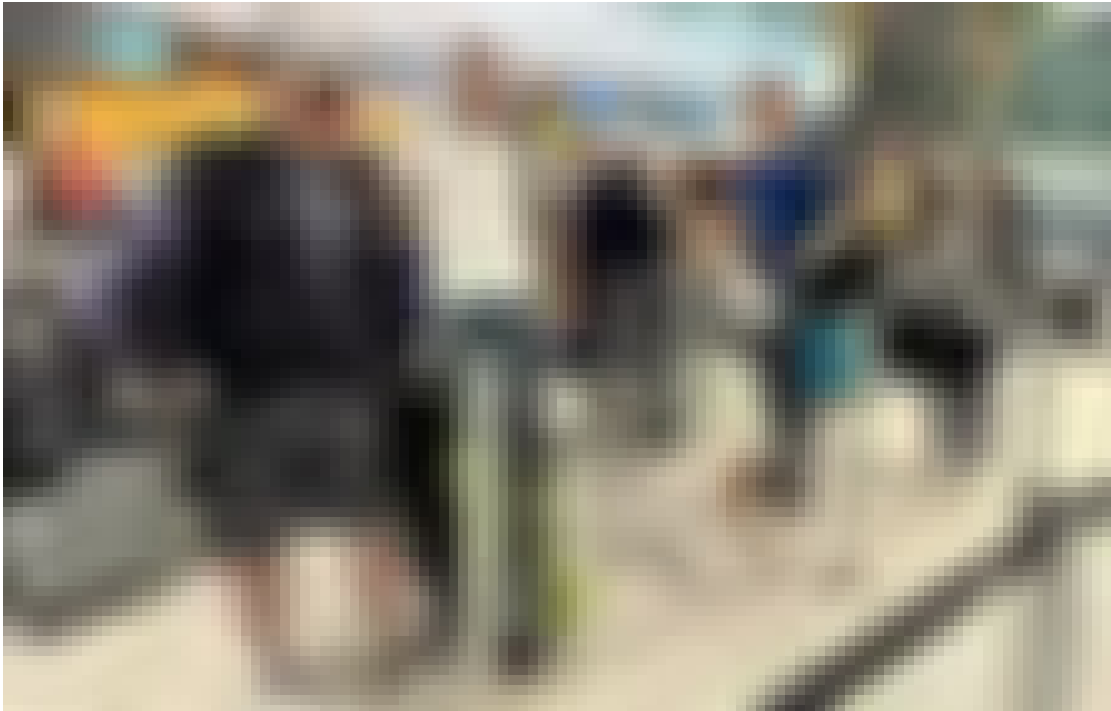
The Shengen commune (local authority) offers the sports hall for free and the project is backed by ‘Let’s Make It Happen’ – an initiative which supports innovative projects across Luxembourg. The Luxembourg Ministry of Education has supported Marc in running training camps for PE teachers so they can deliver squash lessons to their pupils on the wall and spread the word.

Marc, who is an air traffic controller at Luxembourg airport, runs the programme in his spare time. He first had the idea of setting up the wall due to the expense and difficulty of transporting pupils from local primary schools by bus to the nearest squash courts in Luxembourg City.

Around 75% of juniors who play regularly on the wall have started visiting the nearest squash club, Top Squash, 20 minutes' drive away. But they still train on the wall as well because they find it extremely useful for practising straight drives, for Marc's innovative coaching drills and they enjoy the community that has developed there.

Marc says the team now has "almost too many people" coming to play on the walls and intends to build a third one in 2024.

Among the juniors who have thrived in this environment is 11-year-old Matvei Gluhoi and his seven-year-old brother Timofei. This year, Matvei (who represents Romania) has competed in the Under-13s in four European Squash Federation junior competitions, most recently the Swiss Junior Open. His best performance so far was sixth place in the Slovenian Junior Open in March.

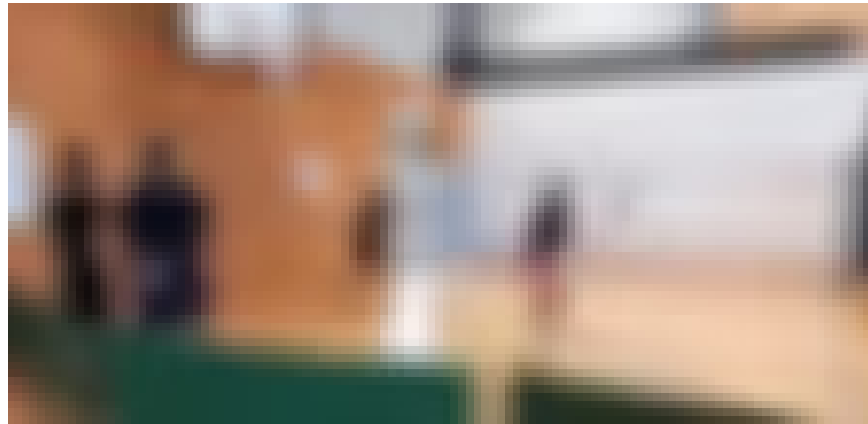


(l-r) Jean Claude Schmidt, Yevgeny and Matvei

Matvei's father Yevgeny said: "The one-wall court is very useful for him. First time on it, he was not happy - but second or third time, it was good for him. In the environment at Shengen it is an amazing atmosphere. It is such a friendly club - like a family."

Matvei's coach, Jean-Claude Schmidt, says the Shengen wall is a great example of thinking 'outside the box.' He said: "A change of environment from a traditional squash court can be very useful and help get more rackets in young people's hands."

"On the one wall you need to be consistent with your straight drives because you don't have your 'friends' - the side walls - to save you. If your drive is not quite straight, the side walls will bring your ball back into play, but on the one wall you need to keep the ball straight. Once you train on the one wall, then go to the traditional court, suddenly the concept of hitting is completely different."



There is a big group of juniors who played squash for the first time on the wall and are now reaching a good standard. But it is not only for beginners - Swiss pro Nadia Pfister, the world No.76, also uses it for training.

Marc says: "Matvei, Timofe and our other juniors are a product of the environment we have created here. They use the wall, they do fitness training in the hall and train at Top Squash in Luxembourg City. Our system makes them what they are. We are facing the problem of too many people coming! It is a wonderful atmosphere."

"Squash can be very successful if we just open our minds. We need to build courts where kids can come and enjoy it without barriers. The full squash court can come later - you just need a wall, some lines and a coach to show them how to hold the racket and play games. Of course, it's not squash as we love it, but it doesn't make any difference to them. They all want to play squash now because of the wall."

He adds: "We can't wait any more for people to come to their local squash club. Most of them never go because they have never seen it. We have to give them the possibility to play a basic version of the game. The single wall idea is simply to get them to play. Once they play, we will get players on our courts. I'm 100% sure of that."

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