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Is this the only UK squash club with a waiting list?



Founder Matthew Towers with his team

Towers Health & Racquets Club is one of very few squash facilities in the UK that has a waiting list to become a member. How have they created such an unprecedented level of demand?

Opened in 2017, the club in Bedford (50 miles north of London) has four squash courts, indoor tennis courts, gym, spa, swimming pool, club lounge and creche. It has around 400 squash-playing members, 100 players in its thriving box leagues, teams in local leagues and a junior programme including classes for two local schools.

Nothing unusual about all that; so what's the secret? Founder Matthew Towers believes the club's key difference within the UK market is that it is a commercial members' club, rather than a non-profit members' club run by a committee.



Coaching Squash 57

"The members' club model in the UK has a number of issues" Matthew says. "Unless you've got a very forward-thinking person leading the committee, clubs can tend to get very stuck in their ways and big decisions can be hard to get approved.

"Very often these clubs are run by very well-meaning committees, but they are under constant pressure from members/friends to keep the fees as low as possible. This means that they don't charge enough - and if you don't charge enough, you lack money to re-invest. Facilities deteriorate and membership becomes less and less attractive - it becomes a vicious circle. I see this happening in many clubs that I visit all over the UK."

The commercial structure at Towers Health & Racquets Club enables Matthew and General Manager Steve Davies to make quick decisions - without having to call an Emergency General Meeting or put anything before a committee. This means they can be agile and react quickly to changing circumstances or need.

This, in essence, is how they have managed to buck the trend of squash participation in England, which has been shrinking for over 25 years. As shown in the Squash Facilities Network's 2024 Global Squash Report, there is a strong link between countries with a higher proportion of commercial facilities and the strength of grassroots squash in those nations.



Junior coaching

Matthew puts the waiting list for membership at Towers down to several factors, all of which are easier to address if you are a commercial, rather than a non-profit members' club:

- The facilities must be excellent

Matthew says: "When you next go into your club, have a proper look around and ask yourself, 'If I were a member of the public who has never seen squash before, what would I think?' Is it clean? Are the seats and carpets covered in beer and coffee stains? Are the corridors dark and mouldy? This is what I see when I walk into other squash clubs, and it is no longer acceptable in this modern age. If we want squash to thrive and grow again, it has got to change.

"We charge between £70-£100 per month in membership fees. To begin with, a lot of the squash community in Bedford were sceptical, and some did not join initially. But over the next five years they visited and realised how good the club was. Once you see great facilities, you want to play there – they are key to the whole thing.

"I set this club up primarily for squash and tennis but only a quarter of our 4,000+ members are rackets members. In essence, the gym, swimming pool, sauna and steam room help to fund the squash, which is my passion."

- Invest in marketing

Matthew and his wife both have a marketing and branding background. They realise the importance of internal and external comms and marketing to engage and retain existing members and attract new ones (which they need to do far less these days, hence the waiting list!)

"We maximise social media - we have a post virtually every day on our Facebook page and have used cheap local ads to recruit new members," says Matthew. "A members' club can't always have a dedicated social media officer, but I would like to encourage others to do more to raise the profile of the club and squash in general," he added.



coach for Squash and Squash 57

- Develop the next generation of players

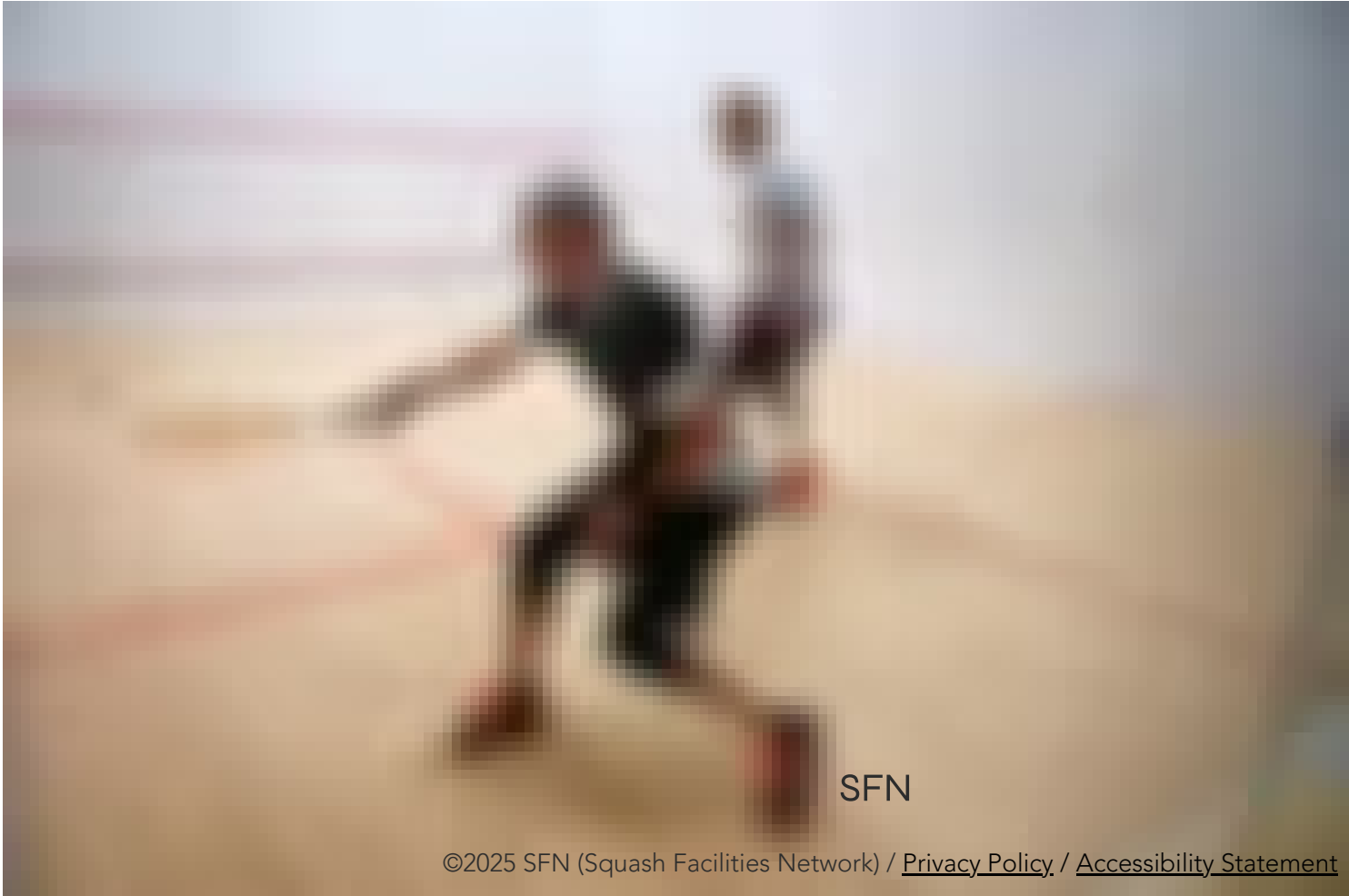
"Juniors are not just your members of the future, they also bring parents in too!" says Matthew. "Some parents haven't picked up a racket for 10 or 20 years, but once they see their kids having fun on court, it has a knock-on effect. This effect is really under-estimated."

- Run multiple squash activities - and don't forget racketball!

"It almost goes without saying, but you've got to have lots of things going on," Matthew states. "Open up team squash to intermediate levels because players are really enthusiastic when they can be part of a team. Have box leagues for all levels - and racketball [Squash 57] is crucial as an introduction to the courts and to keep players on court into older age - we've got six racketball leagues now."

- Promote coaching both for adults and juniors

Towers Health & Racquets Club has a strong team of coaches who motivate adult members to improve their game and run a busy junior programme. Around 60 pupils from Bedford Modern and Bedford School use the courts during daytimes and there are 40 junior club members who enjoy coaching and matchplay. The club also subsidises court time at a local leisure centre to run a junior academy for non-members.



Squash match on court

- Finance

"Make sure you charge enough for the facilities you offer," advises Matthew. "I'm sure not enough clubs do this." He also says clubs should look out for grants from sport and squash federations. Even commercial clubs can access grant funding in areas such as sustainability funds for solar panels or LED lighting. Sponsorship can also provide useful income – very often from member-run companies who want to support their local club.

- Build an investment fund

"There's a mindset amongst some clubs in the UK that you only need to bring in enough income to cover your outgoings and this has got to change," says Matthew. "What if the roof needs replacing? Clubs need to be sitting on some cash to refurbish their courts, make repairs and keep the place looking really nice (and clean!)."

For more information about Towers Health & Racquets Club, visit [their website](#).