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Frans Otten Stadion - a family-run Mecca for squash



Glass Court of the Frans Otten Stadion

The Frans Otten Stadion in Amsterdam is one of the world's largest squash clubs. With 20 glassback courts spread over three storeys plus a glass showcourt with seating for 1500 spectators, it is a Mecca for our sport.

The club is run by several generations of the Koopman family. Ger Koopman, director of the Frans Otten Stadion, was a hugely respected figure in Amsterdam sporting circles. In 2003, he sold the site of the previous Frans Otten Stadion to developers, who built 1,400 apartments. Honouring a promise he made to the Mayor of Amsterdam to provide community sports facilities to local children within cycling distance of their homes, he built Frans Otten Stadion V2 in Zuid, south west of the city centre, on the site of the 1928 Olympic Games.

Ger died last year and is much missed at the Frans Otten Stadion. His son, Patrick, is Operations Manager and lives in an apartment above the bar. Ger's other son Martijn and his wife Inge also work at the club, as do their children, who all love squash. Many of the staff have worked there for over 20 years.

Squash is the core of the club, but it also has five indoor and 15 outdoor tennis courts, six padel courts, fitness rooms and an enormous bar plus outdoor seating and barbecue area. The bar is the centrepiece of the venue and brings in 20% of its revenue, with coffees, beers, wine and food constantly being ferried out to hungry and thirsty punters. The club's impressive meeting and event rooms host everything from TV show rehearsals to the national ballet, martial arts classes and courses for surgeons from a local hospital.



The bar at Frans Otten - the social meeting point

"My brother and I grew up playing tennis and squash every day," says Patrick. "It was always good fun, but we were educated in hard work, how to improve things and look for solutions. I think that's where our success come from.

"Everybody involved in this business, we're all family. We take a lot of pride in our staff and every day we have a set lunch and dinner for the whole crew. We create an environment where everybody chooses to work hard. This is the biggest part of the success."

'FOR US, BUSINESS IS ALWAYS PERSONAL'

The personal touch is also key to retaining members and attracting new ones. The Koopmans and their staff spend lots of time out in the bar area getting to know customers, their families and friends by name. "By doing this we hear everything that's going on so we're always problem-solving, facilitating and managing," says Patrick. "Our business is always personal."



Action on the glass court

Filling 21 squash courts every day is not easy. The club employs Englishman [Richard King](#) to run its coaching programmes (beginners, youth; partnerships with selected schools, universities and businesses, adult social play, ladies' nights, leagues and an [Eredivisie](#) team). On some nights there can be up to 10 teams playing at the club.

The Eredivisie team, which features world-ranked pros, is Patrick's pride and joy. "It gives the club so much energy - the members are all in awe of what these players can do," he says. "I'm upstairs watching like a kid in a candy store." The club hosts the annual Dutch Junior Open and Dutch National Championships as well as major international events such as the [WSF World Masters](#) in August this year which had 1,070 players from across the world.

Coach Richard's personal touch also helps keep the squash scene vibrant. Patrick sums up the approach: "'Welcome, what's your name? Great that you're here! Come along for the next few weeks, see if it suits you, then we'll talk about money.' That's how we do things, That's how we fill these courts."



View from the top

Retaining members is made much tougher by a Dutch law which stipulates that annual memberships cannot be renewed automatically. All annual memberships end at the start of September, so every summer there's a great emphasis on retention. "We've got to be spot-on from May to September because all our actions are based on how many people are going to leave us or stay," says Patrick.

Patrick's brother Martijn manages the squash department and uses a data-driven approach. If some hours or classes are quieter, this is quickly highlighted, reasons are sought and solutions offered. "Some clubs panic if court occupation gets low," says Patrick. "They see it as a square metre which must be filled, so start a spin class or something. That is never good. We focus on maintaining the facility and the atmosphere well, and consulting the squash community whenever we see any issues. It's just hard work. What you give attention, will grow."

'PADEL IS NOT A THREAT TO SQUASH - BUT IT IS TO TENNIS'

The Frans Otten Stadion's six padel courts were added two years ago to keep up with the padel boom in the Netherlands. The new courts have given Patrick a unique insight into the juxtaposition between tennis, squash and padel.

"Our data shows padel is not a threat to squash - but it is a threat to tennis," he says. "Me and my brother grew up with tennis and it's a classic sport, but it has a really big problem. It is a technically difficult sport and young people want everything so quickly these days. Padel is so easy, you can have fun rallies straight away with your friends."

"But the energy you put into a squash game is what's missing with padel. Every once in a while our squash members will play padel, but they say, 'Is this it?' They are not physically challenged so they are sticking with squash. There is a bigger transition from padel to squash than squash to padel. That's what our data is telling us - that padel is a benefit to squash."

"But that's not the case for tennis. Our tennis members are starting to go from playing two or three times a week to once, because they're playing padel instead."

Having said that, Patrick recognises that clubs which offer only squash, especially in non-urban areas, are finding life tough. "It's key these days to have a diverse offer - as we do with our events facilities, bar and multiple racket sports. If one thing starts to decline, you have the luxury of it not affecting the business because other activities are contributing to the overall turnover. If you're only a squash centre, it's really hard."

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Diverse offer - events

Zuid, the area of Amsterdam where the club re-located to in 2004, has grown around them in the last 20 years - but the Koopmans are not tempted to sell, despite the huge rise in value of the land. Patrick jokes: "We compare ourselves to Asterix and Obelix - we have big guys around us but we won't sell, because we have a responsibility to the squash community and children.

"I'm very proud of the centre and what we do. I'm very happy with where we are right now and I think we can go even bigger and better - but like everything, it's one step at a time."