

SFN Team · May 27, 2024

# How to Build your Junior Squash Section



Andy Whipp, PSA Player Experience Leader, CEO of AWsome Sports Ltd., professional squash coach, and author of 'Play To Your Strengths,' has recently published an insightful article: **"How to Build Your Junior Squash Section in the UK."** Although this article focuses on the situation in the UK, Andy shares valuable insights and practical tips that can benefit squash communities worldwide.

I constantly hear people in the UK worrying about the future of squash, especially from a club point of view. They see squash thriving in Egypt, with their incredible domination of the men’s and women’s PSA World rankings, and their seemingly limitless numbers of juniors playing the sport at every age group. We look over at what is happening in Egypt, and we simply cannot imagine that booming network ever happening again on our little island, which was once such a powerhouse of junior and senior squash.

We can’t help but feel worried for our sport as we see squash courts being re-purposed to gym studios, and our traditional British squash clubs, which were once a hive of activity in the 80’s and 90’s, being knocked down to be replaced by ten 2-bedroom flats. That phenomenal squash boom on the back of Jonah Barrington’s success and fame - which lead to the rise of a prolonged golden era in The UK, producing legends like Peter Nicol, Cassie Jackman, Lee Beachill, Nick Matththew, James Willstrop and Laura Massaro (to name a mere few) – now feels like an un-replicable distant memory.

The World rankings, our British Junior Open results, and the falling numbers of people playing squash in The UK, make our situation look pretty depressing – but I promise you, we’re not doomed!

There are so many good people in our squash communities who desperately want to help, and are willing to give up countless hours of their precious time in order to increase participation, improve standards and save our British squash clubs. The difficulty is, these good people can feel isolated, unsupported, and do not know how to change this situation we are in.

I’m going to outline what I believe our ‘6 step plan of action’ needs to be for every UK club which wants and/or needs more members, so they can thrive once again. Unfortunately, there is not a quick fix, but I am convinced there is a way to improve the situation we found ourselves in, and slowly reclaim our ‘glory days’.

Firstly, a fact we all know – juniors are the future!

## Step1: Every club needs to run a group junior session at the weekend, either on a Saturday or Sunday morning

Obviously at least one coach is required, probably two. This ‘coach’ doesn’t need a high-level England Squash Qualification. They need to be enthusiastic, and that’s all. This could be a professional coach or a parent with some decent squash experience. There are plenty of free YouTube

coaching videos to get ideas of how to run a session, and loads of people to talk to from local clubs, all of which are cheaper than attending an expensive coaching course for a pointless qualification nobody respects. Reputation and experience count for so much more than an England Squash coaching qualification. Willingness, organisation and enthusiasm are everything required.

### **Step 2: Be consistent**

Continue to run these sessions, at the same time, same day, same place, whether there is one person or ten turning up. Decide how many sessions are required based on predicted demand. If you feel more than one offering is needed, you can separate the sessions by age or by standard. I would suggest standard is the better option, as this is more favourable for the coach to deliver productive sessions.

### **Step 3: Appeal to families**

If you can attract other family members instead of just the one child, you increase the chance of longevity, while potentially selling more memberships!

If you are running several junior sessions, make them either one after the other, or at the same time but on separate courts (if you have the facility to do so). Also, if you have the court space, consider arranging an adult session at the same time for the parents to play. This will help in attracting kids AND parents.

### **Step 4: Don't over-coach!**

Offer only basic technical advice at first, and do not dwell on this aspect. Play games, matches, and then more games and more matches. Get the kids rallying as much as possible. This is what they do in Egypt. It's fine for your juniors to have different techniques. If they can cleanly connect with the ball and control where they are hitting it, this is absolutely fine.

Only once a player improves to a high standard and expresses an interest for yet further improvements and a more technical prowess, should you begin to allow more technical based session to take place, and then this should really be in a one-to-one environment.

### **Step 5: Add another weekend session on another day**

After 6 months, if the numbers of juniors attending your group session increases to 10 or 15, then ask them if they would like another weekend session. If your sessions are on a Saturday morning, then ask the parents if they would like the opportunity to attend an additional Sunday session. If there is a small demand, then do it! The second session does not need to instantly be as big, or as popular as the original session.

### **Step 6: Add an after-school session**

After 6 months of running two weekend sessions, ask the players and parents if they would be keen for a mid-week session, and it's likely that between you all, there will be a good early-afternoon session that makes sense for all parties.

Obviously, you can see the progression! It's simple. The key is not to rush, and to include the families in every new offering. This way, they feel valued, and you only run new sessions you know will succeed because you have canvassed the demand.

As I said, there is not an over-night fix, but in a relatively short period of time, 18 months to 2 years, you can develop a thriving junior section which should lead into much increased club membership income, and of course improved playing standards.

Most clubs feel the best way to increase the numbers of their junior section is to reach out to schools. My personal experiences of in-school squash sessions is that it does not follow-through into increased club memberships. Instead, reach out to schools by handing out flyers advertising your junior programme. You need to tempt people to step foot into your club, and onto your courts, do not waste time and resources by delivering an in-school programme.

I hope you find this useful – and good luck.

Andy Whipp

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