

HITTING THE NICK

THE PROMOTION OF SQUASH IN ENGLAND

OUR MISSION: To re-vitalise the game of squash in England

OUR AIM: To increase the number of people playing squash regularly
by at least 10% each year

OUR STRATEGY: The County Associations and England Squash Masters
to work in conjunction with, and with the support of a re-aligned
National Governing Body

INTRODUCTION

England Squash is not in a good position. The following is a minute from the Sport England Board meeting in February 2017

“Due to significant leadership and governance concerns at England Squash, the organisation had been funded for participation on a one year basis throughout the previous four year investment cycle. The ES CEO and Board acknowledged that a fundamental change was required not only in the organisation’s relationship with SE, but also to its future Business model. Given the scale of work needed to put ES in a position to articulate its core market proposition, a six month change and planning period was required. It was agreed to make an interim award of £1,141,350 to give ES additional time to develop a full 2017-21 core market and high performance submission”

While most of the above may relate to the previous regime, its very mention, and the need for additional time to prepare a proposal for 2017-21, is an indication of England Squash’s failure to make progress or indeed change direction since the replacement of the previous CEO two and a half years ago. England Squash has continued to operate in an isolated, top down fashion, seeking to increase participation by having staff work directly with a limited number of Leisure Centres and Universities setting up programmes such as Squash 101 and This Girl Can, which have had limited success. No statistics have been produced about overall take up or, equally importantly, retention figures, and it is apparent that, in general, ES has failed to increase participation in the game. The only areas of success in this regard come from some County Associations who have driven their own programmes, mainly focussed on bringing more juniors into the game, and England Squash Masters Committee, whose regionally based tournaments continue to attract more entries, and whose register of players aged over 35 continues to grow

At the same time, ES’s efforts to become a more ‘professional’ organisation, a kind of England Squash PLC, has distanced it even more from the volunteers and players at the grass roots. The

situation has not been helped by the recruitment of staff with experience of other sports but little or none of grass roots squash, and the use of independent consultants to provide 'insight' into potential squash markets which, as one former member of the ES Board and Chair of his CA put it 'told us what we knew already, at considerable expense'

The outcome has been a drastic reduction in ES funding from SE. While this may in part be due to changes in government and SE policy and a reduction in income from the National Lottery, it is difficult to imagine that the cuts would have been as severe if ES had been able to demonstrate that its strategy had resulted in increasing participation in the game

Consequently, ES staff has been reduced from over 60 some years ago to less than 20 currently, and apparently further redundancies may follow. This is based on rumour, since ES has not released any information about staff changes, and the ES website (at the end of March) still featured at least four members of staff who had left. (Note: the staff list has since been updated, but there is no mention of it on the home page of the website). ES newsletters and County Association updates make no reference to the situation at ES, and try to imply that it is 'business as usual', which is demonstrably not the case. Calls go unanswered, requests for discussion on specific developments remain pending. I was asked by Keir some weeks ago to do a survey through CAN about the Squash Player magazine, and that he would like the results 'within a week or two'. I finalised the questions, sent them to CAN, sent out a reminder, collated the results and sent them to Keir on Monday 3 April. I still await an acknowledgement.

Meanwhile Affiliation and Membership numbers remain static at best, although, again in the absence of hard information, the general impression is that they are declining, summed up in the oft quoted question 'What does England Squash do for us?'

Three current examples illustrate the current state of England Squash. The newsletter on the ES website features the availability of 'This Girl Can' clothing from a particular supplier. The CAN Co-ordinator was asked to publicise this to the CAs, but felt it was an inappropriate use of the County Association Network system to advertise particular commercial companies. Enquiries then revealed that other suppliers had not been invited to bid to supply this kit, and one in particular would have offered the This Girl Can initiative and ES a much better deal than the one which has been agreed

The next example concerns the recent circulation of a document headed 'Removal of Ranking Points for County Competition' (apparently referring to Juniors, although this is not specified), the reason given that ES staff no longer have the time to facilitate the allocation of ranking points. An ex-Chair of a County Association who has been advising ES staff on IT issues comments 'This approach is appalling, and taking the game in the wrong direction. I advised the member of staff responsible at the beginning of March to tackle the real problem, which is the manual systems and old ranking software, and I offered to put all ranking events online and build the ranking system within League Master (which can then feed results into SquashLevels). My offer was declined. Another Chair commented that 'When I saw the announcement that ICC Junior matches would no longer gain ranking points, I was shocked and annoyed'

The third example follows from the above. Rather than take the advice of IT experts that League Master is the most appropriate system, ES is apparently pursuing the use of Club Locker, a system used in the US, which is dated and not relevant to how we run our county activities. One CA Chair comments that 'I am concerned about the US Club Locker system which Keir and colleagues believe provides the answer to many of ES problems' and it is summed up by another comment that 'ES do not understand how to use IT to manage the business and refuse offers of help'

The England Squash CEO has prepared a Draft Strategy, which apparently has been seen by the Board, and which he shared with me as the County Support Contact for Strategic matters. It is summed up in the phrase 'The historic need to deliver participation has now been replaced with the need to maintain and support the existing squash playing population'. This, apparently, is being 'positive and pro-active'. It is to be based on 'utilising technology to achieve maximum efficiency and effectiveness' and 'maximising the commercial opportunities from our assets'. It contains phrases such as 'Strategic pillars' a 'Centric Approach', 'Club Locker functionality', 'Real time feedback model' and 'Discovery and Learning Materials'.

However, there is one phrase which might, to the eternal optimist, give cause for hope – 'Be an enabler for partners and stakeholders, not a delivery partner'. The problem for England Squash is that the current staff team was recruited, from the CEO downwards, to deliver a certain kind of organisation, and a significant change of culture, reflected in action rather than words, will require considerable adjustment on its part, if England Squash is to get alongside and earn the trust and support of the people at the grass roots it needs to support and enable. At present, the situation is summed up in the comment of another CA Chair that 'I am very concerned at the way things are going in our sport'

THE WAY FORWARD

The Board is asked to discuss this paper at its next meeting, and to report its response to the Council meeting on 24 May. Should it support the proposed strategy, there needs to be an early meeting with representatives of the County Associations and England Squash Masters about its implementation, the agenda to include the following topics –

1. Affiliation and Membership. It is particularly important that this topic is discussed before any decisions are made about its future format, since the support of the County Associations is crucial to the successful marketing of a revised scheme, with significant financial implications for both ES and the CAs
2. The Promotion of Participation in squash (and racketball), including the promotion of Masters squash
3. The promotion of Coaching and Refereeing, and the support of Coaches and Referees
4. The Inter-County Championships and other Competitions and Events
5. Player Pathways and Ranking lists
6. The use of IT
7. Publicity and Marketing
8. Resourcing and strengthening the County Associations
9. The National and Regional Forums
10. County Support Contacts
11. The formal relationship between ES and the County Associations

APPENDIX

THE AUTHOR'S CREDENTIALS

Secretary and former Chair of Yorkshire Squash and Racketball Association

Secretary of the England Squash Masters Committee

Founder and Co-Ordinator of the County Associations Network (CAN)

Member of the Committee of the Vets Club of Great Britain

ES Council member since 2012

Former Secretary of Ferriby Hall Squash Club

Former Organiser of the East Yorkshire (Squash) Development Group

Player in the Hull and District Squash League Division 1 for over 50 years

Holder of a European Title, four British Open Titles, two National Titles and twelve Masters Regional titles at Over 60 levels and above

Represented England in the Home Internationals for over ten years, and Yorkshire in the Inter-County Championships for over 15 years

In June, will be seeking a fifth British Open Title

And a lifelong commitment to the promotion of squash as the best indoor game in the world