

# WORLD SQUASH FEDERATION

## ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY YEARS OF SQUASH

For over 1000 years man has invented and enjoyed a variety of games played by hitting a ball with either a closed fist - as in "fives" or "bunch of fingers" - or with some form of bat or racket. Around the year 1148 the French played "le Paume", meaning "the palm of the hand", which developed into Jeu de Paume, Real Tennis, Royal Tennis or, if you play the sport, simply Tennis. At sometime in the early 19th century this obsession with rackets and balls spawned another variety of the sport in the unlikely birthplace of the Fleet Prison in London. The prisoners in "The Fleet", mainly debtors, took their exercise by hitting a ball against walls, of which there were many, with rackets and so started the game of "Rackets". Rackets progressed, by some strange route, to Harrow and other select English schools about 1820 and it was from this source that our own sport of Squash, or Squash Rackets, developed.

Squash was invented in Harrow school around 1830, when the pupils discovered that a punctured Rackets ball, which "squashed" on impact with the wall, produced a game with a greater variety of shots and required much more effort on the part of the players, who could not simply wait for the ball to bounce back to them as with Rackets. The variant proved popular and in 1864 the first four Squash courts were constructed at the school and Squash was officially founded as a sport in its own right.

In those early days Squash, as with all other sports, was without any form of international standardisation and it was inevitable that slight variations in the way it was played, and the equipment used, would occur. Luckily only two main streams of activity followed, one in England with its 21 feet wide courts and "soft" ball and the other in North America, with its 18½ feet wide courts and "hard" ball and with both courts having the same length of 32 feet the universality of Squash was not seriously challenged. We will look at these two branches separately and also at the way in which Squash spread to almost every nation in the world.

### EARLY DAYS IN ENGLAND

The first recorded reference to "Squash", other than in Harrow school, appeared in 1890 in the English book "The Badminton Library of Sports and Pastimes" written by the Duke of Beaufort. Eustace Miles, a world champion at both Tennis and Rackets, wrote the first book on Squash in 1901; stating that the sport was enjoyed by thousands of players in various parts of the world. By that time there were courts in schools and universities in England and some also in private houses. The first professional Squash Championship was held in 1920 in England, when C.R. Read (Queens Club) beat A.W.B. Johnson (RAC Club).

In 1923 H.A.L. Rudd, writing in "Baily's Magazine", forecast that Rackets would lose many players to Squash with the arrival of the first English Amateur Championships. He was concerned at this prospect as he considered Rackets to be a "manlier" game; Squash afforded a good "sweat" but did not demand the same skill as Rackets, in his opinion. Rudd's forecast proved to be only too correct as Squash grew rapidly and soon left its parent sport far behind in popularity.

As Squash play developed so did its administrative structure. The first discrete national associations to be formed were the United States Squash Racquets Association in 1907 and the Canadian Squash Racquets Association in 1911. In England the game was regulated by a Squash sub committee of the Tennis and Rackets Association from 1908 until it gained full status as the Squash Rackets Association in 1928.

A court built at the Bath Club in London at the beginning of the 20th century was chosen as the model for the standard size of a Squash court, 32 feet by 21 feet or 9.75 metres by 6.4 metres, much smaller than the court for Rackets which measures 60 feet by 30 feet (18.3 metres by 9.1 metres). The British dimensions were proposed in 1911, but not ratified until 1923. The point-a-rally scoring system to 15 was used universally in Squash until 1926 when the current hand-in, hand-out system to 9 points was introduced outside north America. The American hardball game, however, continued to be played to 15 points and this system was also adopted for the men's professional circuit in 1991 in an effort to shorten the matches.

In 1933 the great Egyptian player F.D. Amr Bey, won the first of his five British Open Championships, then seen as the World Championships. He was followed in his achievement by M.A. Karim of Egypt who won the title four times from 1947 to 1950 and then the dominating Khan dynasty from Pakistan; Hashim (1951-1958), Roshan (1957), Azam (1959-1962), Mohibullah (1963), Jahangir (1982-1992) and Jansher (1993-1994).

The Women's British Open commenced even earlier than the Men's; with Miss J.I. Cave winning the title in 1922. Until 1960 the title belonged solely to English players, with Janet Morgan (later Shardlow) winning 10 times between 1950 and 1958. She was followed by the most famous woman Squash player ever, the Australian Heather McKay, who dominated the sport from 1966 to 1977 and remained undefeated throughout her playing career. Her successor was the New Zealander, Susan Devoy, who won the title 8 times between 1984 and 1992.

Perhaps the players who had the most impact on the development of the sport were Jonah Barrington (Ireland) and Geoff Hunt (Australia). They dominated Squash between the late 1960's and early 1980's, capturing the imagination of sportsmen and women everywhere and starting a boom in the sport which raised the number of courts to 46000 worldwide and the number of players to over 15 million by 1994.

## **SQUASH IN AMERICA**

Squash was certainly being played in Canada before 1882, as it was then that James P Conover, the Headmaster of St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire, USA, saw it being played in Montreal. He thought it would be a perfect sport for his boys and wrote in the November 1882 edition of the school magazine "It is the universal experience, that for health and for the highest perfection in the game, the average boy or man should play but one rubber a day". He went on to describe the new Squash complex and its 21 feet wide courts and compare the game favourably with Rackets.

"This building will cover an area of fifty feet by sixty, and will have a height of about seventy feet from the ground to the eaves. The ball used in such courts is about the size of a walnut, of rubber, and hollow, with a hole in it to prevent breaking. The so-called "squash-ball court" recommended itself to the club for many reasons; such courts are largely used in English public schools; cost of construction is much less; fewer racquet bats are broken and fewer balls destroyed; fewer heads are cracked and fewer knees and elbows barked; the danger

from being hit by the ball (quite an item among young players) is cancelled; and for all intents and purposes the game is the same and produces just as good players.”

Although the International, or “soft”, ball was harder and bouncier than it is now it was not ideally suited to the cold courts in Concord where the temperature was often below freezing point during play. A harder rubber ball was developed and found to be more suited to slightly narrower courts, leading to the 18½ feet court, 19 feet court and other experimental widths. It was not until 1924 that the court specifications were codified, at which time it was decided to standardise on the 18½ feet width and a 17 inch ‘tin’ rather than the 19 inch variety used for the soft ball. By 1929 official court plans were being sold by the USSRA and the hardball game was brought into controlled growth.

The United States Squash Racquets Association was founded in 1907 and it was in that year also that the first recognised National Championship for Squash in any country was held with John A Miskey of Philadelphia winning the American title, a feat he repeated in 1908 and 1910. After Miskey the National title was won six times by Stanley W Pearson, also from Philadelphia, between 1915 and 1923, with his son Stanley Junior continuing the tradition by taking it in 1948. Other great national players from Philadelphia included Charles M P Brinton (1941/42/46/47) and G Diehl Mateer Jr (1954/56/61) with Henri R Salaun from Boston winning four times between 1955 and 1961. Victor Niederhoffer (New York) dominated the 1970s with 5 victories, Kenton Jernigan (Newport, Rhode Island) recorded three titles in the 1980s and Mexican Hector Barragan won five consecutive titles from 1990 to 1994.

In the early days most of the Women’s National titles were won by players from Boston, Philadelphia or Wilmington, interspersed by the occasional English tourist winner, such as Susan Noel (1933), Margot Lumb (1935) and the great Janet Morgan (1949 & 1955). Margaret Howe of Boston won three times between 1929 and 1934, while two Philadelphians, Anne Page and Cecile Bowes won four times each between 1936 and 1948. Thereafter one player or another dominated the scene for several years; Betty (Howe) Constable from Philadelphia winning four titles (1956-1959), Margaret Varner (Wilmington) four (1960-1963), Gretchen Spruance (Wilmington) five (1973-1978) with the 1980s totally dominated by Alicia McConnell (Brooklyn) with seven titles (1982-1988) and Demer Holleran from Hanover NH taking over in 1989 to remain undefeated for seven years until 1995.

With the establishment of a Professional Tour, to which clubs were encouraged to send their teaching pro., a list of world famous names acquired US titles from the mid-fifties - Hashim Khan (4 wins), Mahmoud Kerim (4), Mohibullah Khan (5), Sharif Khan (9), Mark Talbott (5), Jahangir Khan (2) and Jansher Khan (3).

Squash played with a hard ball on an 18½ feet wide court was the only form of the sport played in the USA until the mid-1980s, but then growing exposure to the “International” game resulted in some 21 feet wide courts being built and the international, “soft”, ball being used on both the wide and narrow courts. Additionally, the USSRA recognised a 20 feet width as being acceptable for International play, this width being derived from the increasing trend to convert Racquetball courts to Squash use. In an incredibly short period of time in the early 1990s Squash in the USA changed from being overwhelmingly “hardball” to predominantly “softball”, with the only available monitor of the trend, ball sales, indicating that by 1996 around 80% of all play was International. Quite why this change happened, and why so quickly, is still being debated but there is little doubt that a new generation of players is now experiencing the love affair with international squash which happened in all other nations and finding it preferable to the higher racket skills demanded by the hardball game.

The North American player was also the first to appreciate the virtues of Doubles Squash, with the hardball being used on a court measuring 45 feet long by 25 feet wide. The first National Doubles Championships were held in 1933 and hardball Doubles continues to thrive even though the singles version now holds only a minority of play.

## **AUSTRALIA, GERMANY AND 123 OTHER NATIONS**

Squash spread rapidly in its early days and the major growth areas were wherever British forces were stationed. South Africa, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Australia, New Zealand and many other countries learned their Squash from the military and soon adopted it as their own. Probably the most successful Squash nation of all time, Australia, had its Squash seed planted through contact with the military.

Although the first Squash courts in Australia were established in 1913, at the Melbourne Club in Victoria, there was no official Squash association until 1934 although top players had been engaged in ad hoc club tournaments since 1927. During 1934 a group of players decided that local administrative pressure and the need to liaise with interstate and overseas organisations demanded an official body and the Squash Rackets Association of Australia (SRAA) was founded, although its main tasks remained locally orientated in the Melbourne area. Even when the first Australian Championships were held, for men in 1931 and women in 1932, they were, in reality, State Championships for Victoria. The SRA of Victoria was formed in 1937.

In New South Wales the first court was built just after the first World War, by Mr. Bjelke-Petersen, the uncle of the former Queensland Premier, Sir Joe Bjelke-Petersen. The New South Wales SRA was formed in 1937 and the first pennant competition in Sydney commenced in July 1939.

But it was in the 1960s that Squash started to really take off in Australia. Greater commercial development came into the sport and public Squash centres were built all over the country, bringing the game to a much wider audience. This growth brought amazing international success with many of the world's best players coming from the Australian Squash scene. Heather McKay, Ken Hiscoe, Geoff Hunt, Vicki Cardwell, Steve Bowditch, Rhonda Thorne and, more recently, Michelle and Rodney Martin all become World Squash Champions at senior level and Peter Nance, Chris Robertson, Robyn Lambourne, Sarah Fitz-Gerald and Rachael Grinham achieved the same distinction at junior level. Hunt was World Champion seven times and won eight British Open titles while Heather McKay was the most successful Squash player of all time, being undefeated in international competition for an astounding 19 years.

In 1976 the headquarters of the SRAA were transferred to Queensland and merged with the Australian Women's SRA to form the ASRA in 1986, its name being changed to Squash Australia in 1990.

In Germany Squash was born twice! Its first cradle was in Berlin in 1930 when the first four courts were built by Dr. Ernst von Siemens, head of the technology department of the electronics company which bore his name, and he started regular company staff activities and even foreign competitions on the "wall-play-halls". Other courts followed, but during wartime they were all used for a variety of other purposes and it was not until 1978 that the Siemens courts were again used by the "Berlin Wallball Game Club".

The initiative for the rebirth came from Christhof Viscount Vitzthum who had discovered the sport in Australia, heard about the Siemens courts by accident and started to promote

Squash and bring the courts back into use. But an even earlier start had been made in Hamburg by a merchant, Henning Harders, who erected three courts following an infection by the Squash bug in Australia and it was a group of Hamburg players who founded the

German SRA in 1973 and sent a team to the European Team Championships in Stockholm during 1974.

Two years after the German SRA was founded the first National Championships were held and within a few years there were over 6000 courts and 2 million players in the nation - the most spectacular growth of Squash anywhere in the world.

Germany celebrated their twenty-fifth anniversary in 1998 by bringing the Women's World Championships to Stuttgart.

Many other nations experienced tremendous growth in Squash, starting slowly at the beginning of the century and then gaining momentum over the past thirty years. In each country the basic story is the same. A group of enthusiasts start to play and promote the game which, because of its inherent qualities of intense exercise coupled with all-absorbing competition., grows rapidly and becomes a major sport in the land. The formula which made Squash grow in its traditional homelands is now being seen again in Japan, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Korea and many new Squash nations, worldwide.

## **PAKISTAN – BIRTHPLACE OF CHAMPIONS**

Of all the nations where Squash is played Pakistan is the greatest enigma, producing a succession of amazing Squash champions from a country where there are still less than 400 courts. No history of Squash can be complete without an account of the amazing exploits of the Khan dynasty, starting with Hashim who won the first of his seven British Open titles in 1951 at the age of 35 years. Hashim was the first of a line of great Pakistani Squash Champions - Azam Khan, Mohibullah Khan, Roshan Khan, Aftab Jawaid, Gogi Alauddin, Mo Yasin, Qamar Zaman, Mohibullah Khan Junior, Hiddy Jahan and the two greatest players of the 1980s and 1990s, perhaps of all time, Jahangir Khan and Jansher Khan. Jahangir, now a Vice-President of the World Squash Federation, dominated the sport for 14 years, winning the British Open 10 times and the World Open 8 times and was undefeated for 5½ years. Jansher took over his mantle in 1989 with his first of World Open titles and began a debate in the sport about which JK was the greatest of them all.

## **THE WORLD SCENE**

In its early days international Squash was controlled by the Squash Rackets Association of England and the United States Squash Rackets Association, but in 1966 representatives of the sport from Australia, Great Britain, India, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa, USA, Canada and the United Arab Republic met in London and agreed to form the International Squash Rackets Association (ISRF), the first meeting of which was held on 5 January 1967.

The ISRF continued to thrive and was amalgamated with the Women's International Squash Federation in 1985. In 1992 the name of the Federation was changed to the World Squash Federation (WSF), finally recognising that the sport had been universally referred to simply as "Squash", rather than "Squash Rackets", for most of its existence.

Squash is played in 130 countries, on 47000 courts, and the World Squash Federation now has 116 Squash playing National Associations in membership. It is the sole International

Federation for the sport, as recognised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and maintains responsibility for the rules of the Game, Court and Equipment Specifications, Refereeing and Coaching. The WSF maintains a World Calendar of events and organises and promotes World Championships for Men, Women, Junior Men, Junior women and Master age groups in both singles and doubles Squash. The Federation leads its Member Nations in programmes for the development of the sport and is currently working with the IOC towards the target of having Squash included as a sport on the programme of the Olympic Games in the year 2008.

Squash has been played for over 130 years, grown sensationally in the last thirty and is now poised to become one of the largest and best loved of all sports.