



Revival of the fittest



A UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR who played competitive squash once said to me, 'You have to be fit to play squash, not play squash to get fit.'

He was absolutely right. To play competitive squash you have to possess an elite level of fitness.

I was born in Durham, England. I fell in love with squash before I ever played it. My dad was really athletic and he inspired in me a zeal for the sport by taking me along to watch him play. When I turned nine, he gave me a racquet for Christmas and I haven't stopped playing since.

For a few years after I took up squash I was also playing cricket, which was really my first sport. I got into cricket when I was six years old and I loved it but eventually squash took over. Squash is an individual sport and it lends me a competitive edge which in turn gives me a sense of self-fulfilment, something which team sports can't always do. But I think I would credit cricket with helping my squash game. The transition from hitting a ball with a bat to hitting one with a racquet wasn't such a stretch!

At a very young age I began travelling around the country with my dad, playing competitive squash ... so I really grew up with the game. I competed in my first tournament when I was 11 years old. It was an Under 12s County Closed tournament. I played against and became friends with Nick Mathew, now a professional, ranked number six in the world. I used to beat him back then!

Throughout my youth ...

I played in various tournaments until I went professional for a year before entering university.

I took Sports Science at the University of Birmingham and part of

my education included completing a study of a sport. I chose squash because it was the sport I was most interested in and I found that it ranks with cross-country skiing and marathon running in terms of the number of calories per hour you can burn.

Playing on the Professional Squash Racquets Association (PSA) tour was an incredible experience, but the highlight of my career came while I was in university. There I was named the British Universities Sports Association Champion in 2000. My aim was to play squash for my country and I achieved that when I represented Great Britain at the World Student Games.

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Previously the game was all about technique, and of course, it still is a very technical sport. But now the winner is usually the fittest person on the court. Back in the '70s and '80s, the top players in the world like Jonah Barrington and Jahangir Khan of Pakistan really changed squash from a skill-based game to a fitness-based one.

I think that's one of the reasons the sport could really catch on. Those of us involved in the fitness industry are trying to promote healthy lifestyles for UAE nationals, this could really be the sport of choice. Never mind the high temperatures in summer!

The game is played indoors and there are plenty of courts, particularly in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. It is inexpensive to start because all you need is access to a court, a pair of trainers and a racquet. And it is a really social sport, so people stay fit while being connected with friends.

As recreation manager at the British

Club, I also coach those interested in squash and work to promote the game. To show our members how it is played at the top level, I organised an Invitational Squash Tournament late last year.

I contacted Nick Mathew ...

... along with world ranked number 12, Adrian Grant, and invited them out to play. Dubai-based Adil Magbool, who is now ranked in the top 120 players in the world, also attended and the four of us played several matches, singles and doubles, for the crowd.

The inaugural tournament was a great success. The British players were happy to escape the cold and to tour the UAE and with the help of our sponsors, Tyco, Trizac, and General Motors, and we on our part were pleased to host them. The same sponsors have confirmed their support for a similar tournament again next year. The plan is to make the tournament an annual event, inviting top 100 ranked players from around the world to the UAE. It's a great way to show off the country and an even better way to showcase the game.

I'd love to see a ...

... PSA tournament held in the UAE. However, one of the prerequisites to getting a game of squash televised is a perspex court, so one of my future goals is to get such a court here. The courts are designed so that the audience can see through all four walls of glass, obtaining a clear view of players from all angles, but players can't see out, so the audience is not distracting. These courts are portable and can be set up anywhere people gather. Usually people go to watch the game, but a perspex court brings the game to the people. ■

As told to Shannon Patterson Linden

PHOTO BY SAHIB KUTTY