

Rain Stops Play

Staging the British Open outdoors in an English football stadium for the first time resulted in a number of problems with the fickle spring weather. It was, however, part of an honourable tradition of innovation that has eventually led to progress – as Richard Eaton recalls here

The Allam British Open will stay in Hull, but it will return indoors next year. No tournament has ever endured so many different traumas as the 2013 outdoor Open.

Biting cold made hitting a squash ball infuriatingly unpredictable and watching it a health risk. After players proved their resilience and spectators their fortitude, along came rain and wind, mixed in with a little hail, eventually forcing three changes of venue.

Then, as if malign forces were in pursuit, a move to a local club brought sweating walls and a slippery floor, outbursts of temper and a demoralising ambience.

So even if the 2014 decision seems like a retreat from history – the UK's first completely outdoor major squash event had been billed as a pioneering move – England Squash and Racketball (ESR) is right to take it.

"Lessons have been learned and there are plenty of them," ESR operations director Jim Lord admitted. "The British Open needs to be bigger and better-looking, and has to reduce risk, both financial and to its reputation."

Referees will be first to agree. More than anyone, they suffered from the bizarre ill fortune which persisted after the evil weather went away.

When the sun decided to shine upon the good people of Hull, it sent shafts of light into the KC Stadium at an angle perfect for throwing up weird and dazzling reflections from the back wall.

Seats seemed as though they were suspended inside the court, with people hovering like spirits in mid-air and players darting madly among them.

Spectators were actually in their normal places, but they were half-blinded by diabolical images glaring at them from inside the back wall – and so were the referees. Imagine trying to make decisions about a reflection!

Disturbing as this was, negative after-effects should fade. The 2014 retreat will take the British Open into the KC Stadium's indoor Sports Arena, with seating for 1,200 spectators, room for a comprehensive retail village and space for a comfortable social area too. It may be a sideways step, but it makes further strides forward possible.

For that there is plenty of precedent. Both squash and the British Open have made enormous advances over the years by responding creatively to inevitable setbacks over four decades of technological change.

Risk-taking, mistakes and disasters were drivers of progress even before a comic but dangerous mishap at the World Open at Birmingham in 1982. It was the first major tournament to use a court with two transparent walls and very impressive they seemed too – until Dean Williams shattered one.

It happened when the Australian tried to scrape a clinger away from the forehand wall. He did that well, but a massive panel came away too and dropped like a bomb onto the court.

Even greater absurdity occurred at the following year's World Open in Munich, where a fixed camera protruded 18 inches into the court from under the tin.

It was intended as a way of taking TV coverage into exciting new areas. For Qamar Zaman, though, it meant new areas for his substantial humorous repertoire.

If anyone could land a drop shot onto the intrusion, it was the brilliant Pakistani. It only took Zaman a few tries, whereupon his innocent expression milked the farce with Thespian skill.

Sceptics laughed the loudest. Some thought squash could never become a TV sport. But many of them overlooked a venture by the Squash Rackets Association (ESR's predecessor), which created the first major tournament with four transparent walls just a few months previously.

It was the ICI Perspex World Masters at Leicester and although it may not be particularly well remembered, it was indeed a landmark. The walls were infused with white and black dots, creating one-way visibility which facilitated cameras from any angle and enabled spectators to view from all sides too.

Although this had been tried at the German Masters in Cologne with a court made of Plexiglass the year before, it was the Perspex version at Leicester that became the highest-profile precursor of the glass courts used on today's world tours.

These have attracted spectacular images from many wonderful places, most notably the Giza pyramids in Egypt, Hong Kong harbour and Grand Central terminal in New York. All are direct descendants of that strange, big fish tank which brought wonder to a dull winter's week in the English Midlands in 1982.

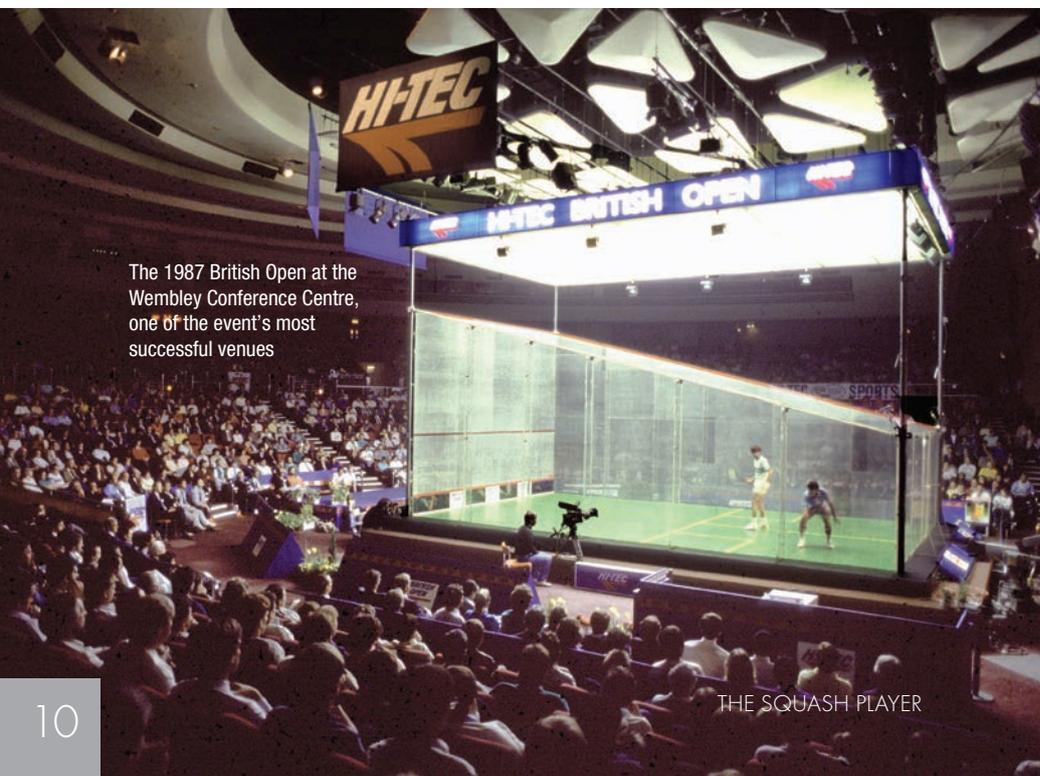
This court had clearly benefitted from earlier mistakes and was further updated at the 1984 British Open with a blue floor, a yellow ball and a first appearance at Wembley Conference Centre.

That brought great expectations, but another setback, as it was placed up on the stage, a long way from hospitality boxes at the back.

The following year the court was moved to the Conference Centre floor, where audiences could see every drop of sweat and twitch of muscle as Jahangir Khan swept all before him.

The Pakistani went on to make himself a British Open legend on the same court at the same venue in the ensuing years by extending a record-breaking sequence of titles to 10.

Damage repair could happen quickly for the British Open at Hull too. The



The 1987 British Open at the Wembley Conference Centre, one of the event's most successful venues

precedent is certainly there.

Indeed, repairs began almost immediately, according to Chris Nutley, ESR's head of competitions and events. "I sent spectators an email offering complimentary tickets for the nationals," Nutley said, explaining the compensation for 2013 disappointments.

"We told them we want you to experience an event which is established, where you wouldn't encounter the same problems. And the feedback was really good."

There was a long-term positive to be taken, he claims, from the last two days of the British Open, during which spectators enjoyed an atmosphere of relaxation, refreshment and chatter in the sun.

"It gives us something to build on, to know we can now put squash in a sports arena," Nutley concluded. "The idea is great. If you can find the right way to do it and get the right balance, it's a fantastic concept."

However, no one can be quite sure whether delights or disasters are around the corner. Uncertainties have long been part of this, one of the fastest evolving of all sports.

Even Abbeydale's pioneer of four-sided viewing – the 1970s bear-pit court with the first ever glass back wall and spectators along the top of other three – suffered glitches. Occasionally, a dangling arm would impede the ball.

A similar mishap happened at one of Abbeydale's successors, the balcony-lined Boyse court at Edgbaston Priory, where Jonah Barrington once lobbed a ball into a spectator's beer.

Before that, spectators watched the British Open final at Edgbaston from a shallow gallery, where they could not see the ball's trajectory in its last few feet before the back wall. Naturally, that was where Barrington, the controlling arch-container, put it more often than anywhere else.

Briefly, it seemed that plastic rather than Perspex or glass might make lighter, more durable see-through courts. However, when Jahangir Khan and Gamal Awad played a record-breaking two-hour, 46-minute match on a plastic court at Chichester in 1983, there were so many scuff marks that transparent it no longer was.

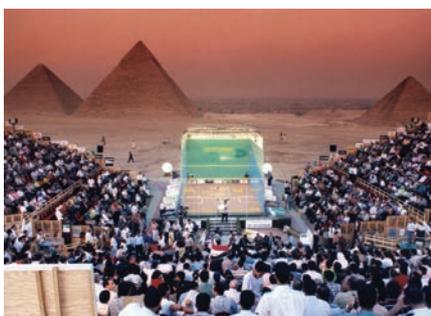
Perspex benefitted. For many years it became the preferred material. In those days glass was deemed fragile and hard to handle. Ceramic dots in the walls, creating the one-way visibility, worked very well until white balls were needed to enhance TV viewing. The whiteness would wear off within half an hour of action and, tiresomely, replacements were needed after every game.

As squash became more physical and balls more expensive, this whitened enhancement could not last. What finally did for Perspex was that glass became

Squash's delights and disasters



The glass floor, used in humid conditions at the 2007 World Open in Bermuda, resembled an ice rink



Wind and sand caused problems at the 1999 World Open in Egypt, with players slipping and sliding



The inflatable court at the 2011 Super Series Finals at London's Queen's Club prepares for take-off in high winds



Sharp reflections at the 2013 British Open in Hull presented challenges for both referees and spectators

1962 First televising of squash

Part of the back-wall door is removed so that matches at the Australian Championships in Perth can be televised through the gap.

1971 First glass back wall court

Installed at Abbeydale, Sheffield, and used for the British Open the following year.

1978 First portable court

Erected in Stockholm for the PIA World Series.

1982 Panel collapse

A panel collapses as two transparent walls are used in a World Championship for the first time, at Birmingham.

1982 Four transparent walls

Four transparent walls are used for the first time in a major event, at the ICI Perspex World Masters near Leicester.

1985-94 British Open's best years

A high-profile decade at Wembley Conference Centre, thanks to the correcting of earlier mistakes.

1986 Ball issue

Skidding ball designed for television disrupts World Open final in Toulouse.

1999 Worldwide publicity

Achieved by a World Open on an all-glass court placed next to the Pyramids in Egypt.

2002 Permanent UK glass court

Created for the Commonwealth Games in Manchester.

2005 Rain stops play

On the Kuwait Open's outdoor court.

2007 Sweating court

Play disrupted by a sweating court at the World Open in Bermuda.

2011 Inflatable failure

Experiment with an inflatable court at the Super Series Finals at London's Queen's Club is abandoned due to high winds.

2013 Hail halts play

At the outdoor British Open in Hull – and causes another rethink.

more durable and extra clarity became essential for HD television.

Meanwhile, another modified ball died an inglorious death. Clothed in luminous strips, it was intended to make TV viewing easier. It did, but it also made life harder for players – far harder in fact, as it skidded.

Riskily, it was used in the World Open final at Toulouse in 1986, when Ross Norman ended Jahangir Khan's winning sequence of five years and seven months, and by the end it had damaged the tactical and emotional context of one of the sport's most famous matches.

Paradoxically, this defeat gained Jahangir far more fame than he had ever had before, because suddenly the world became aware of how special his achievements were. But the ball was scrapped.

Courts have also brought surprising hazards, especially those which had to be put up and taken down to deadlines. One of them nearly killed Richard Ingle, these days the managing director of CourtCare but back in the 80s in charge of the demountable court at the British Open.

"It happened at Wembley not long after a bomb incident at Staples Corner," Ingle recalls. "We had a new guy who unscrewed all the bolts at the bottom of the front wall. The whole lot fell inwards on the court, which was where I was standing!"

"Two tons slammed onto the floor. It was the loudest noise. You can imagine what happened – people came running down from all the gangways, thinking a bomb had gone off.

"In the end, we had to sweep it up and put it in the skip. It was a comedy, but very serious. Had I been in the middle of the floor, it would have been instant death."

Health and safety regulations have been tightened and procedures improved since then, and the commercial pressures of mounting and demounting courts have receded.

A more public collapse occurred at

the Super Series finals at Queen's Club in London in 2011. This happened not just to a court, but to a giant inflatable cube, which housed both a glass court and a substantial number of spectators.

It looked rather as though a space ship had landed on the lawns of the venerable club. It also seemed like one of the most exciting pieces of squash pioneering yet.

To everyone's surprise, it did not survive overnight winds it was said to have been capable of withstanding. As it began to wobble and deflate, club members emerged blinking from the bowels of the club house, summoned by warnings that the invader was in danger of exploding.

It was a costly as well as a courageous entrepreneurial effort and one which unfortunately has yet to be repeated. It may still have potential, though.

So too may the glass floor which brought disruption to the World Open in Bermuda in 2007 because it sweated so much. Solutions to this might bring squash an under-floor scenario of coloured lighting, logos, artworks and adverts appearing between games and matches.

Some setbacks take time to recover from. One reason why long-term disaster may have been avoided at the 2013 British Open is, according to Lord, that squash people pull together.

"We are fortunate, from the press, to the people, to the coaches," he said. "Very few sports would have got through that week.

"It would have been very, very easy for people to be negative and walk away, but everyone pulled together to get us through.

"And on that Friday we were the only sport which carried on playing," he added, referring to widespread bad weather which halted England's Test match with New Zealand at Headingley and the cycling in the Giro d'Italia, as well as other sports events.

Weather is more often a factor in

squash these days. Rain has disrupted outdoor tournaments in Kuwait and Hong Kong, while extremes of heat and cold brought hazards to the 2007 women's World Open in Madrid, which started indoors and finished outside.

Low bright sun stopped play at the 1988 World Open final in Amsterdam and disruption has occasionally been caused by sand in the Middle East.

So an outdoors British Open may yet be attempted again. "Sometimes people don't realise how squash has been evolving," Alex Gough, the chief executive of the Professional Squash Association, said.

"We've had tournaments outdoors for quite a long time in different parts of the world. They are staged very successfully and it is quite reasonable to be trying the same in Britain."

Lord certainly thinks the British Open could have an outdoor future. "An outdoor event could work in this country," he reckoned. "If we want to make the most of being able to use a football stadium, the tournament needs to be properly open air.

"But the risks are high in this country at that time of the year (May). They would be reduced if the tournament were held in mid-August or early September.

"However, changing the date of the British Open may not be a good idea right now, because there are other events and at the moment it is in a proper place," Lord pointed out. Then he added an intriguing few words.

"That doesn't mean in the long term we can't sit round a table with the PSA and WSF, and see if there is a better way of pulling the calendar together."

Disaster usually brings a rethink. Sometimes it brings refinement. That has occurred with pleasing frequency in squash.

So maybe it is not too fanciful to imagine that outdoor delights, with open-air hospitality among the flowers and trees, could one day become part of the tradition of the British Open.



BRITISH OPEN 2014

Provisional dates:
May 12-18

Provisional venue:
KC Stadium, Sports Arena, Hull

Qualifying and women's first round:
University of Hull

Status:
PSA and WSA World Series Platinum

TV:
Still to be negotiated

The KC Stadium's indoor Sports Arena, a possible venue for the 2014 British Open. It has already held several major sports events, including cagefighting, netball, professional boxing, gymnastics and darts.