

Leader of the pack

Jade Leeder tells Dominic Bliss about the pluses and minuses of her role as lead physiotherapist for England Squash and Racketball

Jade Leeder is intimately familiar with the bodies of England's top squash players. As lead physiotherapist for England Squash, her job is to massage, manipulate and heal them on a regular basis.

"The sweat!" she says when asked what the most unsavoury aspect of her role is. "The players come off court, perhaps they've won their match – which is lovely – but the next thing you know, you've got a sweaty hug with their sweat all over your face. Then perhaps you're treating their sweaty feet. They're all quite hygienic, but it's not particularly pleasant. I seem to spend a lot of my time touching feet."

Despite all the perspiration, you can tell Jade loves her job. She's been administering physiotherapy to squash players for the last five years and full-time with England Squash and Racketball since March last year.

Based at the English Institute of Sport in Manchester, she treats any English player who needs her help. Outside of competition that mainly involves injury prevention and post-injury rehabilitation – "plus any niggles they might have as a result of training sessions," she adds.

On top of this, she travels to up to eight squash tournaments a year,

including the Tournament of Champions, the National Championships, the British Open, the Canary Wharf Classic, the Hong Kong Open and the U.S. Open. In the early stages of the competition, or in domestic events, when there are many English players still in the draw, this is often her most intense work.

"Players might have a treatment before a match to loosen them up," she says. "Then, post-match, some like a stretch, some want a rub so as to flush through the lactic acid and if anyone has had an injury problem during a match, I'll deal with that as well."

Jade says she sees many lower back and pelvis injuries because of all the lunging in squash. Players often suffer from tightness in the hips and the glute muscles. "Depending on where we're playing in the world and how hard the courts are, they may get stiffness in the feet and ankles too, which then affects everything higher up: lower limbs, knees, hips and lower back," she adds. Upper limb injuries are much rarer, though.

As any club player will know, blisters are a major problem too. "We see quite a lot in the long matches and on the harder courts," Jade says. "The girls don't tend to suffer as much with their feet as the

guys – probably because they're lighter." Jade explains how, prior to a match, she might tape up the player's feet to prevent the blisters in the first place.

Occasionally, players wound themselves on court. "It's normally cuts where they've dived for a shot or scraped their hands on the floor," she adds. "We get quite a few open grazes. Blood injuries can forfeit an entire match, so we have to tape them up so that, when they go back on court, they don't start bleeding again."

Jade is relieved she has never faced a really gruesome squash injury. As she explains, squash isn't a contact sport – unless you count the dodgy lets. The worst she sees are large muscle tears, although she once treated a fractured spine (client confidentiality means she can't reveal which player it was). "They'd had back pain for a week and it suddenly increased after they played. We sent them for a scan and realised they had a fracture in their lumbar spine," she recalls.

Given the physical intimacy between Jade and the players, coupled with the fact that she treats them in their most emotionally raw states – either elated or deflated, depending on the match outcome – her role is a very psychological one too. "They come off court and, win or lose, they want to talk to somebody," she says. "I'm normally the first person they see. Inevitably, you're looking after their head space a little bit."

In fact, physiotherapy is just one part of Jade's role. At tournaments she will often pass on advice from England Squash experts back in the UK: doctors, nutritionists, sports psychologists or strength and conditioning coaches. Although she is qualified only as a physiotherapist, it inevitably means she is part medic too – and part nurse, part nutritionist, part shrink. "There is a holistic aspect to it all," she adds.

She has even been known to drag herself to a few training sessions with some of the top players. Even though she admits to being "terrible at squash", she has completed sessions with the likes of Nick Matthew, Peter Barker, Daryl Selby, Adrian Grant and Laura Massaro. "Really, it's all about understanding what they go through in a training session, so that I know what we're dealing with when they say something is sore or tight," she explains.

Yet she certainly has no plans to start playing squash seriously herself. "For me to suddenly start playing the sport would be a bit strange," she says. "The professional players don't try to be physios and I don't try to be a top squash player. Much better that way."

