

# Against the odds

Mike Lee, the man behind squash's bid for inclusion in the 2020 Olympics, tells Rod Gilmour to ignore the bookies' early favouritism for karate

Wind back to a September morning in 2009, when four bidding cities are set to find out who will host the 2016 Olympics. Copenhagen, venue for the International Olympic Committee's executive board session, is just waking up and on morning TV, a news network is interviewing a bookmaker. Chicago is the firm favourite, says the odds-layer.

Meanwhile, an unflustered Mike Lee, the lobbyist behind squash's Olympic push for 2020, is watching from his hotel in the Danish capital. Hours later, Rio – whose bid Lee masterminded – gets the nod and Chicago falls with a whimper, accruing just 18 votes as the 'Windy City' becomes the first of the quartet to be eliminated.

Not even a late appearance from US President Barack Obama could seal the deal. Instead, it was then-Brazilian president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva who was left to wipe away tears of joy. "I've never known a bookie get it right in my time," Lee recalls with a smile, after yet another bid success.

Lee's tale is sparked by a report published in the week that we meet at the bright central London offices of his company, Vero. According to one Olympic website, karate is the odds-on favourite to land the one new sport slot on offer for 2020 inclusion. "You can't take that seriously where things stand," is Lee's response.

"You just can't predict the outcome from this far out. We are still early on in the process and squash has been campaigning over a quite considerable amount of time with previous applications. But we are ahead of the other sports promoting themselves."

A figure has yet to be made public over how much Vero have been paid, but it's fair to assume that the WSF have pushed the boat out this time round.

The positive starting point, Lee says, was the WSF's approach in the first instance. "They were aware of a number of mega bids we did," he adds. "It was clear that they recognised that they needed a much more professional campaign now that the PSA and WSA are on a joint campaign."

"I firmly believe squash will be a great Olympic sport. What we bring is a combination of winning campaigns, how we structure and integrate it, and how we put the themes together."

To understand those perspectives on a global scale, Lee was present at the Luxor Theater to soak up the atmosphere at last year's World Open in Rotterdam. He came away impressed.

"The viewing was great in Rotterdam and I had time between matches to go behind the scenes too," he says. "There was very good use of the high-definition screen and super slow-mo. The players came off and did good interviews. You felt very close to the action."

Lee doesn't deal in long-winded assertions. He knows where the sport has gone wrong in front of the Olympic family before and it's spelt out at the end of squash's 2020 bid brochure in capital letters:

**'SQUASH HAS LISTENED AND LEARNT'.**

"The squash world is united in wanting this and it's all about getting across to the players the importance of it," he says. "You always have to remember your audience."

"But the feedback has been very positive. There is a long way to go, but squash is innovating and changing itself to make it much more consumer-friendly."

Then it's back to another declaration, a series of uplifting positives that make you wonder how squash is continually bidding for Olympic inclusion alongside the likes of wushu and sport climbing.

"Squash is a sport which will bring new countries to the medal podium," he says. "It is gladiatorial, truly athletic, has a recognised scoring system and

is played to fantastic levels of fitness. It's a game of great strategy."

As we will see in the aftermath of London 2012 with some of the niche sports, the level of interest from television – Lee believes that squash should find a slot on broadcasters such as Eurosport in the not-too-distant future – also depends on whether you are an Olympic sport or not. As Lee says, it hinges on "where medallists are energising a country of national heroes."

It's a sobering thought when you consider that Britain continues to churn out victory after victory on the PSA World Tour, but Lee is right on the money once more. With every passing month under Lee's stewardship, those karate odds seem ever so optimistic.



## HONG KONG TEST

The \$220,000 Hong Kong Open, which runs from November 25 to December 2, has been chosen by the International Olympic Committee as squash's test event for the sport's 2020 Olympic bid.

IOC inspectors will be judging how squash stages and presents a major tournament – the Hong Kong Open is one of the longest-running on the PSA and WSA World Tours – with a view to its suitability to join the Olympic Games programme.

"The two IOC representatives will report back to the IOC Programme Commission and Executive Board," explained World Squash Federation CEO Andrew Shelley. "It is one element of the process that includes the questionnaire, followed by two presentations to the above boards, featuring videos we have made."

"We also get an opportunity to present our case on the value we would bring to the greatest sporting show on earth."

England's James Willstrop is the defending champion for the \$150,000 PSA World Series Platinum event, while Malaysia's Nicol David is the title-holder of the \$70,000 WSA World Series Gold championship.

