

THE OPTIMISTIC PRESIDENT

Ian McKenzie interviews the new World Squash president Zena Wooldridge

It has been a long journey for Zena Wooldridge, who was elected President of the World Squash Federation in December. She brings a wealth of experience to the role, having been Chair of England Squash and President of European Squash.

The WSF presidential election of 2016 was controversial and disputed. Wooldridge stood against the French president Jacques President who was finally elected with a strong remit to pursue the Olympic dream. Wooldridge now has her turn.

In a brilliant coincidence, Wooldridge, until her retirement in October, was Director of Sport at Birmingham University, which is the squash and hockey venue for the 22nd Commonwealth Games in 2022. This is where the sport transcends its narrow boundaries and enjoys arguably its greatest stage.

“To have the Commonwealth Games in your own city is fantastic but to be the president of the international federation when it is there, in a facility you have had a big involvement in from concept to design, is unique and a fantastic prospect,” she says with satisfaction.



The University of Birmingham

Wooldridge was at Birmingham University for 27 years, first as Sport & Recreation manager and later Director of Sport.

As a child she participated in cross-country running, netball, badminton, swimming, learned squash at 13 years old and played at Stourbridge LT&SC in Worcestershire. She studied at Warwick University and on graduation was invited to be the Sports Sabbatical Officer. “It was great fun,” she says. “After doing the year’s sabbatical I discovered that there were careers in sport other than teaching PE.”

She headed to Loughborough (England’s top sports university) and studied for a Masters in Recreational Management. So what can we expect of the WSF and its new president? It is the umbrella body for the sport but it is a small organisation with just two full-time staff.

Previously all WSF efforts to grow the game seemed to concentrate on the Olympic bid. It did raise a question Squash Player frequently asked: is there a Plan B?

“Let’s draw a line under the Olympic bid,” says Wooldridge. “It was an opportunity the sport had with a French president who was on the National Olympic Committee with the Paris Olympics coming up. It didn’t happen, but there is a general view that we shouldn’t rule out a future Olympic bid. But it diverted our attention and resources for too long.”

“Plan A now is to get our strategy in place and get organised to deliver that strategy as effectively as possible. If that puts us in position for a future viable bid for the Olympics and we can afford it, then let’s do it. Let’s get Plan A, the strategy, in place and get the global squash community behind it.”

So what is the strategy then? This is a crucial, but slightly unfair, question, as Wooldridge is just into position and a strategy needs to be a collaborative process.

“We need to act quickly and develop a strategy that is simple and has impact,



and that complements the PSA [which has recently released its own strategy].”

Wooldridge outlines familiar themes and some new ones – collaborating with the PSA, strengthening finances, improving presence on social media, participating in multi-sport Games, using technology and being creative, supporting emerging and less well-off nations, educational opportunities, the appropriateness of the ball, and above all, to embrace development.

The key question, she says, is, “Can development be a philosophy which can run right the way through our organisation in all our commissions and in all we do?”

The WSF is a small organisation with a large remit. The sport has a lot of challenges and limited resources. It is under serious pressure in ‘mature’ squash-playing countries by new leisure sports and the gym industry.

Wooldridge sees collaboration as the key. “People want to help, so how do we use the strategy to engage these people? How do we best mobilise them?”

“We will give it a good go. If we are willing to be open and honest, collaborate with people and share things, we will get to a much better place.”

“I am a glass half full person,” she adds. That optimism may come in very useful as she takes us into squash’s future.