

FRIEND OR FOE?

With squash courts closed during lockdown, padel offered a fun, safe, sociable, open-air alternative. Mike Dale asks how much of a threat this rival pursuit poses to our game

In *Squash Player's* inaugural issue 50 years ago, there was much talk of the 'boom'. Players were flocking to a trendy new sport, clubs were abuzz and courts couldn't be built quick enough to meet demand.

Today, these words apply not to squash, but to padel (and in the US equally to pickleball, with both sports claiming to be the "world's fastest growing sport").

Padel is played on an enclosed court about a third the size of a tennis court. The rules are similar to tennis, although you serve underhand and the ball is allowed to bounce off the walls. As it's usually played in doubles format, it's extremely sociable, easy to play, with lengthy rallies like squash but less physically taxing.

As of November 2020, there were roughly 6000 padel players in the UK (there will be far more now). There are currently 110 courts at 52 venues, with 150 courts projected by the end of 2021 and 400 by 2023. Padel is massive in parts of South America, Spain and Italy and growing hugely elsewhere in Europe (including Sweden where Zlatan Ibrahimovic has built a nine-court facility).

In May 2019, the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) boldly installed itself as padel's UK governing body and proclaimed it 'a discipline of tennis'. The LTA see padel as a gateway into tennis for new players and a way of retaining existing ones.

Squash may consider the LTA's annexing of padel as an opportunity missed. LTA Head of Padel, Tom Murray, certainly thinks so. "I do think it would have been a good option for squash," he says, "but I'm not sure squash would have offered the same scope as tennis venues do for padel to increase its infrastructure. Tennis clubs

are where most of padel's organic growth has taken place."

The LTA now offer interest-free loans of up to £250,000 for existing tennis venues to add padel courts – a shrewd move to help clubs attract new members, boost revenue and grow both sports alongside each other.

Murray thinks there's value in adding padel to venues which host tennis and squash. "It brings both membership bases together because padel is that happy medium. It's very easy to pick up, so it's a good first step into racket sports before players try more difficult sports like squash and tennis. It breaks down the barriers to entry."

Manager James Gaston says the pandemic "turbo charged" padel at Harrogate Squash Club in North Yorkshire. Around 200 of the club's 750 members play it and that ratio will rise once they increase capacity from two to four courts next year.

Gaston says: "Squash is gladiatorial and intense and tennis can be stop-start, but in padel you're much closer together and have lots of funny rallies. You end up belly laughing together, getting good exercise and having fun."

Ominously, there's a noticeable trend of long-time squash stakeholders 'following the money' by diversifying (or switching entirely) to padel.

For 28 years Chris Herridge was the undisputed world authority on squash courts until he retired as chairman of the WSF Courts and Technical Commission in 2018. He then founded the Padel Court Company and is on course to build 12 courts this year.

"Is padel a threat to squash? I think so," he says. "It's just so accessible, it's good for

mixed abilities, very sociable and a bit funky. You need to be more committed to get enjoyment out of squash and it's technically more difficult, but you can have a good game of padel without having much skill."

Dax Mellor's plans for a new Squash and Health Club in Swindon fell foul of Covid; instead he's building padel venues in Swindon and Southend, has planning permission for a third in Bristol and has sites identified for five more next year. James Sandwith, former WSF adviser, has just launched Padel Plus, offering padel courts, canopies, lighting and tech solutions.

Squash court build and maintenance firm Melior Sports have also added padel to their repertoire. Founder Nicholas Thompson says: "It feels like squash is being left behind because everyone wants to spend money on padel. If I say to a venue, 'Your squash court floor needs replacing for £5000' they recoil, but when I mention a padel court costs £30,000, their ears prick up. That's not a good sign for squash."

World Squash Day founder Alan Thatcher's new Squash 200 initiative aims to build rackets clubs that include padel and squash courts and are a social hub for their communities. His view is bleak.

"People are discovering that padel and pickleball are cheap, easy to play and fun. Dusty squash courts, a non-bouncy ball and an emphasis on the high levels of fitness required do not, unfortunately, make squash seem as appealing," he says.

"Squash's only hope is using these new sports as a 'Trojan horse' just to remain in people's consciousness by being alongside them. On its own, in its current state, it is at risk of becoming totally obsolete."