

Race for Olympic Finishing Line



Scott Garrett now heads squash's Olympic bid.

Squash has already come close to earning a place in the Olympic Games, so it comes as a surprise to learn that the sport has asked someone different to help it take that elusive last step. The bid leader is no longer from the World Squash Federation; instead the role has been passed to an outsider – Scott Garrett, a former rugby professional with the Harlequins, who now runs his own PR company.

Garrett was asked to take squash into the 2016 Games after making an impression with the cogent and confident way he handled a project for the Professional Squash Association.

Make no mistake about the immensity of this decision. A place in the Olympic movement often transforms a sport, through income for national Olympic committees, the stimulus to spending from governments or quangos, and funding to help underdeveloped regions. Plus a ton of publicity. Garrett arguably has the most important job in squash history. Yet he is little known to most of us. So precisely how did he get it?

The truth is, squash was in a fix. Too much was being asked of Ted Wallbutton, the stalwart of previous bids, whose desire to wind down was perhaps not given the attention it needed. So the bid lost momentum while rival sports made strides. Nor was the WSF overloaded with funds to bring in high quality expertise fast. Yet, more by luck than judgement, this may be what it has acquired.

Because Garrett's PSA survey sought to predict the future of the sport, it brought him close to the WSF,

Richard Eaton interviews the new man spearheading squash's Olympic bid and reviews the sport's position as it mounts another Olympic challenge.

as well as to WISPA. By January, just when the WSF was unsure whom to turn to, not only had Garrett made an excellent impression, but his price was within budget, and, with another twist of good fortune, he was prepared to start the following week.

Moving swiftly into action, Garrett marshalled his bid team – which includes George Mieras, Chris Stahl and Frank van Loon from the WSF, Natalie Grainger, Peter Nicol, Ramy Ashour, Lee Beachill, Thierry Lincou, and Samantha Teran from the players' ranks, and professionals Alex Gough and Andrew Shelley (Chief Executives of the PSA and WISPA respectively); he clarified the sport's strengths; and he analysed replies to an IOC questionnaire. He is now planning a crucial presentation to the IOC executive board in June, with the likelihood of more persuasion being required before the decisive vote in Copenhagen in October.

"He is extremely perceptive and he is a good fit," says Gough. According to WSF President 'Rami' Ramachandran, "He's young and a team player and doesn't sit on a high horse."

These compliments suggest that Garrett's situation as an outsider may be an advantage. He brings no baggage to the decision-making process and yet may have a feel for the game, having played it for fitness between rugby seasons.

"This is a very exciting and athletic sport," he rattles enthusiastically. "And if it had had the voting system last time that we have now, it would be in the Games already."

He is referring to the widely held view that squash got more than 50 per cent of the votes while falling short of the two-thirds required for entry to the London 2012 Games; and that 50 per cent is all that is required for 2016.

Squash's chances have also improved – and may be its best ever – because the IOC has announced that there will be two extra

sports at the 2016 Games, making 28. Against that, there are now six rivals, not four. Three of them – baseball, softball and golf – have significant American support. The others are rugby, karate and roller sports. Baseball and softball are both competing to be restored to the Games after being voted off the London 2012 program. Officially they were dropped for not being sufficiently worldwide, but some Americans felt that, because the US was involved in unpopular wars, there was a political ingredient to the decisions. Some even say that Obama's election has improved their chances.



Thanks to modern equipment you can now enjoy a tournament on TV.

EIGHT ASSETS

The bid team's first task has therefore been to identify squash's key assets. "What makes squash a better Olympic sport than the others?" Garrett asks. "This is difficult to pin down." To make it even more of a challenge, the IOC's priorities keep shifting. In the '90s it was all for clean, drug-free sports. Then it focused on sports which advanced the cause of women. Now it is keen to make a mark in countries where the Olympics have lacked prominence, and to create a legacy for young people. What has remained constant is that Olympic sports should televise well.

Garrett's team has identified eight strengths for squash. First is its popularity and accessibility. It is played in



Left: 'Rami' Ramachandran, the new president of the WSF, is preparing for critical meetings with the IOC.

more than 150 countries, and by more than 20 million people, well spread across the continents.

"It's a genuinely global game, which anyone with a couple of dollars can play," Garrett says, though some might disagree, considering the cost of rackets, kit and court or membership fees.

Secondly, Garrett claims, squash is not just exciting to watch live, but highly broadcastable. The assertion is that the problems of televising the sport, which bothered the PSA and WISPA for so long, have been solved.

Squash's third main asset is unity. All three governing bodies – WSF, PSA and WISPA – are behind the bid, the PSA and WISPA nominating ambassadors and allowing bid personnel access to tournaments. "Some other sports don't have this cohesion," Garrett says.

Fourthly and fifthly, squash meets the IOC requirements that Olympic medals should be the sport's highest honour (which begs the question as to how football and tennis got in, and whether golf should do so) and therefore that the best athletes will compete; both the PSA and WISPA have signed pledges not to schedule tournaments during the Games.

Squash also scores significantly – perhaps crucially – in its potential to take the Olympics to nations in North Africa, the Middle East and South-East Asia which don't usually win medals, which was a big factor in badminton's debut 17 years ago. Egypt, for example, has produced only one Olympic gold medalist since 1948, while Malaysia has never won one.

Number seven, squash can impress with its unique capacity for stunning staging, as with tournaments before the Giza pyramids and on the Hong Kong harbour front. The portable court means that television impact can be huge and yet costs minimal. Chicago, Madrid, Rio de Janeiro and Tokyo are the four competing cities for 2016, and tournaments have already been staged near the Chicago River and next to Madrid's Royal Palace. Olympic squash could just as easily be staged in front of Sugarloaf Mountain or on Shibuya crossing. And with only two events, men's and women's singles, there would be only 64 athletes, with minimal accommodation requirements – probably less than the rival sports. There is a distinctly green sub-plot to squash's bid: "We can go anywhere and not leave anything behind," Garrett

points out. "There is no negative imprint."

As for the necessary legacy, squash knows it can ensure new courts for the host city, because the WSF has reached out to clubs in every potential host city, all of which have promised to create Olympic practice facilities. Asset number eight.

THE OPPOSITION

What has still to be clarified is how squash would make use of its enhanced popularity after the Olympics – which it must do.

Meanwhile Garrett seems most concerned to justify squash's claims to quality TV coverage. Some people still argue that it does not televise well.

"I admit that has been so in the past," he says. "The ball moves very fast and it's not big. But the equipment is so much better now. And with super slow-mo and high definition the experience is fantastic."

Though it is probably true that what was once a fatally weak point for squash is no longer so, it remains to be seen how widely Garrett's view is held. Squash may yet need to do some persuading: some of its rivals look pretty good on TV.

Baseball is one. Its bid emphasizes its growth, substantial youth



Pictured by the all-glass court at Grand Central Terminal in New York are the WSF Olympic Athlete Ambassadors (L to R) Peter Nicol, Thierry Lincou, Natalie Grainger, Ramy Ashour, Samantha Teran and Lee Beachill – flanked by PSA Chairman Ziad Al-Turki (Saudi Arabia) (extreme left) and PSA Chief Executive Alex Gough (Wales) (extreme right).

participation, major media distribution and 145,000 league teams outside the United States, with claims that it is "everywhere" – though this may be an exaggeration. On the other hand, it has had two major problems: difficulties in getting leading players to the Games, and its drug-testing not being up to scratch. Its bid leaders say they are committed to getting an agreement from the major leagues – though this is by no means guaranteed – and claim to have resolved the testing problem.

Softball's mission is to become "the most inclusive team sport on the planet". Rather more convincing is its determination to become more independent, for it has been hurt by association with baseball's doping



Right: World no.1 Nicol David (centre) would like the chance to win an Olympic medal for Malaysia.



scandals and its similar inability to ensure top player participation. Its governing body has promised that all 131 of the national bodies which are affiliated to other sports will be separate within two years.

Golf is also trying to return to the Olympics, but after more than a century's absence. To further its bid, the professional and amateur bodies joined forces but even that failed to get the sport into London. The current bid highlights golf's worldwide participation – 60 million people playing in 120 countries – its economic and charitable impact, and its initiatives to bring the sport to young people. A significant strength is that 216 countries receive televised golf each week.

Rugby has a radical plan: to scrap the World Cup sevens tournament if rugby sevens becomes an Olympic sport. This, it claims, will ensure that players regard the Olympics as the sport's pinnacle. But the focus of the sport as a whole will surely remain on the Rugby World Cup (which in 2007 had record profits, 2.2 million spectators and a TV audience of 4.2 billion) and the Six Nations and Tri Nations tournaments. Neither is rugby truly a worldwide sport, even though the IRS has a membership of 116 nations, and \$50 million is being spent on developing rugby in new territories.

A more plausible candidate in that respect might be karate, whose World Federation claims 180 affiliated federations and more than 10 million members. However it has been bedeviled by division and the WKF does not represent all karate styles, of which altogether there may be more than 50 million practitioners. Karate has also aroused concerns regarding protests

against the judging of bouts, although the WKF President claims these have been answered. Nevertheless, karate conspicuously headed the list in six of the seven rounds of voting for the 2012 Games. Its mission to ensure that an ancient part of Eastern culture is accepted within the modern family of sports gives it a unique attraction.

But perhaps no candidate has so modern or original a claim as roller sports, or speed skating. Its bid emphasizes that it is not just a sport but a green and exciting means of transport; uniquely, it proposes road races on host city streets. It is also one of the few sports to offer complete equality between men and women; it is cheap and easy to learn; it would offer unusually good chances of medals to countries which never usually get them; and it appeals hugely to the young, something which particularly interests the IOC. But despite all these very considerable advantages, the sport is not as well promoted as it could be.

IN WITH A SHOUT

All in all, though the chances for squash have never been better, the competition has never been stronger, and it may not be among the favourites to gain entry in 2016. It will have to work hard to overcome negative perceptions and assert its attractions.

What are the signs as to the IOC's thinking? Craig Reddie was scrutinized when he appeared as an IOC observer at the World Open in Manchester in

Right: IOC delegate Sir Craig Reddie with his wife and former WSF Emeritus President Susie Simcock at the World Open in Manchester.

Above: Squash can be staged easily and in exciting venues.

October. Besides having led badminton into the Olympics in 1987, he sprang two surprises: first he revealed that he had once converted a disused church into squash courts; then he claimed not to know of IOC concerns over confrontations between players and referees. Reddie was also encouraging, even though he had to respect formalities. "Squash got very close last time, which indicates the programme commission people view the sport highly. It will be a serious contender," he said.

The fact remains, though, that votes for squash last time round were not as numerous as has been reported. Official minutes of the Olympic vote on 11 July in Singapore show squash finishing fourth out of the five sports in the first round, third out of the four in the second round, and second out of the three in the third. Each time it avoided elimination by a narrow margin. And in the fourth round squash did not, as popular opinion suggested, achieve 50 per cent of the votes, receiving only 39 out of 102 votes.

It will therefore need to do much better than last time, and it has got its act together later. The hill can be climbed, but it may be steeper than many of us imagine.

