

Squash's little brother is making a racket as it aims for parity on the courts

SPORT

Fr Vlad Felzmann

Born out of the game rackets, which was played in London's prisons in the 19th century, squash was invented at Harrow School in England around 1830 when pupils discovered that a punctured ball, which "squashed" on impact with the wall, required a greater variety of shots and skill to hit. Today squash is played by over 20 million people worldwide.

Across the Atlantic, Joe Sobek is credited with inventing the sport of racquetball in the Greenwich, Connecticut, YMCA.

A professional tennis and American handball player, Sobek, frustrated when he was unable to find an indoor racket sport that appealed to him, designed a new racket and adapted the rubber core of a tennis ball on a handball court and initially called it 'Paddle racquets'. He designed the first strung paddle, devised a set of rules, based on those of squash, handball, and paddleball, and named his game 'paddle rackets'.

It was subsequently renamed 'racquetball'.

In February 1952, Sobek founded the National Paddle Rackets Association (NPRA), codified the rules, and had the rules printed as a booklet. The new sport was rapidly adopted and became popular through Sobek's continual promotion of it. He was aided by the existence of some 40,000 handball courts in the country's YMCAs and Jewish community centres, where racquetball could be played.

In 1969, aided by Robert W. Kendler, the president-founder of the US Handball Association (USHA), the International Racquetball Association (IRA) was founded using the name coined by Bob McInerney, a professional tennis player.

Kendler used his publication *ACE* to promote both handball and racquetball. Starting in the 1970s, and aided by the fitness boom of that decade, the sport's popularity increased to an estimated 3.1 million players by 1974.

Consequent to increased demand, racquetball clubs and courts were founded and built, and sporting goods manufacturers began producing racquetball-specific equipment. This growth continued until the early 1980s, and declined in the decade's latter part when racquet clubs converted to physical fitness clubs, in service to a wider clientele, adding aerobics exercise



A Racquetball player in action

classes and physical fitness and bodybuilding machines. Since then, the number of players – an estimated 5.6 million – is growing.

In 1976, Ian Wright, an English squash referee, was officiating and lecturing in Canada and tried racquetball. He brought back a couple of rackets and balls, pierced the balls with a pin to slow them down to reduce their speed, and secured the support of Dunlop to manufacture them.

Wright felt that racketball, as he called it, could encourage more people into using British squash courts, and discourage interest in turning them over to studio, gym or other use. In 2009, Ian Wright suffered a heart attack on court during the Bexley Racketball Tournament on 4th January and died shortly afterwards.

At the first meeting of the British Racketball Association (BRA) formed in 1984, the Rules of the game were approved. In England, national Championships were first held in December 1984, followed by Doubles in 1986. Open events began to be held soon afterwards.

Separately, in 1977, through the efforts of a small number of Victorian squash venue operators, the sport of Australian Racquetball (AR) was conceived to encourage people who found squash challenging.

Racquetball is a fast-paced action sport played with standardised equipment and specific court dimensions worldwide. The sport became extremely popular during the late 1970s and early 1980s because it was fun, easy to learn how to play, and one of the best workouts you can get in a short period of time.

The number of racquetball players worldwide is estimated to be 5.6 million – and that number is growing. Racquetball uses a 'racquet' that can be up to 55.88 cm long with a tear-drop stringed area. Squash uses a 'racket' that is longer (up to 68.6 cm). However, the stringed surface is narrower. Both racquetballs and squash balls are hollow and rubber. Although, racquetballs are larger than squash balls by 42 per cent in diameter and they are bouncier.

Unlike most racquet sports, such as tennis and badminton, there is no net to hit the ball over, and, unlike squash, no tin (out of bounds area at the bottom of front wall) to hit the ball above. Also, the court's walls, floor, and ceiling are legal playing surfaces, with the exception of court-specific designated hindrances being out-of-bounds.

Kendler ruled over professional racquetball throughout its early

stages of growth, but upon his death in 1982 the organisation declared bankruptcy and the professional men's tours fell into disarray. Several professional governing bodies ruled the Men's pro tour throughout the 1980s, and the women broke away and self-organised their own professional tour in the same time period. Eventually, after the tour collapsed in 1988, a new men's tour called the International Racquetball Tour (IRT) was created by Oregon State President and popular tournament promoter Hank Marcus, which remains the primary men's professional sanctioning body to this day.

The women's pro tour has gone by several names in the interim, but is currently known as the Ladies Professional Racquetball tour (LPRT) and has partnerships with the USAR, IRT, and other sanctioning bodies to this day.

The British Racketball Association was formed on 13th February 1984, and confirmed by the English Sports Council as the sport's governing body on 30th October 1984. The first National Racketball Championship was held in London on 1st December 1984. The sport – like squash – is now played in a host of countries, including Australia, Bermuda,

France, Germany, Malaysia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa, Argentina, Ireland and Sweden. Currently, racketball also is played in parts of North America.

In 1988, the British Racketball Association merged with the Squash Rackets Association, and 'England Squash & Racketball' is now recognised by Sport England as the English national governing body for the sports of squash and racketball. There is now a UK Racketball Tournament Series consisting of eight events around the UK, which forms the basis of the national rankings along with the National Racketball championships held annually at The Edgbaston Priory Club.

The sport has a high appeal in the Americas, and because of this racquetball has been included in the Pan American Games in 1995, 1999, 2003, 2011, 2015 and in in Santiago, 2023.

Racquetball differs from other racquet sports as most competitive players wear a glove on their racquet hand for the purpose of getting a better grip on the racquet (similar to golfers using a glove when driving), but gloves are optional equipment.

In 2016, World Squash Federation announced an international 're-branding' of racketball as Squash 57, the 57 referring to the diameter of the ball, in order to emphasise both its membership of the 'squash rackets' family, and its distinctiveness from the US racquetball.

The WSF, in partnership with England Squash, signposted a change of name for the game, which is played with a larger ball and a shorter racket. The new name focuses on the key difference to squash – the larger ball, which has a maximum diameter of 57mm (compared to a squash ball's 40mm).

The rebrand will ensure that the game is seen as part of the squash family, while also eliminating any confusion with the North American version of racquetball game played on much larger courts with no tin and a different type of ball.

Current Squash57 Rules are at <http://www.worldsquash.org>

A quote from Shakespeare "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" (Romeo and Juliet, Act 2, Scene 2). reminds us that a name is just a label to distinguish one thing from another. After all, I am either 'Prof Msgr Vladimir Felzmann' or 'Father Vlad' – even 'Father V'. For a while, by some sixth formers while I was teaching at The Cardinal Memorial School, London W14 8BZ, I was, 'Norm' – as I looked somewhat like Norman Tebbit, the old Tory politician.