STANDARDS IN SPORT: SQUASH

A sport that, while popular, used to be almost impossible to show on television or to a live audience has made significant changes to the way it presents itself, and top-level squash is now an exciting, colourful spectacle.



Malaysian squash star Nicol David says she would happily trade in her six world titles for an Olympic gold medal.

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Squash makes a spectacle of itself

Squash was pipped by wrestling for inclusion as a non-core sport in the Olympic Games in 2020 and 2024 *(see WSA January-February 2014)* and took the news badly. All sports are good these days at putting televisual star athletes in front of a video camera and having them deliver a corporate message. Squash certainly achieved this in the build-up to the 2013 International Olympic Committee decision about its future as an Olympic sport, with twice men's singles world champion, Ramy Ashour, from Egypt, proclaiming that to compete at the Olympics would mean "absolutely everything". His female counterpart, Malaysia's Nicol David, goes further than "everything", which is a bit of a sportsperson's cliché, saying that she would "happily trade my six world titles for an Olympic gold medal".

They say squash deserved a chance because it is played in every corner of the globe, in 185 countries, on 50,000 courts. All five continents has produced at least one world champion, including Ms David for Asia and Mr Ashour for

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Ceramic dots on the glass make for a colourful spectacle.
ASB

Africa. Their point here is that squash's audience is genuinely global and that people in all parts of the world could harbour hopes of seeing their flag and hearing their anthem at Olympic medal ceremonies for the sport. Power, strength, skill, mental toughness and supreme fitness and strategy are required to excel at squash, and always were, but the two Olympic hopefuls went on in their promotional video to talk about changes and innovations that their sport introduced as part of its campaign to win Olympic inclusion, and insist that "squash embraces change".

Clever venue technology

It redesigned its venues, offering in-court technology and a better broadcasting environment to make it more of a spectacle. Show-courts are all-glass and can now be quickly assembled as temporary structures in the centres of big cities. Some clever technology has gone into new squash-court design. Companies such as ASB from the Czech Republic have developed a product that consists of 42 panels of secure glass, 12 millimetres thick. Each panel is 1.6 by 1.7 metres in size and are designed to be constructed easily and quickly and replaced equally easily should the need occur. The courts even have a glass floor, with a special, non-slip version developed for that purpose. "Glass is a highly elastic and at the same time very hard material," ASB says. The Czech manufacturer has designed the glass with burnt-in coloured ceramic dots, applied by screen-printing. Lighting is also fixed to the glass, making for a colourful, dramatic, gladiatorial, highly televisual arena. And because of the interplay between lights and ceramics, players on court are unable to see beyond the glass, allowing them to concentrate fully on the game. A wide range of on-court temperature is permitted: temperatures as low as 15° and as high as 25°C are permitted, although most in the know say a temperature between 15° and 20°C is ideal.

As spectacular as squash arenas are these days, the clothes and shoes athletes wear to take part in official competitions are more conservative.

Tasteful clothes

In all championships that come under the auspices of the World Squash Federation (WSF), clothing regulations apply, although some matters such as those regarding taste and appropriateness of a player's garb to the cultural and religious traditions of the host country are for the championship referee to make a call on. As a general rule, men should wear a a short-sleeved shirt, shorts, socks and shoes to play squash. Women wear a skirt or dress, socks and shoes. Other garments, such as part or all of a tracksuit, can be worn during play for cultural or religious reasons with the prior permission of the championship referee. Cycling shorts may be worn for support as a baselayer, but, for women, the hem of the cycling shorts should "not be visible below the hem of the skirt or dress when the player is standing". This quote, from the WSF, gives a good indication of the sensitivities that can still surround female athletes' attire for sports that are popular in countries in which women often dress conservatively. This issue sparked a recent debate for badminton, for example. In May 2011, the Badminton World Federation asked women playing the sport at the highest levels to wear either dresses or shirts and skirts to compete. In other words, the sport's authorities wanted women players to stop wearing shorts or trousers.

There are few other restrictions in place at the moment for squash. The WSF asks players to "dress and present themselves for play in a professional manner, with clean and customarily acceptable squash attire". As well as shorts for women, it also frowns on promotional cotton T-shirts, leggings and "aerobic bodysuits" of any description, but there are provisions for sponsors' logos to appear and for players to wear the colours they like, provided there is no colour-clash between opponents. Shoes can be of any colour or combination of colours but must have a non-marking sole.

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