

Glamour times recalled as Sports Club holds 75th bash

Members of Edinburgh Sports Club will gather at Belford Road premises tonight to mark the 75th anniversary of an institution that has hosted the greatest squash players, stars of screen and stage and even the world's richest man.

It was back in 1997 that the Sultan of Brunei dropped by for badminton with his entourage while visiting the Capital and former Sports Club squash internationalist Ray Stevenson also recalls: "many celebrities have taken advantage of the Sports Club facilities for some exercise when they were performing in Edinburgh. I remember Leonard Rossiter, in particular, was a decent squash player, and Spike Milligan also turned up."

While these visitors were happy to adopt a low profile, much more attention was focused on the touring squash stars.

Former ESC professional, Steve Sproule, says: "At the height of squash's popularity leading players such as Geoff Hunt, Ahmed Safwat, Hiddy Jahan and Jonah Barrington were part of a group of eight who toured the country staging the Yellow Dot Classic and the Sports Club was one venue."

Barrington is widely regarded as having done most to popularise squash by reaching the top of a sport regarded as the preserve of the well-to-do.

"Jonah had such a common touch that after one exhibition at the Sports Club he kept everyone waiting upstairs for a question-and-answer session while he coached a couple of 12-year-olds. He was the greatest enthusiast."

As well as winning six British Opens (the de facto world title) Barrington went two decades without losing to a countryman - and then along came Edinburgh's Mark Maclean who reached world No.7 in 1991/92.

Said Maclean: "I broke Jonah's stranglehold on the British game in a league match in London; pretty soon afterwards he followed me to the Sports Club to get his revenge on the famous court 5 which is the best I ever experienced anywhere in the world.

"Not only does it have the truest bounces but the spectators are almost on top of the court creating atmosphere and then there's the history; everybody who was anybody in squash has played on that court."

From Hashim Khan to Peter Nicol they have trod the wooden floor but one of the greatest for Mark was the late Firhill High School teacher, Douglas Yule, whom he describes as the Sports Club's "unsung hero".

"Dougie inspired a generation of Edinburgh youngsters including myself, the late John McGhee, Ray Stevenson and others with his coaching and encouragement. We owed him such a lot." "The tradition of excellence extends to the present day and professional Simon Boughton says: "Our annual Artemis Championship every January has attracted the likes of Nick Matthew, the present world No.1 and his predecessor, John White, from Scotland."

The club's own 'greatest-ever' is surely Mike Oddy, who reached world No.2 in 1963 and in a six-year reign as British No.1 captured the titles of South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

Little wonder current chairman Andrew Forrest, who will lead tonight's celebrations driven by predecessor Alastair Allanach, feels there is much to live up to. "The theme tonight will be reminiscence but we are looking ahead already to the centenary by diversifying into other racket sports" explained Forrest.

"Squash has had a difficult time but we have stabilised and are growing again by developing racketball, East League tennis and a strong table tennis section supervised by Lindsey Muir and Eddie Still.

"We probably won't ever see queues forming outside to book a squash court a week in advance as happened in the boom years but the future of Edinburgh Sports Club is bright."

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