

## **Club Spotlight: Pontefract Squash Club**

Pontefract Squash and Leisure Club has eight squash courts, including five glass-backs, and tiered seating on its top two courts. But while its facilities are impressive, it's elite coaching that has resulted in international renown for the club that has nurtured several international stars.

The late great Malcolm Willstrop coached at the club for many years, and his son, former world number one James Willstrop, remains a member and regular face on the courts. Continuing the high-performing theme at the club is Jayne Robinson, who was named the 2024 Coach of the Year at the England Squash Awards. As part of our Club Spotlight series, Jayne offers a behind-the-scenes insight into what makes Pontefract Squash and Leisure Club so special...

### **Beginnings**

I started playing squash with my dad when I was about 12. The rest of the family played badminton, so I decided I'd do something different. I started playing at Pontefract, which is a great squash club but it was new at the time, so I was the first junior there to be selected to play for the county. That was quite an honour at the time.

### **A legendary coaching mentor**

I started doing some coaching on a Sunday morning with the juniors. I started doing that under Malcolm Willstrop, who passed away about four years ago, but he was a legend of the sport. Well-known worldwide as one of the best coaches in the world. I was fortunate enough to be under his tutelage and that's how I got into coaching.

It was a good chance to give back because my career as a social worker had moved into management, and you forget why you went into social work, which was to work with and help children and families. In management, you don't see them anymore. So it was nice to be able to do that, and it just grew from there.

### **World renown**

Pontefract Squash Club's got eight squash courts, and it's probably better known worldwide than in the UK. We have lots of international players come over. The current world number one, Mostafa Asal, comes to our club, and we have two homegrown players, Lee Beachill and James Willstrop, who were both world number ones. James Willstrop and [Dutch former number one] Vanessa Atkinson coach here. I was fortunate to work with Malcolm Willstrop, and now I work alongside James Willstrop day in, day out. There are people from Germany and France at the club at the moment. In the squash world, people gravitate to Pontefract, a little Yorkshire town with the best in the world.

### **Start 'em young**

Two and a half years old is the youngest I've got at the moment. On Saturday and Sunday mornings we'll have 40-50 kids in, it's quite challenging - we recently had an incident with potty training!

With the juniors, they're like little sponges they learn so quickly. One of my fortés is working with very young children. At first, they can't hit a ball, then suddenly they can and you see the pleasure they get from that. Many will just be nice club players or play for enjoyment, which is great because they're playing a sport I love.

### **Nurturing future stars**

The other side is coaching those kids who are special, you can tell they could go far. For example, Sienna Hampshaw, who was a rising star of the year with England Squash. Seeing where she came from to where she is now is fantastic, and the pleasure she gets from it is my reward.

Sienna is the current under-13 champion, and I coached Fern Copley when she was the English under-11 champion. We've got great players, county players, and England representatives. It's a privilege to work with both two-and-a-half-year-olds and English champions. I feel very blessed to have this in my life.

### **Growing a women's squash community**

Some of the kids' mums said, "It would be really good if you did some sessions with us." That was good because not many women play squash, and I know that's a thing in sport full stop. So I started women's sessions.

Now we have about 30 women who play. Some clubs don't even have half a dozen. It's a real challenge for England Squash. I try to keep it social and fun. They're not going to be world-beaters; they just want to have fun, do something different, and have a social chat afterwards. I've built my ladies' squash on a social element. It might have cost me a fortune buying drinks at first, but now everyone mucks in. It doesn't matter because they're coming for a game, doing sport, and having a social side too. That's so important for women's squash. If you just do the squash session without the social element, it will probably break down. If they only play once a week, they won't improve hugely, but they enjoy it and come back, which says it all.

### **Mix of ages and abilities**

On Monday nights I run a club night with 12-20 club players, all of a good standard. We have local leagues, the Yorkshire League, and the Leeds League. There's a real range of ages: county players, Masters players, and even a world over-60 champion.

We now have two mixed ability sessions a week - Monday and Wednesday mornings - for adults with learning disabilities. We play racquetball with a bigger racket and a bouncier ball, making it easier.

One group is slightly less able than the other, but both give it a go and love it. James Willstrop, ex-world number one, joins in and one of his favourite sessions of the week is coaching these groups. That's the beauty of Pontefract Squash Club, nobody's "too good" to join in.

### **Schools: bringing squash to the next generation**

We're a community-based club as well as a world-class one. We work with schools, inviting them along and they see what we do, and we often run after-school sessions. Parents pick them up, come inside, and say, "I've never been here!". We do six-week school programmes, and some schools come every week for the whole year. Many of those children then join our weekend sessions.

### **Highlights**

Coaching Ferne Copley to the English under-11 title without dropping a game was a great moment, my first English champion. Sienna's under-13 title in Nottingham, after taking a year out during Covid, was another. But honestly, every child who goes from not hitting a ball to being able to hit it is a highlight. At the other end of the spectrum, I've got women in their 60s giving it a go, and loving it.

One family came through our school programme. The daughter joined juniors, then the grandma brought her, decided to have a go herself, and now we can't get her off the court!

*Find out more about Pontefract Squash Club <https://www.pontesquash.com>*