

JONATHON POWER – “LET” IT BE!

Over 380 participants took part in the 2003 Canadian National Squash Championships in Edmonton April 30 through to May 3^d, 2003. The Royal Glenora Club provided an excellent host facility for the 650 plus matches over the 4-day event.

Over 1000 people attended and paid top dollar to see the final open women's and men's display their world-class skills. The showcase glass court allows spectators to watch from all sides. Sitting in front of the glass court provides a rare-perspective of the fine details of high-level squash that you just have to experience to appreciate.

The 2003 Canadian National Squash Championships opened my eyes to the squash culture in Canada. It is probably not widely known, but Canada boasts some of the best squash players in the world. For the price of a flight to Edmonton and the entrance fee to the tournament (all in, less than \$450), I was exposed to an endless amount of world-class squash and blown away by the hospitality of the squash community in Edmonton. On top of that, I played two games in the Men's B draw, received an excellent tournament package, enjoyed 2 extravagant dinners and witnessed the true comradeship of squash players from all over Canada and all walks of life.

I have been playing squash now for just shy of three years and this was my first (of hopefully many) National squash experience. This article spawned from the idea that there are probably many other players at various levels, both male and female, who didn't make it out to Nationals, but might in the future if they knew a little bit more about it.

MY EXPERIENCE - GAME ONE

Fresh off the plane and ready to do battle; I had my game face on right from the start. My first opponent was Omar Angeles. He had the touch of a professional and I could see from the start that it was not going to be easy. We had long tight rallies and exchanged service for what seemed an eternity only to be tied 4-4 after at 15 minutes of play. One long rally broke me and my focus dipped for a few rallies. Soon afterwards the first game ended 9-5 in favour of Omar. Off the court during the 90 second break, I insisted that this only meant that we would have to play at least 4 games now, stressing to my opponent and the referee that it was not over yet. The next two games lasted another 30 minutes, and in each one I gained an extra point, however, in both games I was shy of the required number of points to claim victory. Result: Omar 3 - Mike 0. I was expedited to the consolation bracket.

GAME TWO

Facing elimination, but remaining calm, my new focus was the consolation finals. I think I won the warm-up! But it went downhill from there, only accumulating at total of 12 points as I extended Dave Hine to three games. My strategy going in was to run him and tire him out. He had played a match earlier in the day that went to five games, so this seemed the logical strategy. He had the look of a marathon runner, and I have the look of

an offensive linesman. Clearly I had the wrong game plan. Anyone offering 'Squash 101 for dummies'? Indeed the rallies were long, but the result was the same. To quote Loree Adams, I went "One, Two, BBQ". But the BBQ was good!

Now that all the pressure of winning the B's was gone, I could enjoy all that the Royal Glenora had to offer and watch some of the best squash players on the planet.

INTERESTING PLAYER COMMENTS

I may have been eliminated quickly, but I wasn't down and out. My focus switched yet again and with a little bartering at Future Shop, I had myself a digital recorder and began interviewing any player that would give me 5 minutes. I managed to interview players ranging from the "D" category to the Men's 2003 Canadian Champion Jonathon Power, who is currently ranked #3 in the world. Thus was the genesis of 'Mike's Hard News'. What follows is a compilation of players' comments, observations, motivations and stories.

Andrew Lynn (Vancouver – Men's 30+ Champion)

- "This is a great experience, motivating to come and watch all sorts of levels of players. You can learn many things to take back and apply to your own game or even just going out to watch the 65+ guys battle it out is inspirational...says there is a heck of a lot of years left to play squash, and to play competitively".
- "My best squash moment, that is easy – it would have to be meeting the women who is now my wife in a squash tournament in Kamloops in 1992. I sat down at a table with my dinner and she was sitting across from me and well, that was 11 years ago..." I think he was subtly saying that there is still hope for me...

Trish Martin (Vancouver – Women's B Participant)

- "It was brutal out there, she played very well and I...didn't"
- "If you are not mentally tough, they usually walk all over you!"
- Trish's family was kind enough to open their home to me during my stay in Edmonton. Thank you to Trish and her family for not leaving me to freeze in the snow blizzard.

Randall Town (Victoria – Men's Open Top 16)

- "Start watching players who are better than you on court to see what they do. Take some of their styles away and try implement them into your own game... keep learning"
- "Squash is a mental game, much like chess...and this is an exciting event, all should come, even if they don't participate"

Jack Nishikawa (Prince George – Men's B Participant)

- I got into squash "as I needed something to do after (competitive) wrestling"
- I came out to Nationals for the great "competition and to watch the best in the country play. I'll be in Vancouver next year" for the Nationals again

Jeff Boag (Hollyburn CC – Men's Open Top 16)

- “It is all about determination”
- “We just wrapped up the 2003 nationals here and we have a full year of training before the Nationals in Vancouver next year (at Hollyburn Country Club where Jeff is the pro). I think that the best way to get involved is to take lessons from your local squash pro, do tons of drills and just *get prepared!*” Thanks Jeff, don't mind putting in a little plug for all you pros, just be careful with that camera!

Kelly Shannon (Calgary, age 13 – Men's B participant)

- “I didn't do that great, but that's okay cause it was a good experience”
- “In my first game I lost to this guy who won the tournament, but he killed me – triple bagel'd me 9-0, 9-0, 9-0”
- “It is really cool having the glass court. It is amazing how fast (the pros) are and how few errors they make”
- “I'd like to play in the worlds one day” Kelly won the Canadian and USA junior Championships last year.

Jason Giuffre (Vancouver, Men's Open Participant)

- “Squash is in the family, everyone plays squash. I used to play at the Glenora with my cousin Matt before I moved to Vancouver”
- “The best thing at Nationals would be to watch the open matches. Look for the right shot selection, pick up their game strategies, and to see how they approach various opponents, it is a great event”
- Jason comes from a huge squash family. He has the talent to become one of the best in the country like his cousin Matt.

Sarah Wilson (Saskatoon) – Women's D Consolation Winner

- This event “gives you a good opportunity to play squash and also to see some excellent squash. I watched the quarters, semis and the finals”
- “I've just recently been introduced to squash, but Rob's been playing since he was 10 years old” (Rob is Sarah's husband – he competed in the Men's Open and is currently ranked 15 in Canada)
- “The squash community in Saskatoon is great...the players there are very keen and we do drills every Tuesday and Thursday...I love the social aspect of it”

Garett Hennigan (Vancouver – Men's 45+ Consolation Semi-Finals)

- “This is a great tournament...it is kind of like a pilgrimage to Nationals”
- “My theory is that if you win in 5 (games), you actually lost. So either win in 3 or you don't win at all, cause you only have so much energy!”
- What can lower level players do to improve their game? “Two things (1) take some lessons (2) find one person you can do drills with on a regular basis, if you don't do drills you won't improve”

Rod Symington (WSF Rules & Referees Committee Liaison)

- “What do you call a bunch of referees? – a madness of referees!”
- “I will be giving a speech on ‘Squash as the drug of choice’ about how people are fanatical about squash and the length they go to play squash; 8 hour drives, arrange vacations around playing squash, and even me – I got married and an hour later I played squash!”
- “The witty banter is fine, but the bad behavior is bad for squash”
- “Players should come and talk to us about your concerns, about the rules...”

Graham Ryding (Toronto – Men’s Open 2nd Place, World #24)

- “I’ve been able to put myself in a situation where I can make a living from a sport. There is not a lot of money out there as squash is a second tier sport. You really have to hustle”
- How do you come back from being down 2-0? “Start over. You’re not necessarily being out played and often you have put a lot of mileage into the other guy. If you get the third game, now you’re down 2-1 and back in the game. If you get the fourth game, now all of a sudden the guy is freaking out, and you’ve got the momentum”
- “It is all about who gets the better length. The person whose hitting good length is standing at the ‘T’ and that is where you get easy opportunities for drop shots. Most squash players are not hitting good enough length to put themselves in position to actually hit the drop shot effectively”
- “Everything you do in squash, you always have to come back to the ‘T’. It becomes natural after a while”

ANONYMOUS QUOTES

- *“The Tin man cometh, the drop shot didn’t”*
- *“How’s he look in the hot tub? – That is what you should write about, that is what people really want to know...”*
- *“How do I feel...well I would feel much better if I had a good excuse...like if I had gone out all night partying...”*
- *“You need to prepare with pineapple juice”* Oh, has the pineapple juice preparation been implemented by many players on the tour? *“I’m not sure, but I know the women are raving about it!”*
- From a referee after a difficult match when asked about his National experience: *“Well...it’s the usual *^holes, complainers, whiners, you know...it is all good. It is no different than any other tournament”* and so why do you do it? *“Best seat in the house and you never have to pay for it!”*
- *“The refereeing was good, except for the ones he screwed up on!”*
- *“I’m not here to judge the refs, they are here to judge me!”*

PLAYER INTERVIEWS

Jonathon Power (Montreal) – Men's Open Champion, World #3

Interestingly enough, my first attempt at interviewing Jonathon was a tremendous success, however, as a rookie in the interviewing game, I forgot to turn the recorder on! Luckily, Martin Roland was there to capture most of it on video. I'd have to say that it was a tremendous pleasure talking with Jonathon. He has a certain *je ne sais pas* presence that people find magnetic.

He is also quite a character on the court providing humorous banter with his opponent and the referee. He was constantly making facial expressions and gestures that raised laughter and smiles from the spectators. He has won at all levels and been ranked the top player in the world. When asked what he had left to accomplish in squash, he said *"I love to compete and I'd like to bring more notoriety to the sport"*.

Watching his matches, I often found myself wondering what made this player so much better than his opponents. He didn't seem any fitter or stronger, nor did he seem to hit the ball any harder or move any quicker. What seemed to be the difference was that he always knew where his opponents were going to hit the ball. He got to everything. Just when you thought it was down, he'd gracefully and effortlessly get to it and make an amazing return to challenge his opponent...time and time again! He made the game look simple and in slow motion. However, his opponents informed me that he constantly pushed the pace of the game and he moves like a cat out there. He is a true champion and it was a pleasure to watch live.

I had a chance to talk with him after he won his fifth consecutive Canadian National Championship. Here are some of his responses to Mike's Hard News:

Q Are you disappointed they don't present you with a big cheque for winning these events like in tennis or golf?

A *"Yes, that hurts a bit, but I'm looking forward to the big cheque in Vancouver next year."* (Boag – take note here)

Q Did you play other sports growing up?

A *"My dad ran all the gyms on a military base, so I grew up playing every kind of sport. He made me decide when I was 12 that I had to pick one sport and do it full time. I was more inclined to an individual sport. I picked squash. We took it seriously. I watched all the pros play and picked up different things and ideas."*

Q Why will the lower level players benefit from participating in tournaments like this National event?

A *"Basically, they don't get much exposure to top level squash. It helps all aspects of your game to improve by watching this kind of level. If you are keen on a sport and you have the opportunity, I think you'd want to get out and watch the best players in the world."*

Q Squash is such a mental sport – how do you remain so mentally tough out there on the court?

A *“I think it is definitely my will and competitiveness. **I want to win.** That is probably my mental strength. Otherwise, keeping my concentration. I could probably be better at that...there is room to go...but that is the most important thing.”*

Q What should the young and aspiring players focus on to improve their game?

A *“You have to do a lot of drills. It is easy to just go out there and play all the time, but if you want to get better in any sport you have to do drills...they may not be exciting, but they engrain how to do certain things and get rid of bad habits.”*

Jay Anderson (Nelson, B.C., Men's A, 2nd Place)

Jay is 31 years old and started playing squash about 8 years ago. He has steadily moved up the squash rankings and is currently ranked 17th in B.C. He was really easy to talk with and had lots of suggestions for the lower level players on how to improve their games. More than that, he is the epitome of all the great people that make up the squash community. He always offered a smile and carries such a positive perspective on life. Here are some of his responses to Mike's Hard News:

Q What do you like about squash?

A *“I like to describe (squash) as physical chess...cause there is a lot going on out there, it is not just hitting a ball. There is fitness, the game plan, and how you are directly affecting your opponent, I like that challenge”*

Q How do you change your game when you are down 2-0?

A In the tight games there are “ *three things to focus on (1) **Tighter** – keep the drop shots tight (2) **Deeper** – really good length to keep the person behind you and (3) **Smarter** – smarter shots, force your opponent to take you, your not giving it away!”*

Q What are your goals in squash?

A *“I own a (squash) club in Nelson, I am teaching and playing...I am just looking to be the best I can be. I play as many people as I can and try to get better. Nelson is a small part of the province (they call me ‘Mr. Hick’ when I come to Vancouver), but I love it where I am and wouldn't live anywhere else...at tournaments, like the Nationals, it is lots of fun to meet and play different people, see other clubs, stay healthy and be competitive.”*

Q Why should the B/C/D levels participate in the Nationals?

A Players at all levels will *“enjoy themselves and have fun...the Nationals experience is unreal, to play and to watch all the top players”*

MORE STORIES...

THE GRIGG SISTERS

There are some amazing families involved in the sport of squash. The Grigg family is one of them. Five members of the Grigg family participate in squash. Leona (18) and Kyla (22) are both ranked in the top 20 in Canada, and they met in the semi-finals of the Women's Open Consolation draw. What lovely young women they are, in all aspects. Kyla eked out a win over her older sister, despite being down 2-0 and then went on to win the consolation final. I had a chance to talk with Kyla after her match with her sister as we watched her mother compete on court. She has such a great attitude and a smile that would light any room. She said *'I find it different every time I play (Leona). Today I was just taking it one point at a time. I had to tighten my game, as the first 2 were too loose. But Leona played very well and she kind of let up. That seems to happen a lot between us because neither of us really wants to beat the other'*.

She had a clear message for all the women squash players *"GET OUT HERE – it is such a great event. You are never too old, that is ridiculous cause there are ladies over 60 here and they are having a blast"*. Kyla won the junior Nationals a few weeks ago and will be competing in the Worlds this August. Good luck to her!

DAVID PHILLIPS (Montreal – Men's Open)

Hosting the championship trophy, David Phillips made a celebratory entrance to the Standard Nite Club Saturday evening after the closing events at the Royal Glenora Club. Shortly afterwards, several of the top players joined Phillips in drinking beer from the cup as if it was the holy grail of squash! David won the Men's Open consolation final, beating out Robin Clarke of Ontario. After one of his matches, I had a chance to hear about David's life outside squash. He may train all day, but he spends his evenings playing the drums. To David, it *'counterbalances everything'*. Despite finishing in the top 10, David explains that the *'top 8 players in Canada are just really good players, they are also high world ranked players and it is a different level. That is why squash is so amazing; it is not like tennis where the 150th ranked player in the world can beat Sampras one day. It doesn't really happen like that in squash'*. David is himself an amazing player and I wouldn't be surprised if we find him in that Top 8 elite category sooner than he leads on. Beat on David.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE PRE-GAME PREPARATION!

Jody Evans won the Men's B consolation final, but almost missed his first consolation game. He explains: *"I played at won and lost in the quarters, so I looked at the consolation draw and I didn't play again, so I started drinking. I'd had a few rum and cokes and a couple of beers when Mike Revell comes up and says to me 'what are you doing drinking?' I go 'man, it is party time!' He says 'Dude, you have to play in less than an hour, you advanced to the third round of the consolation draw'. So I went down there*

and played and beat this poor guy 3-0. The next day everyone is telling me to make sure I have a few cocktails before I play!"

What I love about squash is that no matter how old you are, or how good you are, there is plenty of competition. And besides, no other professional sport provides such easy access to the best players in the world. Whether it is watching their games, engaging in discussions about the game strategy, or just sitting back enjoying a game of pool or a cold beer together, squash's great athletes are just great people. I not only admire their dedication and athleticism, but also their down-to-earth nature and approachability.

My hope is that this narrative will spur more players of all levels to participate in future squash Nationals. If you would like to know more or have comments, please, by all means, send me an email. If I don't hear from you, I hope to see you next year at the Nationals. You can guarantee that I'll be there. Until then, 'Let' it be.

Mike's Hard News

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Stay tuned for the next article "Blazing the road to beating Danis!" A special thank-you must be given to David Adams, whom I often refer to as 'Yoda'. A truly special person, whose love of the game and genuine passion for life are an inspiration to many of us.