



Head Squash Pro Ashley Read, left, offers swing tips to the father-daughter duo of Kristian and Adelaide Foden-Vencil.

Evolution (not revolution)

On the most beautiful days in Portland, Alix Nathan doesn't consider looking for a tennis court anymore. Instead, the 42-year-old real estate developer heads down to the sub-basement of the MAC to bash a little black ball against four walls. "I'm totally converted," he says. "I love squash."

Moving from a sport he'd played for more than 30 years to one where he is now a beginner wasn't hard at all, Nathan says. MAC head squash pro Ashley Read made a huge effort to make it fun, connecting him with other new players of similar ages and abilities, arranging group lessons and giving him goals and strategies to improve on his own. He now plays squash two or three times a week.

In the past year, since Read came on board from the Winter Club in Calgary, Alberta, MAC has doubled its junior participants, overhauled the adult clinics and introduced a series of intraclub tournaments for juniors. Nine-time U.S. national squash champion Julian Illingworth is now a teaching pro at the club and starts squash-specific fitness sessions this fall.

"The number of positive comments we have received since Ashley started has been tremendous," says MAC Athletic Director Ed Stoner.

Under the leadership of Head Pro Ashley Read and new Assistant Pro Julian Illingworth, MAC's squash program has seen steady increases in participation and new programming. It's all part of the program's evolution.

story by
NANCY KEATES

photo by
CRAIG MITCHELLDYER

In the past year, MAC has doubled the number of junior participants, overhauled the adult clinics, and introduced a series of intra-club tournaments for juniors.

Beginners welcome

Squash is known as chess with a racquet: success in the game requires more tactical analysis and mental strategy than most sports. Read, who is one of only four Certified Level IV coaches working in the United States, has transitioned these skills from the court to the office, following what he calls a motto of “evolution, not revolution.” First, he spent months studying the MAC squash environment and speaking with members about what they wanted from the program. He then took a flexible approach to making changes, trying to give every group (singles, doubles, adults, kids, women and men) an equal voice and equal time. “Every club has its own feel, culture and demographics. I had to adapt to what was happening at MAC,” he says.

Read quickly noticed that there were not many beginners. To attract new juniors, he held a squash demonstration at a MAC Family Friday, enlisting advanced juniors to hit the balls against the wall in the gym with any kids who wanted to try. He then introduced new weekly junior clinics, including what he calls “noncompetitive” and “pre-competitive” levels, which let players decide how seriously they want to take the game.

Adelaide Foden-Vencil, 12, describes these new clinics as “more fun than just playing actual squash.” Read jokes a lot and introduces other games, including one called “squicket” – a mixture of squash and cricket. To resolve an ongoing dispute about whose dog was the cutest, Read asked his wife, Amber, to bring their dog, Watson, around to the front of the building to show the juniors – something that’s become a regular activity. “Watson is cute,” Adelaide admits – and squash is now “up there” on her list of preferred activities.

Adelaide’s dad, longtime squash player and Oregon Public Broadcasting reporter Kristian Foden-Vencil, has been pleasantly surprised by these events. His daughter wasn’t all that excited about playing squash with him, and she had previously resisted taking lessons because her friends didn’t play. Read advised Foden-Vencil not to give Adelaide any instruction when they hit together – but to just keep it fun. “It’s great now that she is down there,” Foden-Vencil says. Adelaide has two older sisters, and Foden-Vencil knows that at a certain point teenage girls lose interest in hanging out with their fathers. “Squash is something we can do together,” he says.

Elite opportunities

For more experienced juniors, Read started a Squash Junior Grand Prix

tournament where competitive juniors play about eight short, but ferocious matches one Sunday a month, with cumulative results from the entire season tallied. Their parents have used the time to get on open courts and play one another. In February he took a group of MAC juniors to Victoria, British Columbia, to compete in the Jesters Pacific Northwest Junior Championships.

Adults now have new clinics and drill sessions, with cardio squash classes starting this fall. “It’s not just about getting on the court and hitting the ball against the wall. It’s an intellectual approach. He spends time talking to people about the big picture of the game,” says Amy Gaddis, chairman of MAC’s Squash Committee and a longtime player. “It’s helping me move out of the rut I was in.”

A-level player Brian Greenleaf appreciates Read’s use of the ball machine, video analysis, and his tendency to write on the glass wall of the court to explain ideas; he also likes how Read offers him tips when he happens to walk by and notice something about Greenleaf’s game.

Read came to MAC from the Calgary Winter Club, where he grew squash revenue by 400 percent, secured the club a new doubles court, and clinched the department a North American Association of Club Athletic Directors award for the racquet sports program of the year in 2009 and 2013. Before the Winter Club, he was an assistant squash pro at the Germantown Cricket Club in Philadelphia, and the head pro at the Winchester Tennis and Squash Club in Winchester, England.

Read says the MAC squash program is still in its early stages of evolution, with many more changes to come.

“It’s a long journey as a squash player, and the big picture is really important. It was clear from the start that Ashley had big plans. At one of his earliest presentations to members, he put forth the goal of having glass walls on all six singles courts at the club,” Stoner says. “Those skeptical that would ever happen in their lifetime are now having second thoughts. He is dreaming big.” *WM*



PHOTO BY JOSEPH PALAZZO

Head Squash Pro Ashley Read, above, during the recreational squash camp this summer. Read has increased opportunities for players of all skill levels.



Born to Coach

Head Squash Pro **Ashley Read** has been coaching for decades, and is one of a small handful of people to hold the world's highest squash coaching certification.

BY TONY ROBERTS / PHOTO BY CRAIG MITCHELLDYER

MAC Head Squash Pro Ashley Read's path to MAC began in the pool. At least, that's where his athletic career started. Read's father was a regional swim coach in northern England, and as the youngest of three brothers, he had a mean competitive streak. So when he burned out on swimming, he was bound to find somewhere else to focus his energy. It wound up being the squash courts, where Read eventually became one of only 23 people in the world to earn the English Level 4 Coaching Certification. A year into his tenure as MAC's head squash pro, Read has increased participation, created new junior programming, and injected new life into the program.

Winged M: You grew up in England. Tell us a little bit about where you're from.

Ashley Read: I'm from a town in the north of England called Nelson. It's about 50 minutes due north of Manchester. It's a very working class town, it's an old mill town. I stayed there until I was 18, then I moved to the south of England. I lived in a town called Bournemouth for four years, then moved to various towns along the South Coast.

How did you get involved with squash?

I was a competitive swimmer. My dad was the swim coach, and we were all competitive swimmers, and being the youngest, I really wanted to compete against my older brothers, and I got pretty good. I was regional champion, but had really had enough by the time I was about 13. I got burned out.

When I was 14, squash found me. A buddy of mine at school had started playing squash at a local club. There was a notice on the board at our school that if they found enough people, they would go to a club to play. I didn't know what it was, but my buddy said, "Hey, let's go play." I just loved it straight away. I was still in shape from swimming so I could run all day, and I'm left handed so, tactically, I knew my forehand against everyone else's backhand was good. I really got into it, saved up, bought a racket and joined a tiny little club that had four courts. It had a code to get in, no one at the front desk, and you had to put money in the meter to turn the lights on. A lot of times, we'd run out of money and play in the dark with just a little light from the upper floor. When I was 18 and moved to the south, I found a really good coach and then just played every opportunity I could.

It sounds like there were more opportunities for younger players in England.

In England, there are so many leagues that you can drive an hour one way and be in a different league, or drive an hour in another direction and be in a different league. You can play every night, and it helped me to get better and better. Through my 20s I started

really improving, leading to my first job as a player. There was a small squash club in Switzerland that was looking for a player to bolster their team, and they were allowed one foreign player. I got to play two years in Switzerland in the winters. I also did a little bit of coaching; it was a fun time. I got to play squash, I got free accommodations at a local hotel, I got to take up snowboarding, it was good. **How did you get involved in coaching and running squash programs?**

When I moved back to the U.K., an opportunity came up at a club in Winchester. I didn't know what I was doing, but I was a strong player with a good work ethic, and they gave me a chance. Those first few years were really about me learning the business side and developing my philosophy as a coach. I was there for seven years and that really formed me as a coach and as a pro.

Eventually, I started to see what was going on in the U.S. and North America, and it was apparent that North America was going to be a dominant force, so I put some feelers out there, and with my Level 4 certification, it opened up a few doors. I spent two years at the Germantown Cricket Club in Philly before I moved on to the Calgary Winter Club. The squash program there was quite poor, and we built into one of the top two or three programs in the country, with 200 youth users, new adult users and record court usage. For the first time in the history of the province, a program was able to sustain three full-time pros. I was proud of that.

But that time in England was really instrumental. I got to share an office with the head tennis pro who was very good at the business side; we're still friends today. There was a committee there as well, the squash chair had been there a long time, and there was just this love of squash. There were some similarities to MAC. There was a guy who had been there 25 years, and I came in and had a hundred ideas and was working hard. It was a 98-year-old club that had never produced an England-ranked junior. The rankings were only for the top 20, so you could be 21 or a million and you'd never know. Within the first two years we had three in the top five and another couple kids ranked between five and 15 somewhere.

You're an English Squash Level 4 certified coach. What does that mean?

Usually jobs globally are advertised as English Squash Level 3 for a head pro. They've only done two Level 4 courses, in 2000 and 2001. Of those two courses, I think around 23 people passed, so there are only 23 people in the world that have my qualification, and in the U.S. there are four of us, so it's kind of exclusive. It basically means I can teach up to an elite level. I can step on court with any world-class player and produce a good session, be able to

Continued on page 33



Pro's Perspective

Assistant Pro **Julian Illingworth** is the most accomplished U.S. squash player of all time. As his career winds down, he returns home to Portland and MAC.

BY TONY ROBERTS / PHOTO BY CRAIG MITCHELLDYER

It's fitting the Julian Illingworth has returned to MAC. After all, it's where he started playing squash a quarter century ago, before he won nine national titles, and cemented his status as the best American male to ever play the game. After more than a decade of living in New York City and facing off against the world's best squash players, Illingworth and his wife Sarah moved back to Portland last year. Illingworth recently sat down to discuss the next phase of his career, life on the pro tour, and what it was like being one of the only first graders hanging around MAC's squash courts in the 1980s.

Winged M: Talk about growing up with squash.

Julian Illingworth: My Dad played with me growing up; he was the one who initially got me into it. He brought me down to play here. I played soccer before, but I was coming down here with my dad when I was 6 or 7, and then, pretty quickly, I started taking some lessons with (former pro) Khalid (Mir) and doing some clinics. Now it's pretty common for people to put their 7 year olds in lessons, but I think back then, it was unusual. Khalid would always remind me I started when I was really young. I think I was just reasonably coordinated for a 6- or 7-year-old. Eventually, I got more serious. The program here was always pretty robust, and things have gotten more competitive in the 25 years since then, but back in the day this program was pretty cutting edge. It was very well regarded within the region.

What was it like to play squash at such a young age? Did you have friends that played?

It was great. I had a friend, Will Davis, who is a pretty good player and we went to Chapman Elementary together, so either my mom or his mom would pick us up after school and drive us here to play. One of Khalid's sons, Asif, was two years old than me. He was a really good player. We were the core group of three. Khalid would take us back East for tournaments.

And you managed to not burn out, even though you started so early.

I played a lot of other sports. I played competitive soccer until I was 18. I ran track in high school for two years, I played tennis, I was on the ski team. I was really into soccer. That was my fun outlet, and I still have a bunch of good friends I played high school soccer with. It was a good mix between a team sport and an individual sport. I really liked team sports, but as I got a little older, it was apparent that I had a real opportunity to play squash in college and be a highly ranked player.

I guess I was lucky that I had these other outlets. I feel like a lot of parents now think they have to choose a sport early. This is a huge debate in sports right now. The pros who make it always tell us about how they played so many different sports, but I think that a lot of

people who do become a professional athlete, they were probably the best at all of those sports when they were in high school; whereas, if you are an average athlete, you can see how you might need to specialize if you are going to get recruited to college or be a competitive junior. Most people are never going to be professional athletes, and obviously, most parents don't realize that. Most people don't realize that. Everyone wants to be a professional athlete.

You had a successful college career at Yale. When did you turn pro?

I played some small professional events in college but I couldn't accept any money. I had to meet with a compliance officer to make sure that I wasn't breaking the rules. My senior year, after the season was over, I played at nationals, which was at Yale that year, and won it. I signed a contact just before that, and that was my first reasonably big payday.

Was it intimidating stepping up to international competition?

When I 15/16, I went to the world juniors in Italy. That was really eye-opening. That was the first time I thought about it as more than just playing squash for fun. A lot of us were probably seeing squash all of the time. This was before YouTube, this was before streaming online squash. We had some VHS videos but that feels very far away. Now, you look at the juniors who play squash in America, and they've all been to a camp with Jonathan Power or Peter Nicol. Their coaches are people like me. There's a little bit less of a wow factor. A lot of the pros get together, and when we're having beers and talking about the juniors we coach, the consensus is, "These kids are so lucky and they don't really realize it." They know all of the pros. It's not like tennis, where if you wanted to be coached by Roger Federer or Andy Murray, that would never happen. Whereas the top players in squash, when they're in the mid 30s and they're looking for the next thing, it's not like they've put away millions and they can ride off into the sunset. They're staying involved and running camps and coaching.

Tell us a little bit about life as a pro squash player. It seems like you can't play in a regional or national league like you can with team sports.

Probably a quarter of the year I was gone. New York was great because for most places, you can hop on one flight and you're there. The only thing that approaches a league are in a lot of the European countries, where they have a pro league that plays once a week. If it were here, it would be like MAC hiring five pros who would play against the Lloyd Athletic Club, who would have their five. A lot of the guys based in Europe don't even play PSA. They play Dutch League on Wednesday, they play French League on

Continued on page 33



\$10,000



\$10,000

What's More Valuable? Perhaps the best thing you could leave future generations is not a diamond dog collar, but a fund that helps young people get the support they need to sparkle as adults. With The Oregon Community Foundation, you can create a charitable fund that puts your resources to great use locally, for the causes you care most about. To learn more, call us at 503.227.6846 or visit www.oregoncf.org.



Here for Oregon. Here for Good.

Read

Continued from page 29

break their game down. It's the highest of the highest of the high. There are a lot of Level 4 coaches like me that don't do club jobs; they are national team coaches.

What drew you to MAC?

Portland, first and foremost. Two years ago my wife and I did a little road trip. We were in Portland for a few days and had a look around MAC, went to Seattle, had a look around a couple of clubs there. My time at Calgary was drawing to a close. I just wasn't enjoying the intensity of the city. In my field, usually you would head back to someplace like Philadelphia or Boston. Timing-wise, the job came up and it was just a no-brainer. This is a huge club, a traditional club, a major player, and it just seemed to be a good fit.

What are some of the differences or similarities you've seen at MAC?

The No. 1 thing I always find is passion. Squash players are always passionate. The thing I want to bring back here is fun. Squash is fun. It was kind of fractured here. People were coming down here with a frown on their face, and I want them coming down here with a smile on their face.

Do you have goals for the program here?

At MAC, I really want to be able to provide excellent service for all levels, not just for elite kids. I want MAC to have an excellent reputation for having excellent service, putting on great events, and producing great players. Across the board, people should hear about the MAC program in positive terms. In Calgary, I hadn't really heard about MAC. It's all about excellence in programming and service, but I don't know what that will look like. It's up to the members to decide what they want. But I feel like we're primed and ready to take off.



ORAG MITCHELLDYER

Read and Illingworth on the MAC squash courts.

Evolution, not revolution is my tagline. I think this year will be another evolution in the squash program with Julian (Illingworth) on now. He's been a great addition. It's much more harmonious in the pro office, and I feel like the members are picking up on that. As for specific goals, I'd like to see overall court usage improved, I'd like to see people here after 6 p.m. at night ... There's not just one area I want to target, it's a little bit of everything.

Have you seen more people getting involved at MAC?

Yeah, both adults and juniors. We had around 70 juniors, at least, try squash this

year. Some are very serious, some come and give it a try along with their other sports. We've also probably got about 20 adults that we've introduced. In Canada, when I arrived I was the only pro, and there wasn't really enough business to support one pro. Then I got busy and we needed a second pro. Then we got busy and we needed a third pro. It took four years to do that, so I'm hoping the program will grow, but I'm not sure how quickly and in which direction it will go. I'm an ideas guy, I've got lots of ideas. Some work great and you stick with them, and others flop. But that's OK. We're not curing cancer here. If I have an idea and we put a poster up and nobody signs up, I'll rip the poster down and come up with another idea.

You've been a coach for decades. Were you drawn to the profession by your dad?

One of my earliest memories of coaching squash was when I was about 19. My brother was visiting me and there was a gnarly old pro at my club, and he wanted me to teach some kids. I felt like I didn't know what I was doing, but my brother watched me teaching this girl and he said, "You're really good at that." I didn't think anything of it at the time, but I think I am a natural teacher. I think I can break it down and simplify it enough to where people can get it. I don't know where that came from. It could have been my dad, it's something that's just inherent.

Coaching is the most satisfying job ever. I get to see my hard work pay off on a weekly basis. I see kids improve. I see adults improve. I was on court with a guy today who's in college. He's only been playing five months and he's in college, and at the beginning of the summer he couldn't get the ball out of the back court. Today, he's digging them out of the back corners. I get satisfaction all the time from seeing people improve. *WM*

Illingworth

Continued from page 31

Thursday, and they play German League another night – they're just popping around Europe all of the time. They can make \$1,000 a match, it's a one-night affair, and you get the money whether you win or lose. It's different then showing up at a tournament and staying there for a week. If you do badly, maybe you just cover your expenses. But if you do well, a lot of player's sponsorships are based on ranking. I actually enjoyed it. It's like you're running a small business and having to figure out the opportunity costs of going to one tournament

versus another; figuring out how to best maximize your ranking, how to make sure you're hitting your performance goals within your contracts.

Squash is not like tennis. You would never be coached by Roger Federer.

Are you scaling back on how much you play professionally?

Yeah, definitely. I've been given the wild card for the world championship champs in November in Seattle. It's the first time it's being hosted by the U.S. I'm gearing

up for a push there, to not necessarily win the tournament but at least play well. I'm playing a few tournaments in the fall to try to get some practice in and trying to do a little summer training. I've already kind of transitioned. Even the last year I was in New York, I was coaching three hours a day on average.

What's your role at MAC?

We're still figuring that out. To start, it's mostly one-on-one and semi-private coaching. I'm going to run one or two clinics a week. I'm running a fitness clinic, a squash movement clinic that will be open to adults. *WM*

Editor's note: The above interviews were edited for length and clarity.