

50 Shades of Old Grey

Whisper the word, GREY, these days and minds wander towards levels of sexcellence, unsurpassed. Mention the word, GREY, in Port Elizabeth, where life is simple and innocent, and minds jump to the famous schools on the hill, and their continuous drive towards Academic and Sporting excellence. Mention the word, GREY, and immediately, the brain ticks into Sergeal Pieteron, Siya Kolisi, JJ Englebrecht, Timmy Whitehead, Johan Botha, Wayne Parnell, Dave Callaghan, Pieter Strydom, Gavin Cowley, Kevin Paul, Cliff Drysdale, Wayne Graham, the Fensham and Reid-Ross brothers, and of course, Graeme and Peter Pollock - who by the way, both spent their winters trailing the 1st league courts, "keeping fit" for their first choice sport. Peter, a bombastic, bull-doing player and Graeme, one with silky touch and easy skills.

When Squash boomed in the 1970's, Grey was one of the first schools to build courts and today stands proud as one which has added to the heritage of top South African players. Chairman of Squash SA, is Steve Doeg, and Alan and Hugh Colburn, Athol Ryder, Alan and Hugh Glover, Keith Coppin, Morgan Morris, and Mark Rogers, are just a few who have climbed to the top of South African Squash. Amongst the current crop of top EP players, Sean Bailey, Paul Mason, Jarryd Terblanche, Dane Bigara, Morgan Westcott and Peter Ryder all learned their squash under the "Tria Juncto in Uno" banner.

Not far from the school, nestled in a dried out dam, 'neath the shade of a Police Station, another Centre of Excellence exists. The Old Grey Club. Here, old boys, colleagues and friends gather to continue their cricketing, hockey, rugby, and squash careers, and to quaff, banter, sulk and sluk as they reminisce over their schoolday heroics.

On a personal note, the Old Grey Club has changed my life. This is where my wife, first invited me out, led me down the aisle and where we celebrated our wedding. This is where, as a young teacher, I met on Sunday evenings and learned the subtle arts of teaching, not taught at universities from folk like Martin Barker, Blade Mackenzie, and Smiler Hibbert, who interestingly, all waved the squash racquet with different levels of dexterity. Then, it was off to El Cid to "prepare" my Monday morning lessons while eyeing potential and listening to Thommo's tunes.

This is where, I played my 1st, 1st League Cricket match where as a guppy opening batsman, I was sent in half an hour before the end of play (we played 2 afternoon matches those days) to face the bumping wrath and blistering banter of Spook Hanley, Kevin Helm, Nigel Dutton, and Keith and Terry Reid.

This, too, is where I played my 1st, 1st league game of squash. On first, against Brian Corcoran, I bumped my nervous head against the wall of the hole in the wall, which served as a door, and the first game was a hotch-poch of starry mistakes where the wily vet must have wondered where UPE had found this palooka. I salvaged some pride but lost. Then I started to learn, as I was introduced to the regal, gentlemanly skills of Athol Ryder, mixed with the bull-doggish determination of Ross Kobus and the mind-numbing, mind-boggling mind games of Peter Henderson and Benji Lappiner. Against this bunch, there was never an easy game, and you had never won until the last rally. The day that I finally beat Peter "Peppermints in my pocket" Henderson, for the first time, was when I realized that I may have "arrived" as a squash player.

The Old Grey Club has always been at the forefront of sport development. When Angela Difford arrived in PE in 1946, the only courts in town were the Old Grey courts, the P.E. Club and those at 42 Air School . Fred Wylde, Jeff Coppin, Bennie Myers and Lyall Mitchell were the stalwarts who launched and guided Old Grey and EP Squash from its beginnings. Like our friend, Christian Grey, these men also sought to pleasure their women, and it was they, who gave permission for ladies to use the courts after 8pm on a Tuesday night, and on one morning during the week!

Despite opposition from Peter Pollock, who claimed that schoolboys were not strong enough to compete in Men's League, the school has for years had a handful of sides in the League - one of the reasons why they are one of the leading squash schools in the country. Not only is Men's League exposure good for their squash, but it is also a wonderful leveler and good for "general education and maturity"

More recently, Gavin Ferguson, Richard Gillies, Wout Offerman, Jimmy Catt and Mike Burmeister have guided the Old Grey ship through good and bad times. Some may measure a club on League titles, but these do not make a club .It is the people, the personalities, the spirit and the vibe abounding within the club. And Old Grey has had personalities, a-plenty. Foes on-court, friends off-court. I think of Andy Vogel, leaning on racquet, panting, a seemingly spent force that just kept on coming back at you, of Steve Smith, tall and gangly, mad and mystical, of Ronnie Halse, a gunpowder keg waiting to explode, Gary Capel, lover of marathon squash matches and marathon party sessions, of Keith Stewart, so talented, so laid back, of argumentative Adrian Smith, gregarious Georgiou Giaconi, robust Rob Judd and the inimitable Ian Jones. I think of pupils, who have become "playmates" - Carlo Giaconi, Pieter Strydom, Andrew Whitehead, Brad Muller and Andrew Miskin, amongst others.

When Doubles Squash started gaining popularity, Old Grey became the hub for Doubles squash, and still today, their Summer League is weighted towards Doubles. When the call for the development of township squash players came, Old Grey, under the guidance of Darryl Smith, took up the cudgels. At great cost to its members, the club has taken development to new levels, where the programme is not just about squash – it embraces commitment, commitment to attendance, to pass exams, and hopefully, to become more part of the club . The group of 10-12 players, who travel by taxi and foot, practise every Saturday under the wise and beady guidance of Scotty Moffatt. And within 3 years, they are all competing at very high levels. Thando Ncamani , Awonke Mdana and Yanga Manxaba are hovering at 1st and 2nd League level and EP player, Bonakele Nomkala , though not part of the programme, is the current club No 1.

In 2013, Old Grey takes a new leap into the future, with the opening of their re-furbished glass-backed courts, with ample watching and relaxing space, (hopefully a pub) and again a first - The first Doubles Court in Port Elizabeth. The courts will become a haven for Grey pupils - safe, accessible, family-friendly and coaching-friendly .EP Squash can only await a new wave of squash players bursting forth.

The Old Grey Club is an institution of excellence. Within traditions and the deeply entrenched ethos of sportsmanship and camaraderie, it will continue to be a cornerstone of EP squash. Perhaps, our friend, Christian, should be invited to learn some lessons on class and trail-blazing innovation.