

## Balls to the Wall: I'm an N<sup>th</sup> Leaguer & I'm OK

(With apologies to Monty Python)

I'm an N<sup>th</sup> leaguer and I'm okay  
I work all day & play squash some nights  
I win some games, I lose some too  
Then I drink my beer  
On Wednesdays I play League stuff  
And have boerewors to chow  
I don't warm up, I don't skip and jump  
I like to klap the ball hard  
I put on sweaty clothing  
And hang around at courts

He's an N<sup>th</sup> Leaguer & he's ok

As a young, ambitious coach, I dreamed of producing squash champions and champion squash sides who in hours of glory would emblazon my name in bright lights, and I would become famous in their reflected glory. While I could (sort of) compete and practise with them, I lacked the knowledge and experience to advise and guide those potential champions, the Morgan Morris's, Mark Rogers and Anlen Murrays to the levels they potentially, could have achieved. Would they not have achieved whatever they did achieve, despite my swooning attention?

And was I not like a Labrador chasing a Lamborghini? Chasing an unachievable dream. How many of these potential champions even carry on playing the game after school? Is this not true of all sports? What percentage of our 1<sup>st</sup> XV rugby and 1<sup>st</sup> XI cricket stars dribble off into nothingness. Of the SA Under 19 side that I took to the World Juniors in Egypt, only Mark Rogers, still plays. A 25% hit rate, and over an extended period, this ratio diminishes to doughnut figures, and some crumbs

Sadly, as that young, ambitious coach, I ignored the calls of The Less Talented. Those who struggled to hit the ball. Those who wanted to play "social squash" Why should I waste my time on someone who was not going to become a Player? "Shirkers" I would call them, avoiding the injuries and rough-and-tumble of rugby and the time-sapping curiosity of cricket. I should have been called the Shirker. If I really wanted to learn how to Coach, this is where I should have focussed. For this sin, I should be stripped of my shirt, shackled and led to the front wall of the court where all of those ignored players be allowed one shot to brand me. And then finally for Cameron Pilley, U-tube-like, to have the final shot.

How foolish I was. This is where I would find real enjoyment, satisfaction, and huge return on invested time. These are people who appreciate assistance, and show it. The smile of a child who eventually manages to hit the ball. And then to hit it continuously. And then to hit it while running. And then to play a rally. And then a match. Priceless. Even more priceless is to see those players growing in confidence, at squash, and in themselves. And competing. At whatever level.

To top all of that, how priceless and rewarding is it, to see players who may have set off on the squash-road, leave their school confines, emerge as successful business-people, surrounded by happy families, and continuing to play squash in whatever league they end up. That should be the real joy of the coach. He, who grows the base of the game so it is brim-filled with N<sup>th</sup> League players who play for the fun and enjoyment that the game offers.

These, are the Real Squash Heroes.

They are probably not even aware that Squash was in the running to be included in the 2020 Olympics, (only to be rudely bundled off the mat by crooked wrestling politics.) To them, Ramy Ashour and Nicol Davids could be Bollywood stars. They probably don't know that South African, Steve Coppinger is ranked 16 in the world and National Champion, Siyoli Waters, is an Eastern Cape girl. They were probably unaware that the Jarvis Inter-provincial was played in PE. And if Sean Bailey, Thami Mngcete or Jacqui Ryder walked into the courts, they would be just another squash player

At an Nth League fixture, the warm up will be a Deep Heated rub and as sweat-stained shirts are stretched over some bookish, and some boep-ish bodies, the stretch, will be to fetch the racquet from bag. Knee braces and bandages bond them together. There will be no sponsored kit, or bags brimming with branded racquets. Broken racquets maybe. Curses you will hear, but mostly directed within, and mostly followed by laughter. After Match 1 , fire smoke will waft through the courts as aromas of braaied wors gel with that of sweaty bodies. Powerades – there'll be a few, Hansa's a-many. Banter, bad calls, and the oomph of barging bodies will echo through the dungeoned courts. Miraculous flicks out of the back corners will merge with revolting reverse angles, collisions and cackles of cursed laughter.

But here, you will see REAL commitment, Real passion, guts, team spirit, and camaraderie. This is where the rubber hits the road, and rubber burns into fleshy bums. Some N'th Leaguers may chuck in some extra friendlies, but mostly, they live for that league match. To them their Nth-league night is as important as World Peace. Wedding anniversaries and birthdays pale into insignificance.

Maybe those idiots in the IOC (The International Olympic Committee for those Nth Leaguers who might read this) should come and watch our Nth-League Heroes. Here they would see what Real Sport is all about. They would realise that they have made a mistake. And maybe those wrestlers will be scared, and submit.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Nth League Ladies of Port Elizabeth shone their lights beautifully when a record field of 46 players contested the Difford Cup, a tournament run exclusively for N'th League Ladies. A tournament which embraces giggles and guts, sweat and sweet wine, laughter and love of the game. And so much potential. Carla Matthys, showed signs of what she could become when she defeated Ronelle Van Eck in a 5-game cliff-hanger. But the Real winner was squash. Ladies squash in PE is seriously alive, and pumping.