

ESC and me – by Dave Ferguson

My first visit to Edinburgh Sports Club was as a freshly-cultivated squash nut in 1975 or maybe 1976. I was a guest of Scottish Widows colleague and no. 1 player Tam McGinley, who had taken me “under his wing”. So, I was also a wing nut, and about to tighten my connection to the game. We were there to see a “GB v Rest of the World” tournament sponsored by Leisure Showers (I even remember the dark red tickets). On one side were John Easter of England plus a substitute for late call-off Jonah Barrington. On the other were the legendary Hiddy Jahan (Pakistan) and Ahmed Safwat (Egypt). I was impressed by the club and inspired particularly by winner Safwat and his subtle, creative-boasting, counter-attacking game, which overcame Jahan’s power play.

My next few appearances were as a Waverley groupie, watching our 1st team playing against Sports Club’s top two teams – named 1 and 2 but pooled so as to be of equal strength. It was always known as simply “Sports Club” and I appreciated the very high standard of its players and their welcoming attitude and sociability. Soon I was in Waverley’s 1st team and on the receiving end of these high standards which, as a player wishing to learn, I relished. Honest.

In 1981, there was a four-man exhibition tournament in North Berwick to publicise the Marine Hotel courts. Representing North Berwick, Tam and I played Tom Smith and John McGhee respectively. John, being John, let me win the first game, but then took off his duffel coat and wellies and duly faced Tom in the final the next day. The event was reported, with photos, in the East Lothian Courier (*posed photo of John and me on court given to Alastair*) and, to my embarrassment and John’s amusement, my 3-1 loss was described as an upset. Another memorable occasion was being asked in 1986 by senior referee Mike Fitchett to mark Jonah Barrington v Mark Maclean. This was an exhibition match, part of a series between them, and one of several events celebrating Sports Club’s 50th anniversary (*laminated marking sheet, signed by Jonah, given to Alastair*).

Over the years I made a host of friends at Sports Club – players, other members, management and staff – and these friendships were solidified by many appearances as a referee (with my wife Yvonne) at various tournaments held there. We’ve been invited on several occasions to “guest” for the club in multi-player friendlies against Colinton Castle, Bridge of Allan and Watsonians and look forward to more of these. A major highlight was winning the 2006 ESC Octoberfest with Waverley Wonderers (yes, that’s spelt right) when we’d traditionally finished in the lower positions. As captain I take most of the credit, chiefly for my tournament-winning decision not to select myself. Yvonne was in the team, as was my son Chris (15) who won all his matches at no. 1, culminating in a tie-break extra game in the final against the experienced Colin Stirratt.

In a Waverley v Sports Club 20-a-side friendly in about 2005, I had the pleasure of playing Brian Bathgate and, over the course of the evening, got to know him better – learning, for example, that he’s a big Heavy Metal fan and lives just round the corner from Waverley. I’m still trying to lure him to jump ship (so to speak) but accept that Sports Club have probably enjoyed his best years. Brian and his identical twin Derek share the pleasant characteristic of a face whose natural default expression shows an ocular twinkle and a mischievous smile, although of course that could be wind. I like to show off that I can tell them apart, and address them individually rather than “Hello, guys”. One day in the lounge Glyn Cave asked me how I could do this and I replied “It’s quite straightforward, Glyn. Derek is the one who looks exactly like Brian, whereas Brian is the one who looks exactly like Derek.” Well, it makes sense to me.

One Friday in late 2013, Tournament Organiser Simon Boughton phoned about the forthcoming ESC (Artemis) Open. I expected him as usual to ask if I’d be one of the refs, but was most surprised to instead be asked to consider succeeding the recently deceased Ken Gibbs as Tournament Referee. Ken was a universally popular senior referee from Glasgow (originally from Tobago) and had been Simon’s choice in

all the previous years because of his skills in dealing with people. I immediately said “yes” and, when Simon then said to think about it over the weekend and get back to him, I said “I’ve thought about it”. I’ve now done the last seven ESC Opens and working closely with Simon has been a privilege.

So, despite being a Waverley man through and through, I definitely feel a strong affiliation with and great affection for Sports Club – a great squash institution with an illustrious history, but also a forward-looking attitude and therefore a fine future. This can be evidenced by the busy tennis courts, the addition of table tennis, the continuing innovation of padel, the many players of all ages, genders, sizes, shapes and skill levels, the excellent photos of old and new in the hall (especially the first one), the new glass court doors, the bright, comfortable lounge and bar areas. But the major assets of the club are the good people who run it, represent it and collectively reflect its personality and soul. Way too many to mention, but down the years the Sports Club has consistently been very well represented, and never more so than at the present time. I think it’s a great thing that Alastair is producing this history and, as a long-standing friend of the club, am honoured to be asked to contribute. Although I’m not really very long. And not always standing.