

Ian Allanach, International squash referee of note

On Dave Ferguson and Edinburgh Sports Club

Dave Ferguson

Dave has been one of our top National referees for many years now. Neither I nor any of my qualified colleagues would hesitate to use Dave in any match. Matches can range from those involving world ranked players to those involving the less experienced but who have, over the years, played to their own set of rules. And on occasions, a match schedule will throw up a tie between two players where no love is lost and a bit of respect is missing. Dave is a multitalented referee and he is admired for his ability to adapt to varying needs.

Dave and I always agreed that if a player, after a decision, asked “Why?” or “Why no let?” or similar, the referee must get that explanation out immediately. Any hesitation, even half a second, and it will be interpreted by the player as “unsure/uncertain”. Dave will watch player effort, movement, ability and set his parameters – so that when the decision comes, he knows exactly why he has given it. His tone is assertive, but friendly, confident, his explanations spot on. He is consistent.

This next point is relevant – wait and see. Dave is the king of the jokes and the one liners. It is his view that if a joke is worth telling once, it is worth telling over and over again. If you were part of a group with Dave and you heard him telling a joke you had heard before, you had to marvel at the fact that it was being told this time exactly as it had been the (many) times before. The punchline would be delivered with the same flourish.

But realise that there are seriously useful skills underlying his witty side. Dave is a very quick thinker, verbally intelligent and a good communicator. These skills contribute to the effectiveness of his refereeing. No referee gets all the decisions right all the time. Refs and players accept that. But a good referee knows exactly why he gives a decision and if necessary, can communicate that to the player quickly, clearly and concisely. This is a major strength for Dave – not all referees have this ability.

To be a good referee you do not have to have been a player of international standard. But it helps if you have played the game to a fair standard. It means that you are aware as a player of on-court situations which you can subsequently recognise in a game you referee. Dave is an experienced player, but has the added advantages of two other family members who play at a good level. Yvonne was in the ladies age group events and Chris at Junior international. I’m sure there were times as a family that there were discussions on certain decisions. Always hard to support a playing family member, maybe even harder when you are a qualified referee – but – I never heard Dave make any comment publically concerning a decision given for or against a member of the family. He had referee integrity.

He and Yvonne are a great team in many ways. They work hard at events helping the organisation and refereeing. They work hard on the off court side, meeting and greeting and socialising. And they are very effective on the social side. I admire any married couple where both drink pints!! In mixed company at ESC, Home Internationals I believe, I discovered Yvonne’s secret side. Dave was centre stage in pretty good form, the witty raconteur – some stories OK, some better, some poorer, many we had heard before. When I jokingly asked Yvonne how she had managed to put up with all these quips over the years, she simply replied “Easy – I don’t listen!”

Edinburgh Sports Club

At the start of the squash year, a listing of tournaments would come out to the Scottish refs inviting them to state which tournaments they would be willing to attend. We had our priorities. One was the ESC Open in January, another would be the Home Internationals, often ESC or Aberdeen. We knew what the quality of the matches would be like – we knew how well the venues would organise the event and us as referees. So memories of the ESC? World ranked players from home and abroad in the Open. The new breed of aspiring Scottish players gaining experience. A brilliantly run tournament – Simon Boughton comes to mind, but I will come back to him. A packed balcony,



knowledgeable spectators, a show court stretched to capacity for the later stages. And players who rose to the occasion spurred on by the enthusiastic Edinburgh crowd. I was fortunate to referee many wonderful matches at ESC, but an all Scotland clash does stick in my mind. Martin Heath v John White, both high in the world rankings at the time. Highly competitive and what an atmosphere on the show court. Both players making every effort to play the ball. A standing ovation at the end.

For the Home Internationals, national pride was at stake and the balconies were full of the Welsh, English, Irish and Scots supporters. And after the competition, the bar, the meal and the speeches. ESC was a great venue. As well as the squash, we had the tennis, the lounge, the bar, the restaurant. As a referee there is no better start at 9am for a 10am match than to get a bacon roll and coffee. We were so generously treated. Food was included and a soft drinks bar tab (wise move!!)

For all involved, the show court has a wonderful intimacy – there is a real connection between the players (you can hear what they are saying), the spectators (you can hear what they are saying) and the referees (yes – them too). But it does create a “We are part of the spectacle together” feel to a match. And as I indicated earlier this is perhaps why there has been such a positive response by players who have brought their A game to the club.

All clubs face financial constraints and it is unrealistic to lay out lots of cash in one particular area. ESC has its sponsors but it also managed to develop wide squash community support for its tournaments. Referees wanted to be there. The club did not need to pay a fee. Accommodation for those travelling was paid by canny sharing and the sourcing of good deals. Referees arranged to share travel costs, knowing that they would receive snacks and meals from the club.

The friendliness of the tournaments generated contributing actions on the part of the players. Many a car travelled up from the south with 3 or 4 players sharing the journey and the accommodation. Many were hosted by club members. Yes there were times when a player airfare had to be paid but members and refs would collect and return these players to/from the airport to reduce costs. I remember taking Simon Parke and Alex Gough back to Edinburgh airport on my way back to Forres. Both were great players and very witty on court – a ref had to go with that flow – but as with all the players they were greatly appreciative of the way ESC came together to make the tournaments run smoothly. ESC was rightly proud of the feedback it received from tournament players and their stated commitment to return in the following year, often contributing to their own costs.

I return in finishing to the person I saw fronting the key tournaments- Simon Boughton, with doubtless a team of unsung heroes behind him. His personal charisma must not be underestimated. It was a natural charisma, not an affected one. Players and referees felt welcomed, appreciated and understood. Simon and the team created events that players praised to colleagues and praised in squash reports. It was accepted among players that while there are larger venues on the squash circuits, hosting tournaments with greater prizemoney, few have that “feel”, that ethos of friendliness and organisation, that ESC has.

Ian Allanach, September 2020