



Introduction

Program ladders and challenge matches can be a fun way for students to learn how to compete. Program ladders give students a goal to work towards, and challenge matches are a great way for students to learn how to handle the pressure of tournaments and prepare themselves to perform to their best ability. Below are some suggestions for framing and organizing program ladders and challenge matches.

Overview

Below is a summary of the points covered in this guide.

- ❑ Frame ladders and competitions
 - ❑ Be explicit that everyone had the potential to move up or down
 - ❑ Focus on personal improvement
 - ❑ Highlight the role of competition and cooperation
 - ❑ View losses as opportunities for learning
- ❑ Organize and display the program ladder
 - ❑ Keep ladders visible and updated
 - ❑ Separate ladders by gender
 - ❑ Consider staff ladders
- ❑ Prepare students for matches
 - ❑ Give advance notice and have a consistent schedule
 - ❑ Help students prepare
- ❑ Facilitate match play
 - ❑ Set the number of matches
 - ❑ Have student referees
 - ❑ Use students coaches
 - ❑ Create an efficient structure

Frame Ladders and Competitions

When using program ladders and challenge matches to motivate performance, how coaches frame ladders to students matters. When coaches focus too much on performance and who is the “best,” we can hinder as opposed to encourage student motivation. Below are a few tips related to effectively framing ladders and competitions.

Be explicit that everyone has the potential to move up or down, and the top of the ladder *does not show the “best” or “most talented” athletes*. It shows which athletes performed at the highest level most recently. Highlight that the best ladders are competitive so that you don’t know week to week who will be at the top; all players are improving and pushing one another

to improve.

Keep the focus on personal learning and improvement. Teenagers frequently use social comparisons negatively, in ways that hurt their self-confidence and motivation (i.e. "I'm not as good as him. I'm not going to try hard."). To counteract this tendency, highlight progress over performance and a growth mindset. Reinforce that things like skills, strength, speed, strategy, hand-eye coordination, etc. can be developed over time. Students can set a goal of moving up the ladder, but their action steps for doing so should focus on what specific areas they need to improve (serves, getting the ball to the back of the court, fitness, etc.) in order to move up.

Highlight the role of competition and cooperation. The best outcome for the program is when all students improve. Competition is when we work against someone to achieve the same goal. Cooperation is when we work with someone to achieve the same goal. In individual matches, competition drives us - both players share the same goal of winning and compete to achieve it. In our programs, cooperation and teamwork should drive us. The better each individual is, the better we are overall - both because every match counts (the #5 match matters as much as the #1 match), and because the stronger our teammates are the more they can challenge us to improve.

Hate losing, but value what your losses give you. Help students process their losses. Acknowledge that winning is fun, but we learn more from our losses because they expose our areas for improvement. Encourage students to value and use their losses to inform how they need to improve, as opposed to simply deciding that the other player is better.

Organize and Display the Program Ladder

Keep ladders visible and updated. Having visible program ladders can give students a sense of pride and extra incentive to work towards beating players in front of them. Feature your ladders prominently and update them immediately after challenge matches occur. Students get excited to see updates on the board and enjoy talking about previous and upcoming matchups. Younger students know who is at the top of the ladder because they see it nearly every day, and are excited when they see those older students at practices or have a chance to get on court with them.

Separate ladders by gender. Separate squash ladders by gender. Remember when John McEnroe said Serena Williams was great, but would only rank 700 among men? The sports world responded with outrage because it was an unjust comparison. Studies have demonstrated that, after puberty, girls' and boys' bodies differ in their physical strength. Boys develop more muscle mass than girls, both in their upper and lower bodies, enabling them to move faster and hit harder. Putting girls and boys on the same program ladder implies that girls should be able to overcome this physical difference. Many girls do outperform the boys,

but there's no need to make a comparison. Girls' achievements should be celebrated regardless of their performance in comparison to boys. A few additional notes related to this topic -

- ❑ This does not mean that girls and boys should not play with and against each other. Programs should still organize co-ed challenge matches and practices, but the posted program ladder should be separated by boys and girls.
- ❑ If staff need a co-ed ladder for co-ed competitions, such as matches against other teams, keep a co-ed ladder internally among staff members.
- ❑ If you want opportunities to compare and display results across the program, do so in domains where girls and boys have an equal chance of succeeding, such as in target practice.
- ❑ If you want to create a larger ladder, use ladders beyond your program - urban squash ladders, US Squash ladders, etc. - that also separate by gender.

Post a staff ladder: Some organizations might consider putting up a staff ladder as well. At MetroSquash, for example, there is a staff ladder on display with both squash and academic staff, and staff practice and play challenge matches together. The staff finds that is both a great way to model healthy competition and to help staff members get on court more and bond.

Prepare Students for Matches

Programs differ in the frequency with which they hold challenge matches, and whether the matches occur on normal practice days or on weekends. Whatever your program's approach, here are some tips for making matches successful and meaningful.

- ❑ **Advance notice and consistent schedule.** Give students advance notice of upcoming matches and to be as consistent as possible in your scheduling and format. This way students are able to mentally and physically prepare themselves to play in the days leading up to their matches and they aren't caught off guard.
- ❑ **Help students prepare.** Some ways that students might prepare include focusing on specific areas of improvement during practices, eating properly, and getting plenty of rest. Help individual students understand what they need to do leading up to tournaments in order to play their best.

At SquashWise, coaches schedule at least one challenge day per month for students, and give students at least five days of advance notice before their next match. Having each student attend at least one "Showdown Saturday" each month gives them match experience and ensures the accuracy of the program ladder.

Facilitate Match Play

Challenge matches should be fun and something students look forward to. Below are some tips for the day of matches.

Set the number of matches. Ideally matches are best of five games to replicate the squash that students are playing in tournaments, but that is not always possible due to court and time limitations that some programs experience. Determine what is feasible for your program.

Have students referee. Every match should be refereed by two teammates, whenever possible, with one taking on the role of the referee and the other the marker. This makes the players on court feel that the result is fair and gives students much needed practice refereeing. Squash can be a difficult game to referee and the only way to improve at differentiating between lets and strokes and making decisive and confident decisions is to practice. (See [SEA Best Practice Guide on Teaching Officiating](#))

Use student coaches. Programs might consider encouraging players who are observing or reffing matches, to practice their coaching. This could be as simple as assigning the referee to coach one player and the marker to coach the other, and making sure they provide 1-3 pieces of simple advice to players during the 90 seconds between games. If you have limited courts and additional students, then a useful exercise can be for observers to draw a squash court on a sheet of paper and mark an X where every single shot lands for the player they are coaching. Student coaches can go further by circling where errors are made or where points were won. This can be useful for players to look over after the match and can help them see where they are making errors or hitting too many/too few shots to certain parts of the court.

Create an efficient structure. Ideally scheduling and playing challenges should be as easy as even numbers or odd numbers challenge up on a given week, but that tends to be more manageable when dealing with a lineup of 9-12 players as opposed to a cohort of 20-25 or even a full program of 60+ students. Some programs find that separating students into groups of 3-4 is the easiest way to organize matches. Here are some different approaches to this challenge:

- ❑ At SquashWise, coaches separate students into groups of four and have the lower two and higher two play each other. The winner of the lower matchup then plays the loser of the higher matchup and the other two students either challenge up to the group ahead of them or down to the group below them based on their match results.
- ❑ CitySquash has students challenge in groups of three with the winner of the two lower students getting the opportunity to challenge the player at the top of their group. One of the benefits to grouping students together is that if one player fails to show up (thus forfeiting his/her position) then his/her opponent still has a chance to play a match that day.
- ❑ SquashBusters has challenge matches every other Friday for every high schooler in the program. The students find out who they are playing and match times early in the week. On match day they are expected to arrive early to warm-up, play their best of five game match, and then referee or mark the following match. After they do those

things they are welcome to go home, but many students stay to watch matches and hang out because it is a fun atmosphere with music playing and great competition. SquashBusters enters all results from challenge matches into US Squash as they find this helps make the matches feel more real and helps to build their students' US Squash ratings.

Additional Resources

- ❑ [Club Locker](#) allows programs to submit challenge match scores to US Squash. StreetSquash also plans to use Club Locker to set up a box league for their challenge matches. One benefit to this is that matches will affect students' individual ratings on US Squash and will give a more accurate representation of their current skill level.

SEA Shared Drive Resources

- ❑ [StreetSquash "Box League" Challenge Format](#)
- ❑ [SquashWise Program Ladder](#) showing the top players in the program. We have a list of "Next Up" students beside the ladder with names of players that are close to getting on the big board.
- ❑ [SquashBusters High School Boys and Girls Ladders](#) displayed by the courts

This guide was written by Zach Bradley at SquashWise, with input from the 2017-2018 Squash Leadership Committee.