



Jesters Tour to Madrid 2024

Following on from the hugely successful RAC Bath Cup Veterans team tour to Madrid in 2023, an invitation was extended to "The Jesters Club" to return to the Spanish capital by the British Ambassador, Hugh Elliott.

The Ambassador is about to complete his 5 year appointment in Madrid, and so preparations were quickly made to find a suitable squad.

It didn't take long before a dozen responses expressed an interest, after a note went around the club and the young Jesters WhatsApp group.

Joe Sibley and Miranda Nicholson were leading the charge.

Simon McGivern, who had his trip in 2023 cut short after an unfortunate accident on court, was also quick to respond as well as Stephen Jones, Paul Gazzard, Federico Sequeira, Akshaye Wadhwa and Ross Gardner.

Some fine tuning on dates and costs and the 8 strong team was confirmed.

On the eve of the tour Ross frustratingly tore a calf muscle in a doubles match and had to pull out.

Friday 5th April was going to be a busy day. Flights at lunchtime and after assembling at the apartment in the centre of Madrid for quick introductions and to drop our bags, we were straight back in cabs to meet our local Jester host, Hugh Elliott, and our Spanish host Manu.

Hugh is very tall. Manu isn't.



I had made an early error. I told Manu we had a very strong team, especially our number 1, Joe.

Manu has a tight group of regular players in his club. The standard of squash is excellent and they play several times a week together. Manu pulled together his top team and also drafted in an ex professional to take on Joe.



Two British expats in the Yoofit club played for the tourists to make up the numbers and Hugh was playing in our team.

With no time for lunch and heading straight on court we were definitely on the back foot.

It didn't go well!

First up was Paul vs Juan Rey. Paul started squash in his early years. He stylishly strokes the ball around the court with an excellent width and length. Juan is a strong runner and is used to the hot fast Spanish courts. A tough start for Paul's tour with limited time to acclimatise. Sadly Paul ran out of steam, 0-3.





Stephen was up against Fran, “Sledgehammer” Ledo. Stephen is one of our most accomplished Jesters with a plethora of squash trophies under his belt over the years. However, young Fran is a runner and a hard hitter. He knows his courts well and was able to respond to Stephen’s enviable shot selection with interest. Too strong for our venerable Mr Jones, 0-3.



Meanwhile Miranda was on with Karen Mojica from Bogata in Columbia. Karen is a strong squash player and a tough competitor. Miranda has a superb game. She was going to have to dig deep and work hard. Karen started strong but Miranda was matching her point for point. At 9-9 in the first it could have gone either way. Karen took it 9-11. Karen’s confidence grew and she started controlling the second game. Miranda was picking everything up but it was wearing her down. 7-11 to Karen. A quick chat with Miranda and she went on in the 3rd with a new focus. Pushing Karen to the back of the court she was back in the match and again at 9-9 it could have gone either way. On another day she may have nicked it but sadly Karen took the match 0-3.





Fed was partnered up with fellow Argentinian, the giant Andres Fernandez. Andres has a proper wing span and is a tricky unit to get around. Fortunately our secret weapon, Fed, is only little and he made good speed running around the giant. At 2-0 up I moved on to watch Simon on the next court, relaxed that we were about to win our first match. The giant was tired and all Fed had to do was a few gentle drop shots and some soft boasts or to find a good straight length to move Andres around. Andres looked broken. 10 minutes later I returned and Andres was back in the match 2-2. I had to stay and watch the 5th. Federico was confused, hot and tired. The courts had warmed up our Latin American and he started to see red. A few too many mistakes and Andres nicked it 2/3.



We may have reminded Fed about his 2-0 lead several times over the weekend.

Simon was on with Venancio Parra. Simon was keen to push past his memories from the last time he was on this court. He had trained hard for this tour and had put on several pounds of muscle, around his waist. Simon is a skilful shot player with a clever deceptive front court game. He has a trademark chop drop, which is always a winner and a clever slow lob to push his opponents to the back of the court. The problem was these courts were too hot and Venancio was picking up the drops. As accurate as the lobs were, he was also able to scoop them out, extending the rallies and putting Simon's fitness under pressure. 0-3.





It wasn't going our way.

I was next up against Matt Hall from Ashted in Surrey! Matt moved to Madrid several years ago with his wife and family and is part of the fabric of the YooFit club. He has a racket and shoe shop at the club as well as being a full time lawyer. Last year Matt played Jeremy Krzystyniak and they had a really good game. I'm not sure I was ready for this. Matt knows the courts and plays a lot. He worked me hard and was literally getting everything I threw at him back. At 0-2 down I changed tactics and decided to slow it right down. Lobs and drops. It started to work. I had to get the drops really tight on the side wall. 1-2. I was pleased to nick a game but that took all my reserves. Matt was too strong and took me down 1/3.



To fill in the numbers Manu had the British Butterworth family, father and son combo, playing on the tourists team. Both played the two Jorges and unfortunately both lost 0/3.

Manu was looking quite smug with 0-8 to the Spanish on the scorecard.

So time for our top seeds. Akshaye went on vs Eliseo the Cuban Assassin. Akshaye is skilful, fit and fast. He is the RAC Bath cup second team captain. He works hard at his squash and plays lots.





The Cuban is unconventional.

This was going to be interesting. Home advantage and Eliseo chopped his way through the first two games but Akshaye was finding his feet and working out the hot courts. He fought hard and was suddenly back in it. 2-2. Staring down the barrel of a doughnut I was keen we got something on the scorecard. Not to be and Akshaye lost 2/3.

So all eyes were on Joe. Joe is the youngest in our squad at 25. He is very fit, strong and dynamic. He can get everything back and has a shot selection to admire. All would have been fine if Manu hadn't drafted in an ex pro ringer. So Joe went down. We were 0/10 down in the match and it really wasn't looking good.



So time for Hugh our local host. Hugh is all of 6 ft 7 and hardly needs to move to pick up the tightest drop shot. One large stride. He can reach the highest lob and has a deceptive game.

His workload isn't ideal for squash training. He has lunch and dinner meetings daily with heads of state from around the world and is relentlessly entertaining at his home and in the embassy.





Manu was kind to him. Playing Mark Butterworth for the Spanish for a second match. We really needed this to save the day and the Ambassador didn't disappoint.

At last a win. 3/1.



Made the match result look a lot better! But still not great...1/11!



Off for a quick shower as we were invited back to the Ambassador's residence for a reception party with our hosts.



A wonderful evening where we were entertained like royalty. A massive thank you to Hugh and his wife Toni for their kindness and generosity and to all their team.

Speeches from Hugh about his role in Madrid. With over 20 million British visitors to Spain every year, there is never a dull moment.

Hugh welcomed the Jesters Club to Madrid and spoke fondly about diplomatically weaving the relationship together between the British and Spanish nations.

Manu was presented with the Jesters Club shield for hosting and organising our weekend.

I was able to explain a little about the club to our hosts, with Hugh translating for me.

Simply a brilliant evening and very special memory.





And so back to the apartment for a quick turn around to sample some Madrid nightlife.

We didn't last long. All exhausted we were back in the apartment drinking the red that Eliseo had kindly given us and laughing out loud into the early hours of Saturday morning.

Well rested we headed out for a late brunch as we were due back at the squash club for another squash match.



This time their number 1 was Eliseo and that moved everyone on their team up a place.





The matches were far closer. With wins from Joe 3-2 (he was match ball down in the 3rd), Akshaye 3-2, Paul 3-1, Simon 3-0 and Federico 3-1, we were 5-5 with Hugh to play the deciding match.



Hugh was playing Fran. Hugh used all his diplomatic skills to make sure the Spanish hosts won again.

Manu was happy and we all headed off for Paella.



As if two squash matches in two days wasn't enough we then played padel with each other for 2 hours on the roof of a nearby building. Great fun.



Back to the apartment to change for dinner with Manu and his fiancée Karen.



Fed had used his Argentinian connections to put our names on the door of Madrid's famous "Giselle" nightclub but knowing we all had another day of padel on Sunday we only popped in for a sharpener and a quick boogie before heading back to the apartment with very weary legs.





We were all a bit broken on Sunday. Padel was arranged at lunchtime we enjoyed a couple of hours in the sun and a superb lunch at the squash club before heading back to the airport.

There was one final exhibition match between Paul and Miranda. I will leave you to ponder how that went!!



Huge thanks again to Manu and Hugh for such kindness and generosity and we are looking forward to welcoming the Spanish to the UK soon, to reciprocate.

“When I grow up I want to be like Stephen Jones.”



Hosts:



British Ambassador - Hugh Elliott



Manu Gomez

Tourists:



Richard Winter - Tour Captain



Simon McGivern

Most notable squash achievement is probably getting the Jesters' record for the shortest overseas tour last year.

Two hours in Madrid, 10 mins on court with the resident Cuban martial arts champion, hospital and then next flight home.



Stephen Jones

Venerable Jester soon to be Vulnerable.



Paul Gazzard

Played for a long time, since he was 9 years old, still trying but definitely getting worse now.

No notable height ever reached.

One last push.....



Federico Sequeira

22 year old foreigner living in London.

Half Argentine half Japanese.

A very bad squash player that loves to wear a medallion on his chest.



Akshaye Wadhwa

Originally from Mumbai, India, Akshaye has been living in England since 2013. Squash plays an important role in his life with some members at the RAC joking that the club's Bath/Surrey Cup teams would have fallen apart if it wasn't for him playing in almost every fixture over the 2023/24 season. Outside of Squash, he works at GHCO, an ETF market-making company prior to which he spent 6 years at JP Morgan. Although a proud Indian, he holds a soft spot for anything Spanish, explaining why he has forced his way onto the Madrid touring squad despite still being a "Jester candidate".



Miranda Nicholson

Digital nomadding, job hunting and triathlon-training 27 year old with inadequate foot ligaments.

Token female.



Joe Sibley

Leicester born but now London based while he avoids work studying for his 3rd degree.

Coming into the tour off the back of helping O&C achieve a solid last place position in this season's Bath Cup.