

Can the National Tennis Centre in Cardiff work?

After the announcement came that the National Tennis Centre was closing down I have to admit I was not shocked. Having visited a few times I was often greeted by empty courts, quiet fitness suites and a major lack of atmosphere. I found it to be in-excusable that such an amazing facility would be underutilised in such a way and that the staff or people working with the centre did not seem inspired or motivated to bring people to the doors. A general acceptance of the centre's fate seemed to be evident. Many big operators have tried and failed over the years to turn this facility into a financial success so why should another attempt to operate the facility be entertained? After all it's in a deprived, non-affluent area and if the big guns can't do it, then who can?

I firmly believe that with the right business model and strategy this centre can be a huge success. Although many companies operated the facility a similar model was in existence for each, a focus around selling expensive yearly membership alienated thousands of people in that part of Cardiff. It was hoped ultimately that the membership sales would be so strong that in the long run it would subsidise on court activities and empty courts would not have a detrimental effect on the performance of the facility. Unfortunately both low membership and low numbers of people playing tennis conspired to its doom.

It would be my recommendation that the centre be operated as a low cost, high volume inclusive community indoor venue offering not just fitness and tennis but a range of other activities also. This model would stand the best chance of working and is currently being replicated across indoor centres across the UK and would change the focus of the centre completely. Focus would be put on "selling tennis" and making it inclusive to all, breaking down the perception and barrier that "Tennis is for the wealthy" when in actual fact this model allows "tennis for all". With the National School Sport Survey and Ugov statistics clearly showing a huge demand for tennis in that area, it is about making the facility a financially viable option for people to play tennis at. The tennis in its own right should hold its head above water alongside all other activities offered at the facility. Low costs allow inclusive, high volume, high participation and finally to long-term sustainability.

As a community venue it would not only look at what happens within its own doors but what happens across the city and be at the forefront of community tennis development linking all clubs and community activities back to the NTC as the Hub. So do we have an example of this? Only 30 miles down the road is Swansea Tennis Centre operated by Tennis Swansea 365. No better example in the United Kingdom can be given.

Swansea Tennis Centre is situated in a deprived part of Swansea with very little public transport available and isolated in a commercial environment. With losses of up to £180,000 a year Swansea City County Council announced its closure early 2011 and the building was closed and boarded up for 4 months. How could this centre be saved? Impossible you would think? Yet just over 2 years since re-opening in June 2011 the Tennis Centre which is the Hub for all tennis activities in the city, operates a healthy profit, and has more people playing tennis in it than any other 4 indoor court venue in the whole of the UK. Nearly 600 people have lessons across the centre's programmes in the city and we had over 60,000 participations in tennis last year. The rate at which the centre continues

to grow is truly unbelievable, with revenue going from £190k to £350K from year 1 to year 2. Such is the success at the centre that it is now used as “Best Practise” by the Lawn Tennis Foundation and the Tennis Foundation. The centre has also picked up an “Outstanding achievement Award” and was a recent finalist for “Social Enterprise of the Year”.

It is important to identify that Swansea Tennis Centre is not operated like traditional tennis centres. All primary focus is put into development tennis at high volume, packing courts to make them as profitable as possible. A huge emphasis on sales and selling tennis and selling the right types of tennis are critical for its success. Trying to hire a court at Swansea Tennis Centre can be difficult, not only are there very little courts available due to the centres popularity but staff at the centre are trained to engage people in cheaper alternatives such as lessons. “That’s right; lessons are cheaper than hiring a court!

The staffing structure is also very different to other centres. The centre consists of a very small team that are up skilled to deal with all roles, from cleaning, reception duties, running sports camps to going on court and delivering tennis. This allows the centre offer affordable tennis to its community.

Too often in the past, too much prestige and flexibility has been given to coaches and performance players and all focus has been given to these individuals. Unfortunately this does not pay. At Swansea Tennis Centre the operational team are the key component to the centres success at the coaching team deliver the product. Coaches adhere to strict guidelines which act fully in the interest of the centre. Setting up break away sessions is not allowed and coaches from outside the centre cannot deliver at the centre. Coaches also have accountability for improving the numbers on their sessions and are conscious their sessions could be cancelled if their numbers drop, as the coaches are self-employed prohibitions do not exist entitling coaches to set hours, they must perform well in sessions to drive numbers to create hours for themselves. This type of pressure is not day to day at most tennis centres. It’s very much the coach looking after his/her own interests.

The very nature of TS365 as an independent operator allows for greater accountability for all its work force. It’s too easy to sit and watch a huge operator fail as “it’s always somebody else problem” or “my job is secure”. The team at Swansea Tennis Centre are dependent on the facility doing well. They won’t be deployed elsewhere should the business fail. This does however allow for greater freedom in decision making and the power to tackle problems with performance head on.

The centre also leads all Tennis development activities outside of the centre, creating clone sites across the city all feeding back to the same venue, again utilising sales orientated staff to deliver these sessions. Effectively Tennis development is about selling the sport and TS365 have fully grasped that concept.

It is very important to point out that TS365 as an organisation are not dependant on funding and with the exception of some kick-start funding which is still unused the centre has not utilised any to operate the facility. Sustainability does not come from relying on funding and if funding disappears where do we go? The centres future is in its own hands and funding should only be used as a short term solution to kick start the project would be my only commendation

In summary if a social enterprise consisting of a small group of volunteers can turn the prosperities of such a facility then surely it can be done in Cardiff, either by a group similar to TS365 or by a larger organisations adopting such “Best Practises”. The closure of the centre should be seen as a positive, it is now a great opportunity for a new operator to come in and change its direction and focus and make a success of the facility.