

Irish Squash High Performance Strategy

LA Olympic Cycle 2024 - 2028

Overview

Irish squash players have reached the pinnacle of the sport, instilling a belief that we can compete at the highest level. The inclusion of squash in the LA 2028 Olympics has injected new energy and focused attention on developing a world-class high-performance programme to nurture talent and provide players with the necessary support to compete internationally at the highest levels.

Notable players who have paved the way include Madeline Perry, who ranked number 3 in the world in 2011; Derek Ryan, who reached number 7 in 1999; Angus Kirkland, who reached number 19 in 1995; and Aisling Blake, who achieved a career-high ranking of 22 in 2010.

Irish squash players have not reached those same heights in recent years; however, we believe that with the right structures in place, Irish players can once again win at the top levels of the game.

Baseline

As of June 2024, Irish Squash has three players committed to playing as full-time professionals on the PSA World Tour. Behind them, there is a group of talented young players who have demonstrated their potential in junior ranks and the collegiate system. While not the sole objective, LA 2028 Olympic qualification appears to be a very realistic target based on Irish players' current world rankings, age profile, and the likely draw size and quota allocation.

Rankings as of June 2024:

- Top 100 – 1 female player
- Top 200 – plus 1 additional female and 1 male player (3 in total)

Hannah Craig #84

Breanne Flynn #150

Sam Buckley #153

Irish Squash has not received high-performance funding for over two decades and therefore has historically had limited resources to invest in a high-performance programme, engaging national coaches on a day-rate basis.

Vision

Consistent with the Irish Squash 'Connecting the Dots' Strategic Plan 2022–2027, the Irish Squash vision is to be a “world-class squash nation.”

Targets

Irish Squash has set ambitious targets for the period up to the end of 2028. The development of a world-class high-performance system is a long-term ambition and will require consistent and high levels of investment over multiple Olympic cycles.

Olympic Games

- Two athletes qualified for the LA 2028 Olympic Games
- A top 16 finish at the LA 2028 Olympic Games

PSA World Rankings

- One athlete ranked inside the top 30
- An additional three athletes ranked inside the top 100 (4 in total)
- An additional four athletes ranked inside the top 200 (8 in total)

World Championships (Team & Individual)

- A top 8 finish at the World Team Championship
- Qualify two players for the World Individual Championship

European Championships (Team & Individual)

- A top 6 finish at the European Team Championship
- Men's and Women's Teams competing in Division 1
- A top 16 finish at the European Individual Championship

Commonwealth Games

- One athlete qualified for the 2026 Commonwealth Games
- A top 16 finish at the 2026 Commonwealth Games

Junior Level

- Develop a pool of young players who are capable of qualifying for the 2032 and 2036 Olympics and being competitive at the highest level internationally.

Focus Areas

Secure Investment

We will...	We will do this by...
Secure an appropriate level of government funding for the high performance programme	<p>Positively engaging with funding partners across the island of Ireland to demonstrate the potential within the Irish Squash performance programme.</p> <p>Demonstrate results in order to increase investment in the high performance programme over time.</p>
Secure non-government funding for the high performance programme	<p>Establishing a patrons programme to centrally fund the Irish Squash performance programme, increasing capacity and our ability to support high potential athletes</p> <p>Secure sponsorship investment in the Irish Squash performance programme, increasing capacity and our ability to support high potential athletes.</p> <p>Develop multi-annual funding sources to allow Irish Squash to invest in the high-performance programme over an Olympic cycle.</p>
Advocate for the inclusion of squash in future Olympic Games and European Games	Contribute at European Squash and World Squash Federation levels to support efforts to ensure squash's inclusion in future Olympic Games and European Games programmes.
Progress the development of an Irish Squash National Centre	<p>Continue to plan for the development of an Irish Squash National Centre which would become a world class environment for high performance squash.</p> <p>Provide opportunities for athletes to train and compete regularly on an all glass show court in order to prepare them for international competition.</p>
Raise the profile of the top players within public consciousness	Generate traditional and social media coverage of the top Irish players representing Ireland at the highest levels internationally, in order to raise the profile of both the game of squash in Ireland and the players.

Securing long-term investment in the Irish Squash High Performance Programme will be essential in order to fully implement the strategy.

World Class Coaching & Structures

We will...	We will do this by...
Put in place a coaching and staffing structure to deliver the strategy	<p>Appointing a Head Coach/High-Performance Director to oversee the high-performance programme.</p> <p>Further developing and expanding the high-performance coaching team to ensure there is a pathway for high-potential young players to progress to an elite senior level.</p> <p>It is envisaged that this team will comprise a Head Coach/High-Performance Director, a Performance Pathway Coach, and age-grade National Coaches, supported by back-office administration and logistical support.</p>
Maintain a High Performance Working Group (HPWG) made up of a diverse range of high performance experts	<p>Appoint individuals to a High-Performance Working Group in alignment with the recommendations of the Sport Ireland High-Performance Strategy.</p> <p>The High-Performance Working Group will provide support and expert guidance to the Board of Irish Squash, the CEO, and the Head Coach/High-Performance Director. It will also be a resource for players and high-performance coaches.</p>
Develop our high performance coaching expertise	Provide CPD opportunities to identified coaches and support them in progressing and developing into world class coaches
Identify a High Performance Training Centre	As an interim measure, and until the Irish Squash National Centre has been developed, we will identify a suitable venue to be designated as the high-performance training centre.

Professional Athlete Support & Services

We will...	We will do this by...
Secure Sport Ireland carding and/or Sport NI Athlete Award funding for athletes who meet certain criteria	<p>Positively engaging with funding partners across the island of Ireland to secure their support for carding/athlete awards.</p> <p>Agree funding criteria which is consistent with Sport Ireland and Sport NI funded Olympic sports.</p> <p>Clearly communicate the standards/results required by athletes to gain direct funding.</p>

Provide world class performance supports to high potential athletes	<p>Identify athletes capable of achieving the agreed performance targets and provide them with world-class performance support services (S&C, physio, medical, lifestyle, psychology, physiology etc) to allow them to reach their full potential.</p> <p>Engaging with the Sport Ireland Institute, Sport Northern Ireland Institute and other experts as required.</p>
Provide tailored support to high potential athletes to allow them to reach their full potential	<p>Support athletes with the development of training and competition schedules</p> <p>Professionally prepare teams for targeted European and World Championships giving them the best chance of success</p>

Coaching & Competitions

We will...	We will do this by...
Provide high potential players with quality coaching and opportunities to train with elite level training partners	<p>Bringing together the National Squad members on a regular basis for quality squad training sessions</p> <p>Bringing in high level training partners from other nations where appropriate in order to enhance the training environment.</p> <p>Delivering training camps and/or supporting players to train abroad within high performance environments</p>
Provide opportunities for high potential athletes to compete regularly against world class opposition	<p>Host the Irish Squash Open and other PSA events at an appropriate level to provide athletes with an opportunity to gain World Ranking points and gain experience against quality opponents.</p> <p>Support athletes with the development of competition schedules</p>
Foster pride in representing Ireland at the highest level	Developing a team identity and team kit that players are proud of and that represent their values.

Raising Standards

We will...	We will do this by...
Formalise performance tiers which dedicate the level of support to be	Putting in place a formalised tiered structure which will inform decision making around the allocation of

provided to athletes (eg: High Performance Squad, Performance Squad, Development Squad, Junior Squad)	<p>resources, access to support services and the selection for international competition.</p> <p>Support will become progressively more targeted towards the most committed and talented athletes who are focused on achieving the agreed targets.</p>
Regularly review selection criteria	<p>Complete regular reviews of selection criteria and clearly communicate the standards required to gain selection.</p> <p>Develop an understanding that our limited resources will be directed towards achieving the agreed targets and that teams will not necessarily be selected for all international events if it is deemed they will not be competitive.</p>
Require a high level of commitment	<p>Athletes wishing to be part of the high performance programme will agree to a player agreement which will include reasonable requirements including the level of commitment, physical fitness, performance expectations as well as media and sponsor obligations.</p> <p>An athlete representative will be appointed in order to ensure the athletes voice is heard and there is shared ownership.</p> <p>Athletes are expected to be proactive and take a high level of personal responsibility for their own performance and development as athletes. These includes both on court and off court activities including fundraising and availability for media and sponsor obligations.</p>

Performance Pathway

We will...	We will do this by...
Develop a pipeline of talented athletes	Implement the Long Term Player Development (LTPD) Model which provides guidance as to requirements at each stage of the player pathway
Enhance the pathway into the national squad structure	<p>Develop junior sections within more clubs with high quality coaching which teaches the fundamentals necessary to progress to an elite level.</p> <p>Provide support and guidance to coaches within junior club programmes which helps to develop even more talent</p>

	<p>Elevate the importance of Provincial Squads with high quality coaching and opportunities to gain exposure to high level competition.</p> <p>Continue to promote the Junior Interprovincial Championships as an important developmental opportunity</p>
<p>Appoint a Performance Pathway Coach</p>	<p>Demonstrate results and secure increased investment in order to appoint a Performance Pathway Coach/Junior Development Coach who will be responsible for developing the next generation of elite players.</p>

Implementation

This plan sets out ambitious but achievable targets for Irish Squash and signifies a step change in the high-performance system within Irish Squash. Responsibility for the successful delivery of this strategy rests with the Board and CEO of Irish Squash and will largely depend on securing significant new external investment into the high-performance system. Increased investment will allow for the appointment of suitably qualified staff tasked with fully implementing the strategy. Delivery of the plan will be supported by the high-performance working group, the players, high-performance coaches, the wider squash community, and stakeholders, including funders and service providers.