

ZUKO MASTERS OPEN



Few if any black players had won a British Open title before Zuko Kubukeli took the over-45 event at Colets in June. Ian McKenzie talks to the South African

Zuko Kubukeli's journey to a British Open Masters title is a remarkable one, interwoven with the major political events in South Africa.

As a youngster, in the old segregated South Africa, Zuko started playing squash with his mother, a nurse and good tennis player. They weren't able to become members of the local country club, but a work colleague helped them access it with an entrance card. "The only way we could play squash, without getting found out, was to play at 6am," he said. "I was about 10 or 11 at the time. We couldn't play in the day, as there were no black members."

Zuko's introduction to squash was followed up at school. He was lucky enough to be sent to private schools, the first being a preparatory school in KwaZulu-Natal.

"The schools were world-class. My parents had to give up a lot for me to go there. They didn't have much disposable income," he recalls.

"It gave me exposure to these country club sports, which a normal black South African would not have. The emphasis was on rugby in the winter and cricket in the summer. But there was also golf, squash and tennis, which was my first love. It was the best time of my life."

Going to private schools during the apartheid area not only introduced Zuko to a range of sports, but their enlightened policy also gave him a perspective on a skewed society. He also received an education only available to a tiny fraction of black pupils.

"We learnt that it was not normal for society to be as segregated as it was [by apartheid]. The schools were seen as anti-establish-

ment. It was a privilege to go there," said Zuko, who mixed with white, Indian and coloured pupils.

He then moved on to a senior school called Michaelhouse, which is situated 50km north-west of Pietermaritzburg.

"I would say it was one of the top 10 schools in the world," he commented. "We had incredible facilities. We had three glass-back squash courts and three plaster courts."

"That school has produced a lot of Squash African champions, primarily because those kids had access to proper facilities. Michaelhouse has a rich history of producing strong squash players."

"Part of what I have achieved today [at the British Open Masters] started 30 years ago."

From school, Zuko went to the University of Cape Town, where he played for the squash team and got to no. 1.

He played in the World University Games in Cardiff in 1998 and reached the quarter-finals. Thierry Lincou won that year and later went on to become world no. 1.

When Zuko finished his degree, he turned pro in South Africa and played on the circuit there and in local PSA events while he was working. He now manages a private equity fund, a business he started 14 years ago with partners.

"As I have partners, it allows me to come here," he said about being able to travel and play sport.

At the 2018 Colets British Open Masters, Zuko beat Irish top seed Steve Richardson in a five-set final.

"Steve is a strong player," observed the South African. "My challenge was 'do I change my game because he is a strong player?' I had a chat to a good friend of mine before the final, who said: 'There is no one fitter and stronger than you. You will get to a lot of balls he will not expect you to, so stick to your game.' That's what I decided to do."

Back home, Zuko plays for Country Club Johannesburg at no. 1 in the local league, which comprises 10 four-strong teams playing on a Tuesday night. Craig Van der Wath's pristine, 12-court Parkview Squash Centre, the playing hub in South Africa, is a nearby rival.

"I am playing a lot of youngsters half my age, which means I am used to pace," he said.

Zuko would like to see more Masters events. "It is a friendly and tight-knit community," he explained. "I'd like to see a U.S. Open Masters and the Hong Kong guys are keen. I'd like to play these tournaments and experience the culture and clubs. Playing squash is a great way to see the world."



Right: Steve Richardson congratulates Zuko Kubukeli on his over-45 final win