

Mr Enthusiasm

Canada's Cambridge Group comprises four clubs with 450 employees and 12,000 members. *Martin Bronstein* talks to the man behind the enterprise



Caldwell in the Cambridge Club bar

approachable, positive, straight-talking man that I knew then. He is bright and articulate but without pomposity, and he jokes with the members in the same way he jokes with his staff. Everyone is on first name terms with him and it is obvious as you go through his clubs that the staff like working for him. Today, Caldwell is the General Manager of the Cambridge Club (still men only, £500 to join and £100 a month fees) and President of the Cambridge Group of Clubs.

If you were looking for a Mr Canadian Squash, Clive Caldwell would fit the bill perfectly. Having started as a squash player in the early '70s, Caldwell now owns four clubs in Toronto and Montreal with a turnover of around £15 million.

Caldwell, now 58, wasn't just a squash player: he was part of the 'Toronto Trinity' – with Gordon Anderson and Sharif Khan – which dominated North American squash in the '70s. These three players were unique in that they could switch from the hardball game to the softball game without pausing even to think about it. Americans generally did not have the fitness for the softball game, and the softballers – with the exception of Geoff Hunt and Jahangir Khan – could not get a handle on the hardball game, played in a narrower court.

In 1973 Caldwell was hired as the squash pro by the exclusive, men-only Cambridge Club, which boasted Toronto's leading businessmen as its members. (One year the 'Calcutta auction' kitty for their annual doubles tournament reached \$250,000.)

He was so popular with the members that owner Jim Bentley offered him 5% of the club. Caldwell took it with both hands: it was the start of his climb to success and riches. Bentley and some other businessmen then took advantage of the '70s squash boom and formed a company that

operated a chain of clubs which included the Cambridge Club, the Adelaide Club and the Squash Academy (this writer's first ever squash club).

"But then the main partners fell out and the company fell apart," recalls Caldwell. "I sold my position in the Cambridge and moved to the Adelaide. After two years I bought out my two partners, Jack Lawrence and Al Scott. By 1984 I owned the club 100 per cent."

Caldwell was well and truly on his way. Seven years later he heard a rumour that the Cambridge Club was running into financial difficulties – it was in fact on the edge of bankruptcy. Clive went to his old boss, Jim Bentley, and said he would be interested in buying and, with his old partner Jack Lawrence, supplying the \$1.25 million purchase price. Caldwell had his second club.

As well as being extremely successful, Clive Caldwell is extremely likeable. I met him 30 years ago and he is still the same

His wife runs the Toronto Athletic Club (TAC), his third Toronto club, where the 3,600 members enjoy superb views from the 36th floor of one of Toronto's many glass skyscrapers. All the clubs (Caldwell still owns the Adelaide Club) have the air of a five-star hotel: their interior design is superb and the quality irreproachable. The TAC's Stratus Restaurant has full-length windows overlooking Lake Ontario and the Toronto Island Airport – one of the best restaurant views in the city. The

food is marvellous – and costs around half London prices. Even while on the treadmills and bikes, members can look out over a vast panorama and watch the planes taking off and landing. There are four squash courts, a swimming pool, saunas, piles of freshly laundered towels in the vast locker rooms and attendants to ensure the place is pristine.



The view from the Toronto Athletic Club's 36th-floor restaurant

The Adelaide Club, in contrast, is four floors below ground level but it is also decorated in superb taste. The four squash courts still take centre stage but there are separate gyms for men and women as well as myriad treatment rooms and other amenities. And for all this luxury members pay just £50 per month. By British standards this is outstanding value.

Caldwell's fourth club is now known as Club Sportif. When I lived in Montreal back in the '60s it was the very snooty Montreal Amateur Athletic Club, to which membership was highly restricted.

"It was an English gentile [sic] club. But the political climate changed when the French-Canadian séparatistes came to power. The English ran from Montreal to Toronto. The club didn't welcome French-Canadians and didn't modernise its facilities. It went downhill rapidly and we went in to save it from bankruptcy. We own half of it and 90 Montrealers own the other half," Caldwell explains.



around the club and playing is great for our members, but we also want to support them," he says with enthusiasm. And he does support them with hard cash. (Both Gary Waite and Jonathon Power were touring pros for the Cambridge Group and even now you are liable to find one or both of them at the

Cambridge Club, either playing or socialising.)

Through all this Caldwell's love of squash has remained. He still sees the game as a core part of all his clubs, despite the disappearance of so many courts over the last 15 years. "There used to be 60 courts in downtown Toronto. Now there are ten singles and two doubles and they're all in my clubs. Our squash programmes remain healthy because we have squash pros in every club, with programmes galore. Each club has access to a touring pro [Shahier Razik and Robin Clarke]. We take squash pretty seriously and having those guys

Caldwell's success is deserved: his Toronto clubs are three of the best – if not the best – clubs I have encountered. I would find it hard to suggest an improvement to either the amenities or the service. If you searched for just one word that summed up the reason for Clive Caldwell's success, it would be enthusiasm. It bubbles out of him like an Icelandic geyser and rubs off on employees and members alike. More power to his smile, say I.

Club Chat:

CLIVE CALDWELL ON RUNNING A SUCCESSFUL SQUASH CLUB

ON ECONOMICS:

"The squash business has declined in Toronto in the last 20 years. Squash is a very expensive piece of property. Two storeys, 1,400 sq ft and you've only got two people on it. In the same space you can have 40 to 50 people doing aerobics. That's a problem."

ON PRICING:

"Our fees are based on age. Nobody in the commercial sector does it but everybody in the private sector does it. Members between 35 and 60 pay the full fee; under 30s pay 60%, and those aged between 30 and 35 and those over 60 pay 80%. Our general attitude is that we want to offer the very best: the best facilities, the best programmes and the best services. You have to charge for that but younger people can't afford it and we want all ages in the club; that's why we have that pricing structure."

ON ENGLISH CLUBS:

"I did a dozen trips for Olympia & York [the

Canadian company that built Canary Wharf] to see about opening a fitness club at Canary Wharf. Which meant I saw many clubs in England. I would say that the modern English fitness club has come a long way, but not so much the English squash club. I think some of them are grungy. I'm not interested in a club that has just three or four courts. I want a club that has it all. My view is that if you're singularly focused, you run into trouble. If you were into racketball in the '70s and you built a club with 20 racketball courts, ten years later you got into trouble. If you set up a group exercise business when that was the rage, ten years later you got trouble.

ON THE MARKET:

"The entire field of preventative healthcare – regular exercise, improved eating standards – is going to be with us for a long time. We are in crisis around the world with healthcare and the biggest single factor in improving outcomes in healthcare is preventative treatment and not the drugs that we take when we're sick. It's all about creating an educated population. And they are the people that come to health clubs."

ON THE SOCIAL COMPONENT:

"I run clubs. Most of my competitors run gyms. My clubs are places you can get

your preventative healthcare where there is also a social component. I am in two worlds: the modern fitness world and the old-fashioned English club world, which is almost a military, private-school world. I think that this world is still valued by people who want a place where they can go and hang out and do similar things and have fun together.

ON WORLD CLASS:

"I think the RAC Club in Pall Mall is superb. They do everything in a world-class way. It's my favourite city club. That's what I am after in my clubs – world-class fixtures. We're not only in the fitness and health business; we're in the physical environment business. I spent \$100,000 on the Canadian collection in the bar in the Cambridge Club because I think it enhances the environment. I am trying to do everything I can to make every inch of our clubs world class and first class."

ON SERVICE:

"You've got to have happy people working for you if they're going to give good quality service. So we bend over backwards to make this a nice environment where the staff are treated well and paid well and given a lot of love. Love is a good word for me in business. I use it a lot. My wife, who runs the Toronto Athletic Club, has a mantra: "Make decisions in favour of the members." We're always trying to say yes instead of no. And people like it."

