

Top of Their Game

By Miles Doyle

On a recent weekday afternoon, in the Lombardi Center on Fordham's Rose Hill campus, Jocelyn McKenzie adjusted her athletic goggles, spun her racket between her fingers and smashed a small, gray rubber ball against a high white wall. She spun on the balls of her feet and, with a decisive flick of her wrist, buried her opponent's return shot deep in the lower left corner of the wall, just above the tin, for a hard-earned, sweaty point.

McKenzie, a middle school student at M.S. 45 Thomas C. Giordano School in the Bronx, is a promising member of CitySquash, a Fordham-based, nonprofit, after-school program that helps at-risk, economically disadvantaged students fulfill their potential through squash.

Started in 2002 by Sanford Schwartz, GSS '05, CitySquash combines year-round intensive squash training and academic lessons for elementary, middle school and high school students. It serves approximately 100 students, all of whom either currently attend or matriculated from one of the program's partner schools, P.S. 205 or M.S. 45 in the Bronx.

"I decided to roll up my sleeves and try to set up a squash program," said Schwartz, who modeled CitySquash on several similar successful urban squash programs around the Northeast, like Boston's SquashBusters or Philadelphia's SquashSmart. "My idea was to try to make a difference for young people from economically challenged households."

Similar to racquetball, squash, long the purview of prep schools and country clubs, is a sport played by two players in a four-walled court with a small—squashable—rubber ball. Before CitySquash, the sport was about as common in the Bronx as water polo, or polo, for that matter. Now, however, squash is solidifying its reputation around the neighborhood as an invitation to a world beyond 187th Street and Webster Avenue.

The squash-playing community, a relatively small and close-knit unit, has welcomed their newest members with open arms. Team members regularly play at exclusive venues like the Harvard Club in Manhattan, and are invited to various boarding schools and universities around the Northeast to compete in tournaments throughout the year.

"Most of these kids don't have exposure to the world outside of their own," said Tim Wyant, the executive director of CitySquash who helped Schwartz set up the organization. "Just by playing the game, kids are exposed to a world that values education and offers opportunity."



Jocelyn McKenzie, a promising member of the Fordham-based program CitySquash, returns a volley during a recent practice at the Lombardi Center, on the University's Rose Hill campus.
Photo by Bruce Gilbert



Tim Wyant, the executive director of CitySquash, instructs two CitySquashers on one of the game's finer points. Wyant, who briefly played professional squash in England, helped Sanford Schwartz, GSS '05, start the nonprofit after-school program to help at-risk, economically disadvantaged students fulfill their personal, athletic and academic potential.
Photo by Bruce Gilbert.

Lanique Rhyne, who recently finished her sophomore year at Mercersburg Academy, an independent college-preparatory school in Pennsylvania, was accepted to CitySquash when she was in the sixth grade. She said the organization, coupled with the mental, strategic demands of squash, empowered her to consider options she never thought possible.

"It wasn't just about squash," she said. "CitySquash helped prepare me for life, too. I realized, after a few months, that squash could get me really far. It allowed me to meet new people and get a new sense of life."

Since its founding, CitySquash has been based at Fordham's Rose Hill campus, thanks to Frank McLaughlin, FCRH '69, the executive director of Fordham Athletics, and his early belief in the program.

“CitySquash is very special,” said McLaughlin, who grew up in the Woodlawn section of the Bronx. “It brought an elitist game to the inner city to advance people’s lives. These kids are going to places that kids in the Bronx don’t normally get to go.

“I’m thrilled Fordham is involved.”

Fordham not only gives CitySquash the keys to its athletics facilities. The University also offers its extensive network of human resources: Fordham students and alumni volunteer as academic tutors and squash coaches.

Ted Clarke III, FCRH ’82, a first vice president at Citigroup won CitySquash’s Volunteer of the Year award in 2006. He mentored team member Seetreeon Torres for a number of years until Torres left to attend Trinity-Pawling School, a private high school in upstate New York, where he is currently one of the squash team’s best players. Clarke said CitySquash pushes students—and introduces them to a wonderful game.

“It is a huge opportunity for them to achieve their full potential,” he said. “Plus, they can play squash for the rest of their lives”

And team members seem to be getting the hang of the game. This past June, 49 team members participated in the Urban Individual Nationals at Williams College, in Williamstown, Mass., where urban squash players from nine different programs around the country competed in eight different age divisions. CitySquashers, as they are affectionately known, captured seven of the eight titles.

The primary goal of CitySquash, though, isn’t to develop the best squash players in the country; it’s to help students improve their grades and raise their academic aspirations.

More than half of the CitySquash students earn scholarships to select prep and boarding schools, and five of the program’s seniors—CitySquash’s inaugural class—were recently granted admission to Hobart College, Wesleyan University and the City University of New York, according to Schwartz. At the same time, students have won more than \$3 million in financial aid since the program started.

“The program is really about getting kids to graduate from four-year colleges and to become constructive members of society,” he said. “Squash is just a tool to help them get there.”

—Miles Doyle, FCRH ’01, is the associate editor of FORDHAM magazine.