

## THE JOURNAL NEWS

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# Giving More Than Lessons

By Jane McManus

NEW YORK — Ten-year-old Helen Avila, in two long braids and violet Chuck Taylors, is attempting to bounce a squash ball on her new racket. She is backing up to keep the ball in play as her lips move, counting each successful hit. When she finally backs into the wall, the ball drops and she laughs, along with fellow squash student Jasmine Lewis and their instructor, Isabel Zellweger. They are all at the Fordham University squash courts on the first day of camp at City Squash, a program designed to teach kids in the Bronx to play a sport that in the United States is mainly practiced in country clubs and on Ivy League courts. "I've had friends who've done this and I thought it would be fun to teach kids to play squash," said Zellweger, who lives in Rye and learned to play squash at the Apawamis Club in Rye.

City Squash is a four-year-old program based on several other similar ones in Boston and Harlem. It works with about 60 kids from Middle School 45 during the school year, providing squash lessons, supplemental tutoring and homework help. Many of the players have earned full scholarships to boarding and private schools, and the eventual hope is that 80 percent of the kids will complete four-year college degrees. The camp is a way to expose elementary-age kids to the sport, and identify future candidates for the main program.

City Squash gets a real assist from local players and clubs. "(The volunteers) love it," said City Squash board member and Apawamis Squash director Peter Briggs, who has sent over 20 volunteers. "They do all sorts of community service with their schools and this is fun because they immediately see the fruits of their labor." City Squash executive director Tim Wyant hopes to be able to construct an independent center with courts and classrooms, like the programs in Boston and Harlem have been able to do. The program was the brainchild of Scarsdale entrepreneur Sanford Schwartz, who is an avid squash player. He was on an early flight to Indianapolis on Sept. 11, 2001, and when he landed the world had changed. During the 15-hour drive home in a rental car, Schwartz evaluated his charitable donations to other squash programs, and wanted to do more.

"It was the concept of a level playing field," Schwartz said. "I grew up in a nice middle-class family, and I always had a concept of social justice and a level playing field." And for many of the volunteers, coming into the Bronx to teach or hosting students at clubs like Apawamis, Westchester Squash and the recently opened Club@ 800 has changed

their own perspective. "I used to think my eyes were open before I did this program," Apawamis member Ben Mandel of Greenwich said. "But since coming to this program I realize my eyes were stitched shut." Mandel, 20, is starting his third year with City Squash, and is an intern in the office in addition to working with the 9- to 12-year-olds who come to Fordham for camp.

The children are picked through a series of tryouts for the school-year program. Last year, 111 kids tried out for 10 spots. They need to have a certain aptitude for squash and for school, and they need the kind of motivation that Avila exhibits as she practices her forehand. "I knew what it was because my sister and brother played," Avila said. Her classmate didn't have the same context, and it took 9-year-old Lewis a little longer to decide to try out. "I didn't know what (squash) was," Lewis said. "I thought it was a fruit. There's also a fruit called squash."

Those in the program during the school year not only learn a sport played by the affluent, but they visit courts in Westchester and Connecticut, travel to tournaments and stay in homes that could be featured in design magazines. And those who host players are some of the biggest donors. About 500 people contribute to the program's \$300,000 operating budget. A significant part also comes from the Briggs Cup, a biannual tournament at Apawamis that contributed \$110,000 in 2005.

Schwartz said the goal is to get team players comfortable in a very different world, so that if they are eventually offered scholarships to boarding schools like Phillips Academy in Andover, Ma., Deerfield Academy and Loomis Chaffee (as some teammates have), they feel they belong. Currently, five of the 10 students entering the 10th grade have taken those kinds of scholarships. Schwartz said that City Squash has seen its team members' grades improve incrementally every year. "You just develop these wonderful relationships with these kids and you want to help them," said Wyant, who played squash at Harvard.

Santiago Moran, 12, has played for a year, and he said that his grade average rose from 75 percent to 85 percent in the time since he started. Last Wednesday he led the nine boys new to the sport through a series of warm-ups. He had them all running a fast circle around the court, touching the ground and jumping up. At the end, one stretch — basically an extended pushup — had everyone groaning before Moran said "done." "At the beginning I couldn't hit the ball," Moran said. "My goal is to be the best on the team."