



Alan Chin for The New York Times

Students waiting their turn to play squash at the Columbia University courts in Manhattan. Programs for children from poor neighborhoods that combine tutoring and squash are springing up around the region.

Upper Crust or Inner City, It's Squash

By KATHERINE ZOEPP

The first few times Tyquan Jones took the B train from his school in Harlem for a squash lesson at the Harvard Club on 44th Street, he was not impressed.

"It's all right," he said, perched on the arm of a sofa near the club's squash courts. "I mean, it's fancy, but I don't like the quiet."

Tyquan, a seventh grader at Thurgood Marshall Academy, takes part in StreetSquash, an after-school program for students from poor neighborhoods that combines squash with tutoring. Similar programs are springing up in many places, including the Bronx, where CitySquash began this fall.

Three months into the program, Tyquan credits StreetSquash with helping him raise his grades in math, and he says he has started to enjoy the trips to Midtown twice a week.

"It's better now," he said, glancing through the glass wall of the court behind him, where two classmates were smashing a hard blue rubber ball against the back wall. "The doorman downstairs, he knows us now. And I like the squash, you know. I wanted to play another sport rather than play basketball all the time."

At first blush, squash, with its whiff of the prep school and the country club, might seem a strange choice for enrichment programs for adolescents from some of New York City's poorest schools. Squash is an indoor court game similar to racquetball, though the rules differ. In squash, adjacent opponents with

rackets propel a small rubber ball back and forth against a front wall. A point is scored when an opponent who does not have the serve fails to return a shot before the ball's second bounce off the floor.

But the real goal of StreetSquash and CitySquash, the directors say, is to help students improve their grades and raise their academic aspirations. Squash, they say, is simply a means to that end.

"If one of our kids became a great squash player, that would be nice," said George Polsky, the founder of StreetSquash. "But it's the discipline, the other characteristics that it would take to get there, that are much more important."

Alvin Poussaint, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, suggested that as long as after-school squash programs "keep children grounded in their community," the sport's reputation for exclusivity matters little.

"I remember once talking to Arthur Ashe about some programs he was working on for disadvantaged kids," Dr. Poussaint said. "There was golf, tennis and fencing. I said, 'What are you teaching them?' But he felt black kids should be exposed to these sports."

Lamar Saunders, a seventh grader at Thurgood Marshall Academy, said that his classmates sometimes teased him about playing squash.

"They say squash is corny, squash is crack," Lamar said. "But they're just jealous, because we got something to do after school instead of

walking the streets."

The first squash-based after-school program, SquashBusters, was started in Boston in 1996 by a former all-American squash player, Greg Zaff.

With \$5,000 in seed money from the Massachusetts Squash Racquets Association, Mr. Zaff began holding try-outs for more than 100 middle school students in Roxbury and East Cambridge. The 24 students who were accepted signed agreements to attend squash coaching and tutoring sessions several times a week for three years.

In six years, SquashBusters has served more than 250 sixth, seventh and eighth graders. This fall, it broke ground for a \$4 million building on the campus of Northeastern University.

Of the 20 students in SquashBusters' first graduating class, 16 have gone to college.

"I didn't know whether city kids were going to come into the Harvard Club and say, 'I don't want to do this,'" Mr. Zaff said. "But I learned that it doesn't matter what the sport is. What's important is that they know that you are committed and caring about them."

The SquashBusters model has been copied in several cities. StreetSquash, in Harlem, was founded in 1999, and SquashSmarts began in Philadelphia in 2000.

Typically, students attend squash coaching and tutoring sessions two afternoons a week and once on weekends. Teaching and coaching duties are shared by volunteers and paid

staff members.

In the summer, students are often sent to squash camps on university campuses.

Sanford Schwartz, the Westchester entrepreneur who founded CitySquash, said he expected after-school squash programs to mushroom.

"What I tell people is that, 10 years from now, there's probably going to be 20 of these programs. There's going to be an association," Mr. Schwartz said.

"The kids come from a background where, basically, there are no after-school programs," he said. "Now they get one-on-one individual tutors twice a week, people who give them gear, people who take them places. If I were the kid, I'd be saying, 'This is unbelievable!'"

Ana Roda, who teaches sixth-grade math at M.S. 45 in the Bronx, said that when CitySquash organizers began recruiting students from her school, she was skeptical.

"I thought, squash?" Ms. Roda said. "I mean, it's not very well known to kids in the inner city. But looking beyond the sport itself, I think any sport can teach them self-esteem, about taking care of themselves physically, how to work together, how to rely on other people."

Neil Aliberti, the assistant principal of M.S. 45, said he was impressed by the organizers of CitySquash.

"I've been around for a while, and

An elite sport helps students in the Bronx aim higher.

I see after-school programs come and go," he said. "But these people who work with squash are very well organized, and what I liked is that they didn't ask for anything in return. They wanted to help us."

Janessa Adams, a sixth grader at M.S. 45, said she had never heard of squash before CitySquash showed a film about it to her gym class.

"I just thought, I want to do this," Janessa said.

Some of the families of StreetSquash and CitySquash players seem amused by their children's sudden enthusiasm for squash.

Debra Bryant, who is raising her niece, Janelle, said that until she saw her first match, she had not understood Janelle's descriptions of how squash was played.

"Now that I know what squash is; well, it's cute," Ms. Bryant said, adding that StreetSquash had been a "rude awakening" for her niece. "She came home saying, 'I got to run, I got to work,' and I thought, This is never going to last."

"But she's stuck with it," Ms. Bryant said. "The kids learn to support each other. They need to support each other, once they get out into the work force. It looks like this can take them somewhere."