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The Chemistry of Squash

By Michael Rymer

In 2004, Tim Wyant, who earned all-American honors in squash each of his four years at Harvard and played the international professional squash circuit for two years, visited M.S. 45, a Bronx middle school, to talk about the sport with a sixth-grade class.

M.S. 45 is housed in an old brick building on the northern edge of Little Italy, near Fordham Road. The school's population is largely immigrant and 70 percent Latino. Ninety percent of its students qualify for the federal free-lunch program. Fewer than 50 percent of its eighth-graders meet New York State standards in language arts.

Twelve-year-old Chris Fernandez, whose family moved from the Dominican Republic when he was nine, decided after hearing Wyant speak that he'd rather sleep in than go to the first-round tryouts for CitySquash, an after-school squash and academic-enrichment program Wyant has run since 2002. The tryouts were scheduled for 8:30 on a Saturday morning. But his two best friends knocked on the door of his family's apartment on Morris Avenue, near the Grand Councourse, and convinced him to join them.

One hundred and eleven M.S. 45 sixth-graders tried out for just 10 spots on the CitySquash squad that year, making the odds of joining the program as steep as they are for admissions at a top Ivy League college.

The notion of teaching the fundamentals of squash to a Dominican kid in the Bronx who's obsessed with Mets shortstop Jose Reyes might seem incongruous, but "urban" squash programs are now pervasive. There are established programs in Roxbury, Massachusetts (SquashBusters); Harlem (StreetSquash); Philadelphia (SquashSmarts, which just opened a \$10 million squash facility in North Philadelphia); and on Chicago's South Side (MetroSquash); and smaller ones in Minneapolis (SquashScholars); San Diego (Surf City Squash); New Haven, Connecticut (Squash Haven); and two in Washington, D.C. (D.C. Squash Academy and Squash Empower). The father of the urban squash movement is Greg Zaff, a former top player at Williams College who began SquashBusters in 1995. Zaff envisioned squash as a "fun hook" that would attract children to a program emphasizing academic and social development as much as athletics.

The demographics of urban squash programs, of course, contrast starkly with those of squash at large.



Chris Fernandez swings his way out of the Bronx.

photo: CitySquash

Developed in the 1830s at the Harrow School, a public school in London, squash was first played in the United States at St. Paul's School, a prominent boarding school in New Hampshire. Alumni of boarding schools brought the sport to country clubs, and elite boarding schools and country clubs are still the bulwark of the sport in the United States. Most junior squash tournaments are hosted either by schools or country clubs.

Wyant, who is 30, has short-cropped brown hair and a sinewy build born of 25 years of playing squash. He grew up in Cincinnati, far from squash's Northeastern epicenter, which gave him a taste of being an outsider to the squash establishment; when he played in tournaments in Northeastern cities, he stayed with squash booster families to cut down on his own family's travel costs. Wyant was a consistent volunteer for SquashBusters while he was at Harvard, and he now lives in the Bronx.

He frets over how to maximize the benefits of the exchange between his nontraditional players and the old-school squash world. He doesn't just want to bring urban kids to get whipped by kids who have been exposed to the sport longer. And he also doesn't want those urban kids to be intimidated by their new surroundings.

"We go to Harvard for a tournament every spring," Wyant says. "I can see when I walk around on a campus tour that our students with B-plus and A averages are looking around with a keener interest at the campus than students of ours who struggle in school. For students who are top performers, visiting those places serves to motivate them to a greater degree to continue working hard, whereas there's such a gap between where lower-performing students are and where they need to be to go there—it's fantasy. It's not realistic to take a kid with a 75 average at an inner-city pub school and say you could go to the Ivy League someday."

CitySquash's tryouts occur over a period of three months and, for late-round candidates, involve conversations with parents and teachers; but sometimes, when Wyant watches a child with a natural talent at a first-round tryout, that necessary rigor can dissolve. At one of the boys' first-round tryouts last September, Wyant emerged from a court where he'd observed a sixth-grader named Miguel, a lanky baseball fanatic who wore yellow-and-black Nikes and a left-arm cast decorated with friends' signatures. Wyant was smiling and brandishing his clipboard, where he'd written a note: "Freakin' great! Let's hope he gives a damn about school!"

Wyant had a similar reaction the first time he stood on a squash court with Fernandez, who impressed him as a "superb athlete." But Fernandez was not a dedicated student. Courtney Knowlton, CitySquash's former director of placement, remembers him in sixth grade as "a real middle-school guy who cared about baseball and making everyone love him much more than he cared about school." His first semester in sixth grade, Fernandez posted a 75 percent average. Wyant decided to admit Fernandez into the program in spite of his low grades. "He had a certain magnetism," Wyant says. "And he was the kind of kid—terrific athlete, girls like him—who could get away with being a jerk if he wanted, yet he didn't speak ill of anybody."



Racket man: Tim Wyant
photo: Alana Cundy

"When you bring squash and academics together, something happens," he adds. "There's a certain chemistry between those two things."

There's also a keen interest on the part of admissions offices at boarding schools to build strong squash teams (and attracting minority students helps, too). In 2004, three CitySquash eighth-graders applied to boarding schools. All were accepted. The next year, Wyant hired Knowlton, an alumna of Amherst College, to become CitySquash's first director of placement (she also worked as an assistant director of academics). Her first year, Knowlton was charged with reaching out to boarding schools with squash programs, and shepherding through the boarding-school admissions process CitySquash eighth-grade team members who Wyant believed were qualified. She helped them assemble a list of prospective schools, visited schools with them, prepared them for and drove them to campus interviews, helped them brainstorm application essays, and aided parents, especially those who spoke only Spanish, in filling out financial-aid forms. Knowlton also recalls inserting lined paper under boarding-school applications, which were unlined and had to be handwritten, and shining a flashlight on the paper so that team members could write as neatly as they would on lined papers. "My job," Knowlton says, laughing, "was to be the suburban mother these kids never had."

All five students were accepted and enrolled at boarding schools. Seven more students applied the following year. Since 2005, CitySquash has placed 15 team members in schools including St. Paul's, Loomis Chaffee, St. George's, Williston Northampton, Salisbury, Canterbury, the Hill, St. Pius V, Westover, Hackley, Trinity-Pawling, Mercersburg, and Avon Old Farms. These students' combined promised financial aid totals more than \$1.7 million, more than three times CitySquash's 2006-2007 operating budget.

Fernandez is one of CitySquash's 15 students who have gone on to enroll at a boarding school. He's a freshman at Canterbury School (in Canterbury's lingo, a "third-former"), a Catholic boarding and day school in New Milford, Connecticut. Fernandez is 5-foot-6 and muscular and has bushy black hair that grows just long enough to hint at the possibility of Manny Ramirez-style dreadlocks. He wears a faux diamond earring in his left ear, often furrows his brow, and has a deep, gravelly voice. In his dorm room, over a poster showing sketches of hip-hop stars, he has tacked two notes, one from his mother and one from Wyant, which reads, "You are the freakin' man!"

"Tim told me he accepted me to CitySquash because I have a great personality and I'm a good athlete," Fernandez says.

"He told me he thought he could change me," he says. "And he did."

Fernandez's first year in the program was the year of CitySquash's first three applicants going to private boarding schools. At that point, Fernandez didn't entertain any thoughts of doing the same. "I was not the brightest guy," he says. He changed his mind in seventh grade, after visiting Suffield Academy in Suffield, Connecticut, with his CitySquash friend, Freddy Hernandez, an eighth-grader who planned to apply there. Fernandez describes the campus as "peaceful."

"It looked like a place you could do a lot of work," he says.

Fernandez did not raise his grades his seventh-grade year, and Knowlton resisted the idea of him applying to boarding schools. He not only had low grades, but also, like many CitySquash team members who apply to boarding schools, he scored poorly on the Secondary Scholastic Aptitude Test (SSAT), the standardized test that most boarding schools require for admission. "They're schools, boarding *schools*, not squash camps!" Knowlton joked to Wyant. Squash was not a problem: Fernandez was ranked in the top 40 in the country in his age division by the fall of his eighth-grade year.

That year, whatever chemistry there is between squash and academics seemed to kick in for Fernandez. His grade average was at or above 80 percent every quarter that year. "After playing squash three years," Wyant says, "he started to enjoy learning more."

Fernandez was accepted at two of the four schools to which he applied. He chose to attend Canterbury in part because two other CitySquash students were already studying there: Jose Alvarez, who was a Canterbury fourth-former (sophomore), and Hernandez, who had started there in the fall.

Fernandez wears his blue Canterbury jacket in the style of the school's sharpest dressers, zipped up all the way so that it entirely conceals his dress-code-mandated tie and blazer. At lunch he sits at a table of sophomores he met through Hernandez.

He didn't flinch when, in the dining hall one night before finals week, a shaggy blond Canterbury senior touched his earring. "Take that out, it looks too ghetto," the boy said. But Fernandez laughed it off.

"I've always felt that CitySquash kids waltz into these campuses like they own them because they've been there so many times to play squash," says Knowlton. "They know all the kids because they've played against them in squash. They know all the parents because they've hosted them."

On winter afternoons at the Canterbury School, students and faculty congregate in the athletic center, which consists of basketball courts, a wrestling room, a concession stand serving healthy snacks, an athletic gift shop offering T-shirts and baby clothing from various teams, a hockey rink, and a Zamboni emblazoned with the blue Canterbury crest.

And there's the eight-year-old Saxe and Castellini Family Squash Pavilion, which has five glass-walled courts and seating for 200 on sloped bi-level wood risers where students congregate. During the boy's varsity squash practice, students cluster around the first couple of courts to watch the school's two best squash players hit lofting shots that hug the sidewalls and land in the back corners.

The No. 1 player on the Canterbury School men's varsity squash team is Freddy Hernandez. Chris Fernandez is No. 2.



Courtney Knowlton with some of the squash players she's helped: (left to right) Chris Fernandez, Seetreeon Torres, and Alija Hogans
photo: CitySquash