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Using Squash To Get On The Ball

Gabriel Garcia of **Harlem** practices between matches at the **National Urban Squash Tournament**. Games are being played in **Philadelphia**. This weekend, 260 kids from public schools in Harlem, the Bronx, Boston, Chicago, San Diego, New Haven, and some of Philadelphia's diciest neighborhoods descended on a state-of-the-art athletic center in Hunting Park.

From 8 a.m. yesterday until past 7 p.m., they streamed in, climbed to the second story, and dumped their bags in a corner that began to look like the lost-baggage counter at American Airlines. Then they put on their goggles, picked up their rackets, and, two by two, entered through a glass wall to pitilessly bash a little black ball in a bright-white court in a game of squash.

Yes. Squash.



A game of the English gentry, it was developed in the 1800s at the elite Harrow School and long remained the nearly exclusive domain of white men in white shorts who picked up the sport at prep school, practiced it at an Ivy, and went on to play at private clubs with partners from the firm.

Not surprising, then, that most of the athletes at this weekend's National Urban Squash Tournament, who come from low-income families in school districts with little or no after-school athletics, never knew that squash was anything other than a vegetable. That is, until recruiters from one of the seven new urban squash programs showed up during gym with a video, a few rackets and balls, and a sign-up sheet.

“It was like the best hurricane that ever came through someone’s life,” says Quinetta Bowden, 16, a sophomore at the Philadelphia High School for Girls. She and her older sister, Tempest, have played since 2002, when the nonprofit SquashSmarts visited the city’s Morton McMichael School to launch the program.

The program’s energetic leaders, who introduced themselves as Miss Julie and Chase Lenfest, appeared like emissaries from Planet Happy-Ever-After, the sisters recall.

“They looked so different,” Tempest, 18, says. “She was wearing tights and shorts and a fleece. He was in bombed-out sneakers.”

“They made it seem so inviting,” says Quinetta. “Like if you joined, you had instant success.”

The third program of its kind in the country, SquashSmarts recruits sixth graders and commits to work with them for at least three years, teaching and coaching squash, but also providing academic tutoring, summer camps, Outward Bound experiences and travel, and high school and college placement.

Ten to 14 children are chosen from each sixth-grade class after tryouts, says Stephen Gregg, executive director, as he marks the results of the first round of this tournament’s matches on giant easels. This is the first time the tournament is being held in Philadelphia.

Until last fall, SquashSmarts used courts at Drexel University. But in October, it expanded its program into a new, two-story, 57,000-square-foot facility in Hunting Park. The \$9 million center was funded by Ana Maria and H. Chase Lenfest. The same Chase Lenfest who played squash at Yale and showed up at the McMichael School in the bombed-out sneakers.

SquashSmarts’ objective is not to get its graduates into Ivy League schools, but to open up their world and let them dream big.

“We don’t take the best and brightest or the athletically gifted,” Gregg says. “What we’re looking for is just commitment. How hard you try. Success, similarly, has less to do with winning matches than attendance, good conduct and teamwork.”

Most of the students come from homes and neighborhoods bruised by urban poverty.

“They tend to be older than their years,” Gregg says. “This allows them to be kids.”

One of yesterday’s competitors, Maria Perez, says she has been getting into a lot less trouble since she started playing squash in January.

“People used to get on my nerves,” she explains, so she would get into fights. “I was kicked out of three schools.”

Maria, 13, lives in Hunting Park with her mother, who is unemployed and disabled, and three siblings.

Through squash, she says, she is learning to deal with frustration.

“They started encouraging me. . . . On the court, it feels good. It’s all right when you lose because winning isn’t everything. That’s what they tell you.”

Six years after holding a squash racket for the first time, Quinetta Bowden has played on teams that twice came in second in national urban tournaments. She’s good, she says, but sister Tempest is even better.

In 2006, while in 10th grade, Tempest qualified for the U.S. junior nationals and became the nation’s highest-ranked African American squash player among girls under 17. (She’s now ranked 42d in the under-19 group.) “People call us the Venus and Serena Williams of squash,” Quinetta says.

At first, she says, “we played with used goggles and rackets.”

“But we didn’t care,” says Tempest. “Because we didn’t know what new looked like.”

A year after they started playing, their parents went through a difficult divorce.

“It was like a twilight zone. You were in this whole bunch of mess,” says Tempest. “But when you were in squash, you could leave that. Hit the ball. Take out some of that anger.”

Their father, Kenneth, accompanied them to the tournament to help man the grill and serve several hundred hot dogs and burgers to the athletes. A former cook at Champps and a Sheraton hotel, he has been out of work since February 2006 and living on disability payments.

“You know you have great aspirations for your kids. But growing up in this area, even though they have big dreams, you don’t know how they’re going to get there.”

With the help of SquashSmarts, Tempest will graduate from Gratz High School in June and attend Mercersburg Academy, a postgraduate boarding school; she plans eventually to teach kindergarten. Through the program, her sister spent her 16th birthday at a squash program in London.

“I want so much,” says Quinetta, who is determined to become a lawyer. “And it showed me what I want is not far-fetched.”

Adds her sister, “Because you’ve seen the world outside of Philly, you know there’s so much more out there.”

Yesterday, the sisters won their matches, both 3-0. Today, they’re in the finals (of course).

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