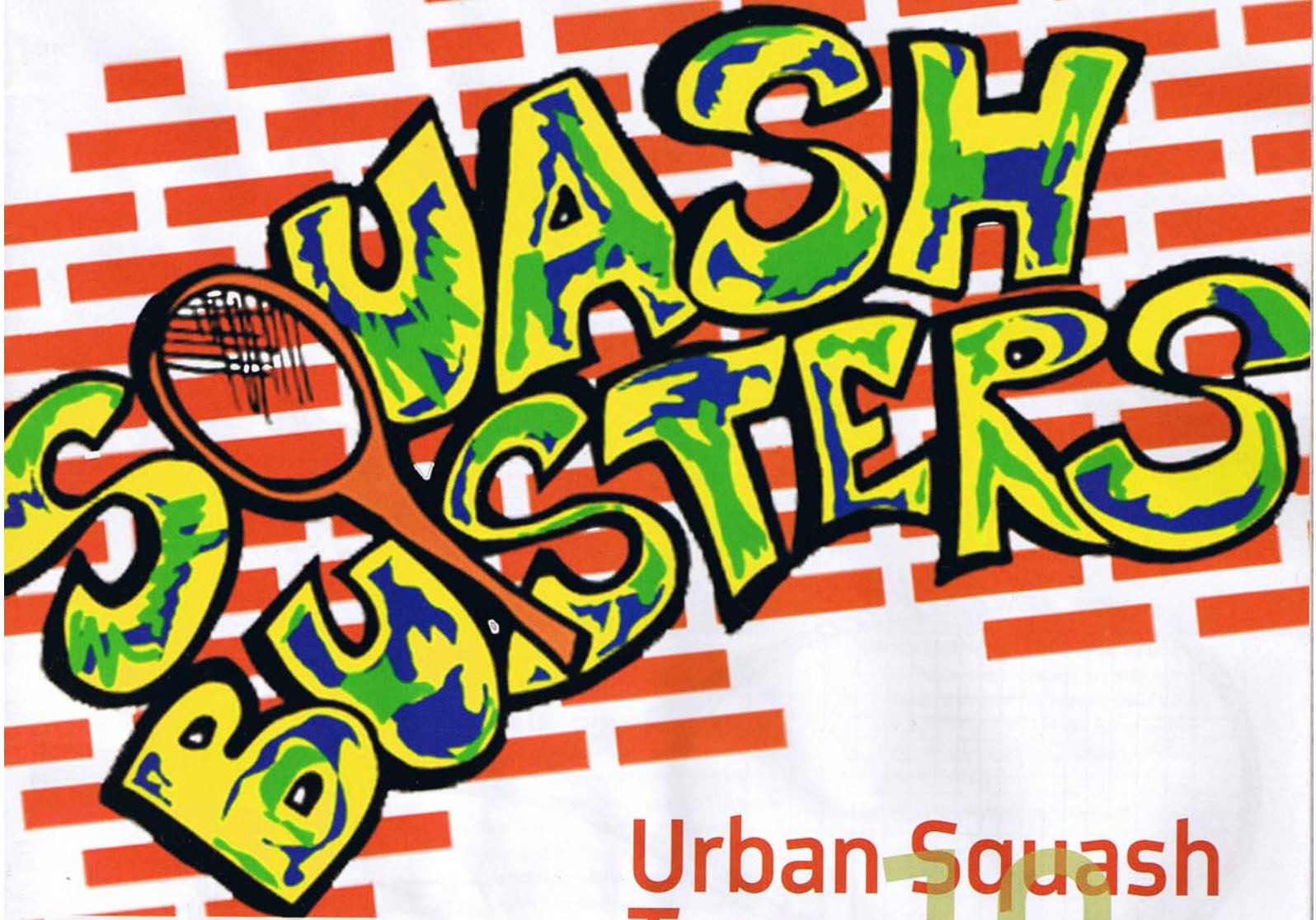


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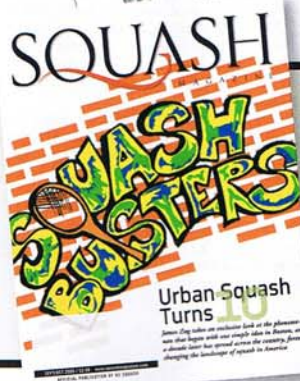
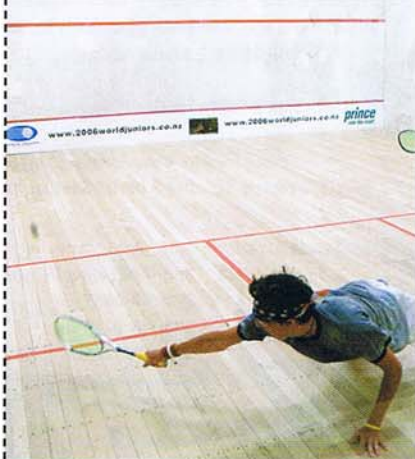


Urban Squash Turns 10

James Zug takes an exclusive look at the phenomenon that began with one simple idea in Boston, and a decade later has spread across the country, forever changing the landscape of squash in America

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36 WILL'S WORLD *By Will Carlin*

ON THE COVER Ten years ago, Gregg Zaff created SquashBusters in Boston as a Youth Enrichment Program for two inner-city schools. Today, there are a dozen similar programs across the country and a newly created National Urban Squash and Education Association. SquashBusters Logo courtesy of SquashBusters. **Top:** After a season of squash, studying and serving, the kids of Chicago-based METROSquash enjoy an end of the year celebration, at the expense of a piñata. Photo Courtesy of METROSquash **Middle:** Reed Endresen went all out in his first round loss to Egypt's Omar Tarek Mahm Aly at the World Junior Men's Championships. Photo by David Wiltshire **Bottom:** Adding jumping rope to your warm-up can help in various aspects of your squash play, including hand and foot coordination and endurance of the hand and wrist. Photo ©iStockphoto.com/Gerville Hall.

THE ARC OF THE MORAL UNIVERSE

Urban Squash Celebrates its Tenth Anniversary

by James Zug

himself in a room for a month, whipped out his old term paper and produced a draft business plan: take a dozen kids, hold three-hour practices (half squash, half academics) twice a week and on Saturdays; toss in community service and cultural outings and see what happens.

In March 1995 he had lunch at the Cottonwood Café on Berkeley Street in Back Bay with Molly Downer who took lessons from Zaff and was also president of the Massachusetts SRA. After lunch, she persuaded the MSRA to take a leap and give \$5,000 to seed Zaff's program.

Seventeen busy months later, he had formed a board that included Senator John Chaffee of Rhode Island and Massachusetts governor Bill Weld, courts at the Harvard Club, and a budget of \$54,200 (it grew to \$72,000 as the first season progressed). In September 1996 Zaff and Mark Talbott went into two Boston schools, Timilty School in Roxbury and Harrington School in Cambridge and did their improvised dog-and-pony show. Twenty-four sixth and seventh graders emerged from the resulting try-outs and, on October 1, 1996, SquashBusters held its first official practice.

Anyone who knows that story cannot

walk into the Badger & Rosen SquashBusters Center at Northeastern without thinking of Virginia Slims. Opened in July 2003, the four-story facility has ample administrative spaces, classrooms, locker rooms and eight courts. It cost \$6.5 million. (Northeastern donated the land, worth \$300,000—maintains the facility, \$175,000 per year—and gets to use the courts at off-peak times; SquashBusters gets a 100-year lease.) The grand sweep of the eight courts, in a trademark, light-filled arc, is stunning. You've come a long way, baby.

No one has ever accused Zaff of standing pat. Midway through SquashBusters' first year, Zaff hired an academic director and he has been adding staff ever since—right now there are 11 full-time employees. Headquarters have gone from Zaff's second bedroom in his Cambridge apartment to a spare office at Len Bernheimer's printing plant to an abandoned building at Northeastern University to a double-wide trailer to the Badger & Rosen. He has run practices at the Harvard Club, Harvard University, Cambridge Racquet & Fitness Club and Cambridge YMCA. He has stretched the original three-year program into seven. The board has kept six of its founding members but has expanded to include former presidential candidate Michael

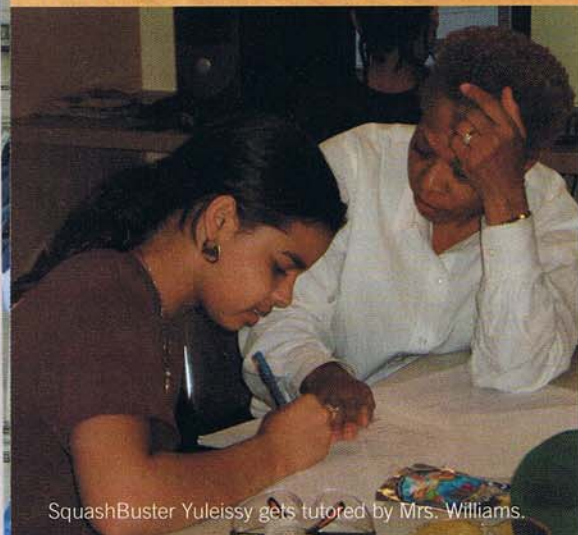
Dukakis and celebrity chef Ming Tsai. Zaff raises his annual budget of \$800,000 from a variety of places, including his first fundraising event, the SquashBusters Derby in May. It netted more than \$300,000, brought more than 150 people to the Center to play squash and celebrate the program and saw Peter Nicol wear a full-length frilly dress. Whoa, Nellie.

Even during SquashBusters' inaugural season, there were rumblings of expanding the program to other cities. But with running his own program an all-consuming job, Zaff had no time to franchise his program. But he could franchise the model.

In September 1999 George Polsky launched StreetSquash. Polsky had grown up in New York and played at Harvard. Based on Zaff's model, StreetSquash followed in the same path: doubling the size of the program, adding staff, and forming a top-notch board that includes artist Frank Stella, publishing mogul Mort Zuckerman, Lehman Bros. chair Dick Fuld and real estate giant Steve Green who has lent them one big room in his famous Graybar building for their offices. The StreetSquash kids come from Harlem middle schools. Polsky has two core facilities, Columbia University and the Harvard Club



New group ProV Squash is all racquets in.



SquashBuster Yuleissy gets tutored by Mrs. Williams.



SquashBusters (L-R) Randy Coplin, Jessica Geaves and Vicki Gomes help out in a community service project at Heifer International Overlook Farm.



SquashBusters (from L-R) Greg, Jessica G., Randy, Shakeele and Andre volunteer at the Food Project in Lincoln, MA.

of New York, and uses courts at the West Side YMCA. The program has gone from 28 kids and two staff and 20 volunteers that first year to 140 kids, 8 staff and 120 volunteers.

Polsky is also building a clubhouse. He is partnering with a developer of a new mixed-income condominium, the Kalahari Building, on 115th Street between Fifth and Lenox Avenues in Manhattan; Polsky is paying \$5 million for a 19,000 square foot space in the basement, ground and mezzanine floors and a further \$4 million to build out eight squash courts, four classrooms, a library, workout area, locker rooms and offices for 14 StreetSquash staffers. Two of the eight squash courts have been named so far: one for Trinity coach Paul Assaiante and one for the late Dartmouth coach Red Hoehn. Polsky has raised more than \$10 million in a \$13 million campaign (which includes a \$4 million endowment). The Stephen L. Green StreetSquash Community Center will open in the spring of 2008.

While the first two programs were started in a similar fashion, with a visionary founder at the helm, the second pair in the so-called Big Four came from a passionate board of directors. In November 2000 Reverend Fred Guyott, a Racquet Club of Philadelphia member, and a few other local squash leaders, incorporated SquashSmarts. It was a volunteer-only organization that began to recruit kids from a West Philadelphia middle school to play first at the Racquet Club and then at Drexel University. In August 2001, with a growing board in place, SquashSmarts hired Julie Williams as an executive director. Williams, a former US national lacrosse team member, had just left her Penn State lacrosse coaching job and heard about SquashSmarts through a serendipitous chain of a best friend's sister's husband.

Keen on the idea, the timing was a bit wrong. Williams was seven months pregnant and living in Blue Bell, a good hour commute away. But for three years, including the arrival of a second child in July 2004, she managed, mostly as the only paid staffer, to not only keep the program afloat but actually grow it. In the summer of 2004 Steve Gregg, a former Trinity player, left his job as junior director at the USSRA and became executive director at SquashSmarts, allowing Williams to relax, ever so slightly, into a job as academic director. The program converted one of Drexel's six hardball squash courts into an office and

now has 22 kids from two schools.

A clubhouse is naturally in the works. An energetic SquashSmarts board member, Chase Lenfest, is also on the board of the Philadelphia Police Athletic League and is about to break ground on a \$10 million facility in a box factory in North Philadelphia that will serve both his interests. One floor will be for PAL (boxing, basketball) and one for SquashSmarts. Gregg will retain the Drexel wing of the program, so there will be two sites serving 112 kids for seven years.

If SquashSmarts started off slowly, CitySquash has kept a blistering pace since it was founded by Sanford Schwartz in 2002. Schwartz, stranded after the 9-11 attacks in New York, had an epiphany about doing something good for the community and hired Tim Wyant as an executive director of a new program in the Bronx. Wyant, a former Harvard player and US team member, got so jazzed on his job that he moved a block away from Middle School 45 and presently houses the CitySquash staff office in a tiny room in his apartment building.

Based at Fordham University, CitySquash has proved that a single city can support more than one after-school program. "When I asked George if I could start a program in New York," Wyant recalls, "instead of feeling territorial, he immediately said, 'Absolutely—how can I help?'" CitySquash is bold. They have stylish, if intimidating, black team hoodies. They have an oversized newsletter that lists every donor. They were the charity that helped lure more than \$250,000 out for the inaugural Briggs Cup doubles tournament at Apawamis in Rye, NY, changing the way pro tournaments can be run. Some programs worry that big fundraising events cannibalize the often more effective, individual appeals that are the core of every program. CitySquash believes they galvanize a community and holds enormous, spring-time fundraisers called Bashes. The first two Bashes were at restaurants owned by David Emil for about 300 people; the first raised \$15,000, the second \$100,000. This year, they went for broke and hosted 600 people at the Racquet & Tennis Club. The night included an exhibition by former World No. 1's Jonathon Power and John White (playing singles and doubles), a giving tree and a silent auction with golf at a dozen clubs, a weekend in Nova Scotia and a Brazilian cocktail party. The night was very, very big—the organizing

committee alone numbered nearly 70 people and the place was jammed—and netted \$190,000. Not surprisingly, Wyant is clubhouse shopping and looking into the possibility of using city-owned land near Fordham to create a CitySquash building.

In 2004 the Big Four launched the urban nationals: two tournaments, a team match at SquashBusters' facility in Boston and individual tournaments at Groton Academy. These weekends are enormously popular with the kids and a fantastic showpiece for the programs—200 inner-city kids playing squash at a prep school.

With all the growth, the Big Four decided in 2005 to formally unify their programs and create an umbrella organization, the National Urban Squash and Education Association. One purpose of the NUSEA is to put best practices on paper, so that each program does not have to figure out all the minutiae on the ground. Another was to help new programs by being a resource, financially and developmentally. And there was quality control. "We also wanted to define what we do and how you evaluate it," Zaff says. "We wanted to create a standard so that there is a known product."

Besides the four executive directors, the NUSEA board consists of its chairman, Bill Simon (a prominent LA businessman), Ed Haldeman (CEO of Putman Investments), and USSRA CEO Kevin Klipstein. "It is very rare that you have a brand new idea that you can replicate," said Simon. "We're giving a whole generation the opportunity to better themselves, and that is very inspiring." After years of benign indifference, the USSRA has been extremely enthusiastic about the urban programs in the past three years and is partnering with NUSEA. They endorse NUSEA member programs, offer discounted memberships to the kids and help facilitate the urban nationals. Most of all, they are splitting the grant money to provisional programs 50/50 with NUSEA.

Zaff is so committed to NUSEA that he is leaving SquashBusters to become its executive director. (He will work full-time at SquashBusters this season and part-time at NUSEA—only Zaff can do this sort of thing. In July 2007 he will leave Badger & Rosen to a successor and work full-time at NUSEA.) "I love the creative mode, stripped down to the bare essentials, creating something new," he said. "It will be hard to leave



MetroSquash kids show off their bling after a tournament.

SquashBusters after all these years, but it will be time to let the next group take it over."

NUSEA has begun fundraising, and there is little question that it will attract support. Money has poured into the urban programs at a startling rate. One person donated \$1.5 million to SquashBusters' building campaign, another gave half a million and 13 people gave \$100,000; for StreetSquash, the numbers were even more amazing—250 donors including two giving a million, two giving \$1.5 million and one giving \$2.5 million. The combined annual budgets of the Big Four is over \$2.3 million.

Some of this is due to the burgeoning economy of the late 1990s, the end of the hardball era and a pent-up need for the squash community to help expand the game and wipe away its elitist veneer. Some of it is due to the passion and charisma of the executive directors. Some is simply because those of privilege want to help those without.

The level of commitment for some extends beyond simply writing a check. Sven Karlen, the father of Pete Karlen who worked at StreetSquash for years, convinced Danny Corcione, a SquashBuster, to move from Boston to Hanover, NH. For his last two years of high school, Corcione lived with the Karlens.

The Big Four will soon have to change their name. In 2003 Fritzzy and Jack Goodman, parents of Zerline Goodman and longtime squash supporters (they have a pristine court at their house) read about StreetSquash

in a *New York Times* article and persuaded a YMCA-like group, the Catharine Street Community Center, to start KidzSquash. Playing at the Poughkeepsie Tennis Club and Vassar College, KidzSquash has 17 Catharine Street kids in grades three through six. Ben Oliner, a recent Brown graduate and top-10 US player, was the director for the program's first three years and brought his kids to the urban nationals in 2005. The program, in part to fulfill NUSEA requirements, is now forming its first board and looking for its first full-time executive director.

In Washington, D.C., not one but two programs have sprung up. In 2004 Howard Day and Wendy Lawrence, two veteran junior coaches, joined with former Princeton player Elizabeth Dupree and this writer to launch DC Squash Academy at the University Club and Results The Gym. DCSA now has two elementary schools in the program, four senators, a congressman and an ambassador on its board (the NUSEA joke is that DCSA requires a 2:1 student-to-Senator ratio). This summer Mark Lewis, the Trinity grad and former No. 2 ranked US player, left his job as the pro at the Union Boat Club in Boston to become executive director. In 2005 Connie Barnes, an Australian expat, started SquashEmpower, DC's other program. Barnes works with 32 fifth and sixth graders from two downtown schools at a local YMCA and is keenly interested in improving their self-esteem.

New England soon might have more

than just SquashBusters. Dave Talbott is organizing SquashHaven, a new program to be run out of the Yale squash facility with its own board and executive director. More concretely, Providence launched a small program this past winter. Ken Wise, head of the Rhode Island SRA, Cory Diamond, who works in development at Brown, and Andrew Frishman, a squash zealot who taught at a Providence charter school, started ProvSquash with nine middle school boys. The program ran on Saturday mornings at Brown's courts. In the spring, they added 11 fifth and sixth grader boys with a Monday afternoon segment. It is an all-volunteer, all-squash program, which they hope to slowly turn into the more traditional model.

California might form its own West Coast league. In early 2006 the Santa Barbara School of Squash started with six sixth graders playing squash and studying at the Santa Barbara Athletic Club. SBSOS has Robert Graham, former US No. 1 and SBAC pro, and Terry Eagle, squash coach at nearby Cate School, among its founding board members. Ashley Kayler, the unpaid UC Berkeley coach for the past 10 years, has been working to hire a replacement who would work part-time on a SquashBusters-like program. Dominique Chiquet, a pro at the Bay Club, is hoping to start a program at UC San Francisco. Both will operate under the umbrella of Giving on the T, a new San Francisco non-profit founded by Dave Levy that is supporting youth sports programs.

At the SquashBusters Derby, Chris Walker offered an hour private lesson for auction. Two were taken at \$10,000 and one buyer asked if he could up the ante to 10 lessons for \$100,000. Walker agreed, but after conferring with Zaff ("you better promise me to come back next year") asked that half the money go to SquashBusters and half to a new after-school program he wanted to start. Surf City Squash is slated to launch this fall at Walker's new squash club in San Diego. He has already secured another \$50,000 donation, has begun forming a board (which includes USSRA Treasurer Blair Sadler) and is advertising for an executive director.

The most prominent of the new programs is MetroSquash. The first urban program to receive NUSEA's \$10,000 developmental grant, MetroSquash was founded a

year ago by a group led by Conor O'Malley, a pro at the University Club of Chicago. MetroSquash is based in Hyde Park on the south side of Chicago. A dozen fifth graders were on the first team; and a dozen more are joining this fall. They play their squash at the University of Chicago's five old hardball courts; the University supplies work-study students. David Kay, the Canadian who played at Princeton and was a top-ranked ISDA star while a pro at the Union Club in New York, is the executive director. "Tim Wyant told me when I started that I would never work harder but never be happier, and it's true," Kay says. "It's an amazing life experience, pulling the pieces together." This summer, MetroSquash came to the urban nationals and hired a full-time academic director.

Not all has been rosy. The programs have struggled to set up mentoring programs (logistics, background checks). SquashBusters has forged ahead the best, and yet in 10 years they have had only 67 mentor-mentee matches. It has been hard to develop long-term, sustainable community service projects. Some foundations and donors worry about pouring so much money into a program that comparatively serves so few kids; they want breadth not depth, they want thousands of children gaining some benefit, rather than a smaller number receiving intense support. The programs have independently discovered that they need to focus much more on nutrition and good health. A number of players are obese and many have dangerously bad eating habits. They also have begun to encourage improved social skills, like players looking people in the eye when they converse.

Moreover, they have also realized that to have an impact, the programs must be comprehensive, all-year and many years. Until they moved to Northeastern, SquashBusters had a unique system in which students were in the program for one semester then took the next one off. This rotation enabled the kids to take a break from the program (for some it can be pretty concentrated; many have jobs and responsibilities at home) and enabled Zaff to bring more kids through the program. Now the trend is towards more intensity. StreetSquash tries to envelope the kids in a longer week, with after-school programs on Fridays and other

programs are pondering such a move. They all make summer the most exciting season in the year. The kids go to squash camps, including one in England; home stays overseas; hiking in New Hampshire; canoeing in Maine; and they attend classic summer camps like Camp Dudley in Westport, NY. The Big Four also run their own in-house summer camps, so they both keep the program running in a time which otherwise can be rather empty for the kids and they provide leadership opportunities for some of the older team members as counselors. Sixteen of SquashSmarts' team worked at their summer camp, the Embrace Camp, which caters toward low-income children.

Such a schedule leads to burnout on the staff. No one on any staff besides the founders has lasted more than five years, except Chris Smith at SquashBusters, and he took a few years off in the middle (and Smitty is a glutton for punishment: he coaches Northwestern's co-ed squash team and is the US national junior coach). The job is very hard and despite the idealism (staffers at two programs first learned about their jobs by going to www.idealism.org), it is easy to get exhausted. The kids call the cell phones of staffers at all hours. Weekends are jammed with tournaments and matches.

And the work can be dispiriting. Kids have to be expelled from the program. Parents disappoint kids. All six full-time executive directors went to top squash schools, are good players and are well-connected in the squash world, yet all except Zaff are a long hop away from the posh world they came from: staff crammed into one room, kids studying on folding tables in hallways and playing on dusty hardball courts.

Due to these pressures and the founders' interests, the programs have developed real differences. SquashSmarts and CitySquash have extremely active boards, while the other two of the Big Four are more hands-off. StreetSquash has a formal parent board. SquashBusters and CitySquash benefit from community service requirements that Northeastern and Fordham have, making finding academic tutors a breeze (I once saw two CitySquash tutors get in an good-natured argument over who was supposed to be tutoring that day) while StreetSquash has to hire part-time tutors because Columbia does not have such a requirement. SquashSmarts is keen on out-

