



SPORTS

Ready To Make A Racquet

Squash slowly catching on in Chicagoland

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Nineteen of the world's top athletes in their sport are coming to Chicago next week for a tournament you've probably never heard about.

But the Windy City Open, one of the biggest squash tournaments in the world, will be played for the 25th straight year at the prestigious University Club, 76 E. Monroe St., in downtown Chicago.

Matches will be played in a glass court, sandwiched between crystal chandeliers in a lovely ninth-floor Cathedral Hall that offers a stunning view of Millennium Park. It's a spectacular setting for an event that, at least in Chicago, ranks far below high school sports for most spectators.

Squash, promoters and players claim, is slowly catching on in Chicago and the Midwest. But it's far off the radar screen for most local fans who, probably because of lack of accessibility to the game, see it as a sport for folks on the East Coast.

David Kay is trying to bring squash to those who may never see the game. He is directing a program called METROsquash that is introducing the sport to Chicago public school students.

"Squash, to be honest with you, has an elitist reputation, especially in the States," Kay said. "People think that only the business elite like it, that it's only played in country clubs and in prep schools and universities back East.

"But there's no real reason it should be like that. It's a sport played on a court with a racquet and an opponent. Last year, Forbes Magazine rated it the top cardiovascular sport," Kay said. "It's the most intense workout you can get in 45 minutes."

Twelve fifth-graders at Chicago's Kozminski School, 936 E. 54th St., are enrolled in Kay's program, learning how to play squash at the University of Chicago, one of the few sites in the city where courts can be found.

Much like racquetball, the game is played in a court with four walls by two players hitting a small rubber ball with racquets.

In squash, the first player to nine points (or 11 points for the pros) is the winner. Your serve must hit the front wall first. Every shot must hit the front wall at least once. The ball can't bounce on the floor more than once. And you must be serving to win a point.

That might sound a lot like racquetball, but there are subtle differences.

In squash, if the ball — a black rubber number about the size of a golf ball — hits above a line painted on the front, side and back walls, it is considered out of bounds.

The squash ball is smaller and doesn't bounce as well as a racquetball. The squash court is typically 21 feet wide and 32 feet deep, while a racquetball court measures 20 feet by 40 feet. Squash racquets are a tad longer.

But the biggest difference is "the tin," a tiny metal border at the base of the front wall. It is 19 inches tall for squash amateurs and 17 inches tall for the pros. If an amateur's shot strikes it, he loses the serve. If a pro's shot hits it, he loses a point. Racquetball has no tin.

One of those pros trying to avoid the tin at the Windy City Open will be Canadian Jonathon Power, one of the top-ranked players in the world and called the "John McEnroe of squash" by many fans.

The pros in the Open, competing for a total of \$100,000 in prize money, will play grueling matches where the balls can travel in the area of 125 to 150 mph when served.

Amateur squash players such as Graeme Cooksley, a member of the University Club who plays there several times a week, are looking forward to seeing the pros play.

Cooksley is executive vice president of SSA Global, sponsor of the open. A former professional rugby player, his oft-broken nose as proof, Cooksley has played squash for about 30 years.

"I'm from New Zealand and rugby was the epic sport there. Squash was a game I found exciting," he said. "The big thing is you can get a good workout in a concentrated period of time. I think it's faster than racquetball."

Unlike racquetball, rallies in squash can last a minute or so, he said. The more you play, the craftier you get as Cooksley has learned.

Cooksley travels worldwide for his job and has found squash enthusiasts in nearly every country he visits.

"You find quite a lot of business people play squash because they can get a quick workout and make business connections. I'm surprised how many executives tell me to bring my gear for a game. Golf is good, but it's a day's outing," he said.

Cooksley, 55, enjoys the intensity of the game, as seen during an hour-long match with a friend at the University Club. Both men were winded and drenched with perspiration moments into a match that found them running, lunging and swinging their racquets virtually non-stop.

"It's not as physical a game as rugby," Cooksley said, "but the competitive spirit is still there. You try to position your opponent to get more shot control. You want to be in the center of the court."

SSA is also sponsoring METROsquash and has given the schoolchildren 5,000 rubber bracelets that will sell for \$3 each during the Windy City Open to raise \$15,000 for the program, he said.

"A lot of these people otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity to play. So, hopefully, the funding will help that program expand," Cooksley said.

Future popularity of squash all comes down to availability, said Rich Cobb, former president of the Illinois Squash Racquets Association.

"I think there may be 20, 25 places to play in the Chicago area," Cobb said.

There is a squash court at Lifetime Fitness in Orland Park, and it's not difficult to book time there, Cobb said. He and a handful of other squash lovers play at Lifetime Fitness in Burr Ridge. They have no problems with over-crowded conditions, Cobb said.

Squash, he said, may be "too rigorous" for your average weekend warrior.

"It's the best exercise next to basketball," he said.

The ISRA has about 150 members in the association and there may be 1,000 players in the Chicago area, Cobb said.

That pales compared to other sports such as volleyball, racquetball or bowling.

That doesn't surprise 16-year-old Nick Sisodia of Chicago's Hyde Park community. Ranked 22nd in the nation among boys age 17 and younger, Sisodia can't find a pickup squash game among friends at the University of Chicago Lab High School, where he's a sophomore.

"None of my friends play squash. They are all pretty serious about other sports. I've taken a couple tennis players out to play squash, but it's hard to convert them," Nick said.

Nick, who picked up the game from his father, likes squash "because it makes you think."

"People compare squash to chess in that there's so much thinking. You can do many things by playing smarter, by trying to outwit your opponent. The strongest or tallest player doesn't always win," said Nick, who stands 5-foot-4 and weighs 119 pounds.

Mark Johnson, who coaches the squash club team at Northwestern University, is surprised squash is not more popular with stressed-out white-collar workers.

"We grew up playing tennis and it's a wonderful game, but squash is a great game when you come home from work and you're frustrated. You want to bang the ball. You can't in tennis, but you can on a squash court," Johnson, a professor of biomedical engineering, said.

Relieving tension isn't the reason Cooksley plays. He just loves the camaraderie.

"I haven't made multimillion dollar deals on a squash court, but I think the game has helped relationships with customers," Cooksley said. "It's like golf, but executives today don't have the time to spend on golf courses.

"One thing I can tell you is letting the customer win never happens," Cooksley added with a laugh. "Squash players are too competitive for that."