

Youths find inspiration on squash court

A program at some South Side schools is not only getting pupils excited in the sport, it's also motivating them in the classroom



Nick Sisodia, 15, helps Jordan Collins get up during a practice round of squash at the University of Chicago's Crown Field House. The Reavis Elementary pupil, 11, is taking part in Chicago's METROSquash program.



'I got good serve.'
- Jordan Collins (above), who is learning to play squash

Squash, which is played in a four-wall court with a rubber ball and racket, is the latest extracurricular activity that Chicago educators are embracing to help learning in the classroom.

For two years, the Chicago Public Schools system has sponsored the "Having a Ball" program, which has turned gawky preteens into gentlemen and ladies through instruction in the fox trot, waltz and merengue. Last fall, a West Side charter school adopted footworkin' – a Chicago-born street dance – as a hook to education.

Former squash pro Greg Zaff sparked the urban squash movement in 1996 when he founded SquashBusters, the Boston-based prototype on which all subsequent programs have been modeled. Today, there is StreetSquash in Harlem, SquashSmarts in Philadelphia, CitySquash in the Bronx and METROSquash in Chicago – the first program outside the East Coast.

All programs, which fall under the umbrella of the National Urban Squash and Education Association, combine squash, academics and community service to expose inner-city kids to a world beyond their neighborhoods.

The privately funded programs collectively have raised nearly \$40

By Johnathon E. Briggs
Tribune staff reporter

Often perceived as an elitist pursuit fancied by Ivy Leaguers with a penchant for argyle socks, squash seems to be the most unlikely sport to inspire kids to hit the books.

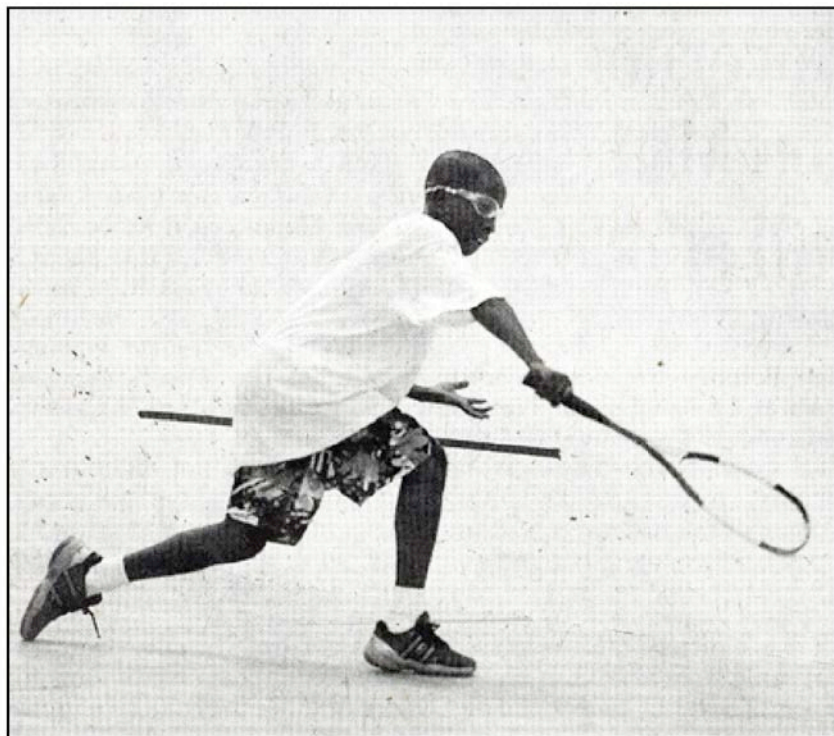
But last spring when staff members from METROSquash, a non-profit group that promotes the game in Chicago's public schools, gave a demonstration at Reavis Elementary, Jordan Collins got excited. It was squash at first sight.

Over the past year, the surly South Side boy whose report cards were a two-letter alphabet of C's and D's has

become a courteous, focused pupil who now frets that his B's aren't A's.

His newfound drive manifested itself last month at Groton, a prestigious prep school in Massachusetts, where the 5th grader bested more than 40 competitors to take first place in the boys' under-13 division at a national urban squash tournament. Never mind that Jordan, 11, was younger and less-experienced than his rivals.

"I got good serve," said a nonchalant Jordan, who earned a chance to partake in a summer squash camp later this month at Princeton University – a place he never imagined visiting.



Last month, Jordan Collins took first place in his division at a Massachusetts squash tournament. His grades are up too.

million over the last 11 years to build urban squash facilities and spread love for the game. There are two new programs in Providence, R.I., and Washington, D.C., with several more slated to open by fall in San Diego, Baltimore, New Haven, Conn., and East Palo Alto, Calif.

In October, METROsquash plans to hold a fundraiser at the Field Museum featuring squash pros playing on a glass court in the shadow of “Sue,” the Tyrannosaurus rex.

“Squash is a phenomenal vehicle for travel, for educational opportunities, for fitness,” said Zaff, who is slated to step down as executive director of SquashBusters in September to head the national urban squash group. “I wanted to use it as a venue for disadvantaged kids.”

Eighty-five percent of the program’s high school graduates enroll in college, Zaff said, some with the help of squash scholarships.

METROsquash Executive Director David Kay hopes to model that success in Chicago. The 2-year-old program currently helps two dozen 6th and 7th graders from Reavis and Kozminski, South Side elementary schools with pupils mostly from low-income homes. So far, 90 percent have improved their grades.

The program plans to expand to 40 youths in the fall by including 5th graders from a third South Side school, Price Elementary. The goal, Kay said, is to mentor its students through high school.

“To be honest, parents are very excited about the academic component of it,” Kay said.

Twice a week during the school year, students like Jordan Collins receive homework help and individualized tutoring before hitting the squash courts at the University of Chicago’s Crown Field House.

On Saturdays, they participate in

cultural activities and community projects, from visiting the Art Institute to making breakfast for senior citizens.

Margaret Pinaglia, Jordan’s 5th-grade teacher, said she encouraged Jordan and his family to consider the program because he needed tutoring, particularly with writing.

METROsquash academic director Christine Boukamp took note of that, and after a quarter of one-on-one instruction, Jordan was able to write expository essays – something he had struggled to do previously.

“It was really great to see,” Pinaglia recalled of Jordan’s growth. “I started crying.”

Jordan’s mother, Jamie Jackson, had tried other tutoring programs but said “this was the best thing that could have happened to him.”

Her son’s grades climbed. He stopped fighting at school. He grew comfortable shaking hands with adults.

Jordan had every incentive to act right. Students who act up or perform poorly in school don’t get to play or go on road trips.

“I have a program that helps me not get in trouble with the other kids,” said Jordan, who will start 6th grade in the fall. “They tell me to keep my anger in when somebody says something to me.”

He now takes those aggressions out on the court. During a recent practice, a goggle-clad Jordan unleashed his powerful backhand and zipped around the court at breakneck speed, chasing down serves that seemed impossible to return.

And to think that he was once ridiculed as “lame” by other boys because he was the only male in his class to sign up for squash.

Now people call him champ.