

ON TOP OF THEIR GAME



PHOTOS BY KRISTINE BULLS/EXAMINER

Students from Booker T. Washington Middle School practice their squash skills at Meadow Mill Athletic Club.

Ambitious sports programs help city's middle schoolers stay out of trouble and in the classroom

By Andrew Cannarsa
Examiner Staff Writer

Eleven-year-old John Boyd III was busy on a recent Wednesday afternoon with two things: his squash serve, and fraction addition and subtraction.

Sound interesting? It's a normal afternoon for John and 15 other Booker T. Washington Middle School students, the first group of Baltimore youth to participate in Baltimore SquashWise, a new nonprofit empowering city children through athletic and academic activity.

"It's good exercise, and it helps you with your homework," John, a sixth-grade student, said as he pored over a fraction worksheet in a classroom at Meadow Mill Athletic Club. "In school, you just sit down and do work. Here, you have time to play."

The program, in its first year and modeled after other squash-and-academics programs across the country, helps Baltimore City students grow and mature with one-on-one guidance. The three-times-a-week instruction preaches teamwork and respect on the squash court, and commitment and focus in the classroom.

"Squash is the hook," said Abby Markoe, the program's executive director and an avid squash player. "It's something unique, giving these kids an experience that's different from their peers. But it's about a lot more than just squash."

With Baltimore City's classrooms overcrowded and its teachers overburdened, there's a need for nonprofits that provide personal, individual instruction for the city's youth. The students involved have economic and academic needs that qualify them for the program.

"The kids aren't getting individual atten-

"Squash is the hook. It's something unique, giving these kids an experience that's different from their peers."

— Abby Markoe, Baltimore SquashWise executive director

tion at school," Markoe said. "The teachers are trying really hard, but when kids get any attention, it's usually negative if they've done something wrong. This program is about promoting positive attention."

Kids working together

Patrick Turner, president and founder of Baltimore's Turner Development Group, said he grew up poor and with limited access to activities such as squash or rowing.

So he knows too much free time can spell trouble for city youth, recognizing the need to keep children occupied with positive activities.

"The Baltimore education system is in pretty bad shape," Turner said. "There's just not that much out there for these kids."

Turner, developing the Westport Water-front community on the Middle Branch, in 2006 noticed the Baltimore Rowing Club's Juniors Program working together on the water.

"I never knew how intense of a sport it was — it's physically and mentally demanding, and it's really the ultimate team sport," Turner said. "But we noticed there weren't many urban kids involved."

So Turner went about working with the BRC and changing the makeup of its Juniors Program. He provided about \$8,000 to establish 10 scholarships to allow area youth to take up rowing, a sport they might otherwise never have the opportunity to try.

It was difficult to recruit willing members

at first, but scholarships were awarded to eight boys and two girls — eight came from single-family or foster homes. The students got to know each other and overcome their anxiety of a new experience together, Turner said. "You have to work together to succeed in rowing."

The team practiced several times a week after school, eventually growing as a unit and even winning some races.

"It was amazing to see the results so quickly," Turner said. "These kids [grew up in a dangerous community]. Now they're [being considered for] private schools, college."

Impressed with those results, Turner last year expanded the program with help from industrial supplier Honeywell, making a three-year commitment to the program and providing 25 scholarships to at-risk youth and enabling citywide recruitment. The increased financial commitment went to the purchase of boats and other equipment and funded college tours to area schools.

"This program is opening a lot of doors for these kids," Turner said. "Our goal is to keep expanding — the results are definitely there."

'College — that's the goal'

Maryland's nonprofit community and the outlets that fund the programs recognize the importance of youth programs such as SquashWise and the BRC's Juniors Program.

"Nonprofits have always stepped up to do the work that government can't fully fund and

no for-profit company wants to do because the work is at best break-even," said Nancy Hall, senior adviser of the Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations.

"Sports programs for Baltimore's kids is a case where nonprofits do fill a gap," Hall added. "The public schools no longer have funds to provide a lot of sports activities, especially for the younger kids. So nonprofit organizations, like McKim Center in Baltimore, work to make communities better by providing ways for kids to get some exercise and learn teamwork in a safe, caring environment."

The work continues for groups like SquashWise. Markoe and organizers raised \$150,000 last year for the program's first year of operation in Baltimore, and she's in the process of grant writing and fundraising for 2009's new SquashWise group.

"It's definitely tough in this economy to get funding from individual donors, so we're really looking to foundations to help us grow and expand," Markoe said.

Markoe said this year's squash group will stay in the program, and a new batch of 16 sixth-graders will join the program next year. Markoe stays in close contact with teachers and administrators at Booker T. Washington to monitor how her program members are progressing in school.

Ultimately, Markoe wants to see this year's group move on from squash with bigger goals in mind.

"I want all the kids to stay in the program," Markoe said. "I want all of them to move on to college — that's the goal."

After just a few weeks, SquashWise is having its desired effect.

"I like it, I'm working on my backhand," said Stevie Armstrong, a 13-year-old SquashWise member. "It helps me stay out of trouble. If I get in trouble, I won't be able to stay in squash."

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For city kids, the game of squash brings hope

By Rafael Alvarez
Examiner Correspondent

Mauricha Taylor knows how to manage the game when she plays touch football with friends on an empty field near her house just west of downtown along Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

A sixth-grader at Booker T. Washington Middle School, Mauricha takes the quarterback position every chance she gets. She is someone who likes to run the show, a youngster with dreams of becoming a pastry chef.

Like a lot of kids in Baltimore — the ones from the wide strata below the private and prep school set — Mauricha had never heard of a game called squash.

And then Abby Markoe showed up at Booker T. with a program called SquashWise along with a young woman from Morgan State University, who had used the game as a path to college.

Together they made some rah-rah about funny-looking racquets and a ball that bounces more quickly than those fuzzy, lime green ones you see on tennis courts.

About 90 kids turned out to watch the introduction. That was several months ago.

Now Booker T. Washington has its own team of 16 players, SquashWise has an initial budget of \$145,000, and Markoe — who landed in Baltimore to pursue a master's degree in public health at Johns Hopkins University — is known as "the squash lady."

The team practices at the Meadow Mill Athletic Club, located in Mount Washington, about 3 miles from the middle school. Meadow Mill has donated court time to the program.

And it is supported by local businesspeople and squash enthusiasts such as Charlie Wise, a renewable energy consultant who chairs the SquashWise board of directors. (The name of the program is coincidental. The Baltimore group was going to call itself SquashWorks, but a club in Utah already had the name.)

"Squash isn't waning with its traditional base, it's actually on an upswing. But these [inner-city] programs expand its reach," said Wise, who played varsity lacrosse for the University of Maryland, going to the Final Four with the Terps as a freshman in 1991.

"This is a good way for these kids to work with each other and to compete for scholarships to top-flight schools."

To stay on the team, the students must maintain passing grades and stay clear of



"Squash lady" Abby Markoe, Baltimore SquashWise's executive director, instructs a student at Booker T. Washington Middle School.

"Squash is about placement and occupying the space on the court. ... You have to manage that ball."

— Abby Markoe, squash evangelist

disciplinary problems for the privilege of smacking a ball against a wall in heated competition.

"Despite the fact that all of these kids were beginners and we were in a huge gymnasium

and not a squash court, they did surprisingly well," said Markoe, the executive director of SquashWise, who herself picked up the game in middle school in Lawrenceville, N.J., outside Princeton. "Some of them were naturals — ready to start hitting on a real court with another student."

But more than athletic ability, Markoe was looking for enthusiasm. "That's the No. 1 thing," said Markoe, adding that the kids in the program receive both academic tutoring and support in social skills as part of the team.

In making good use of her natural enthusiasm — the kind Markoe believes necessary for squash to be a stepping stone to a better life — Mauricha has taken to the game with the funny name.

"You put your mind to it, and you know that you can do it," said Mauricha, who plans to attend the National Academy Foundation School in Federal Hill after graduating from Booker T. Washington.

The first field trip for the squash team was Pam Shriver's 23rd annual tennis exhibition, held at the 1st Mariner Arena on Nov. 21. There, Serena Williams took on Elena Dementieva of Russia. Asked how squash is different from the game conquered by Serena and her sister Venus, Mauricha said that the ball is smaller, and instead of hitting it over a net toward your opponent, you whack it against a wall.

The speed and cunning it takes to do that well, said William Bailey, Booker T. Washington's principal, is a key to why the kids have embraced the game.

"Chasing the ball at a high rate of speed while keeping up their grades is the equivalent of the fast pace of their lives," Bailey said. "They know they have to keep up."

Taralyn Gonzalez — the program coor-

inator for SquashWise — began playing in a Harlem, N.Y., program called "Street Squash."

The Harlem group — along with similar programs in Chicago, Philadelphia and New Haven, Conn. — is one of 10 urban squash projects established around the country in the wake of SquashBusters, started in Boston in 1995 by Greg Zaff, who starred in the sport at Williams College.

The National Urban Squash and Education Association, which recently selected Baltimore's SquashWise as its "star program," asserts that 93 percent of all kids who graduate from an urban squash program go on to college.

In a city like Baltimore, where educational advocacy groups gauged the public high school dropout rate this year at about 65 percent, nonprofit programs like SquashWise are viewed as miraculous.

"When you have a small program with a high mentor-to-student ratio ... when you have people playing the game showing interest in teaching kids the game, you're going to do well," said Doug Hoffberger, vice president of the SquashWise board. "Squash is the way we get them in the door to tutoring programs."

Just like Mauricha, Gonzalez showed up at tryouts when the game was introduced at her middle school and "fell in love with it."

She played through high school and is now in her junior year at Morgan, studying for a degree in business.

"I was one of the first students in the country to be in this type of program. ... I believe in it because I am a product of its success," Gonzalez said.

Rafael Alvarez can be reached at sports@alvarezfiction.com.

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Mauricha Taylor, 11, high-fives instructor Joe Lacy during squash practice at Meadow Mill Athletic Club.

Baltimore SquashWise – Directions to Meadow Mill Athletic Club

Light Rail Station: Woodberry (the club is down the driveway parallel to the light rail)



Meadow Mill Athletic Club
3600 Clipper Mill Road
Baltimore MD 21211
info@meadowmill.com
www.meadowmill.com
410.235.7000

Directions from 95 South From Washington, D.C. From South of Baltimore City

- **95 to 395 Downtown Baltimore**
- **Follow signs "Downtown & Inner Harbor."**
- **Left on Light Street & immediately get in right lane.**
- **Turn right on Pratt Street (harbor will be on your right)**
- **Power Plant and ESPN Zone will be on right as well.**
- **Get in left lane of Pratt Street.**
- **Turn Left on President Street.**
- **Follow signs for 83N.**
- **Take 83N to Exit 8, Falls Road.**
- **Continue on Falls Road North.**
- **After second traffic light on Falls Road (just beyond the Rite Aid) turn left. There is no street sign.**
- **Continue straight down hill through 3 stop signs.**
- **Just under the green sign that says Union Ave, and almost on the RR tracks, turn left into the driveway. (It's very narrow with a chain link fence on the left.)**
- **Drive to the south end of the building where our entrance is under a green awning.**





Mission: Baltimore SquashWise is a nonprofit organization providing middle school students from Baltimore City with a safe and structured place to exercise their bodies and minds during the afterschool hours. We combine squash instruction, academic tutoring, mentoring and community service to empower motivated local youth to excel academically, athletically and in life. Our short-term goals include attitudinal and behavioral improvement, better grades, and improved fitness. Our long-term goals are to keep students in the program through high school graduation, and to promote college enrollment.

Volunteer Needs: SquashWise depends on committed and reliable volunteers to sustain its programming. We need two types of volunteers:

1. Volunteers who can commit to weekly squash and/or tutoring sessions (Wed, Fri, or Sat, see detailed schedule below)
2. Volunteers who can help us out on occasion at tournaments, field trips, and when we need substitutes for our weekly volunteers.

Program Overview:

- *Students:* 16 students – sixth and seventh grade boys and girls from Booker T. Washington Middle School in West Baltimore.
- *Staff:*

Staff Member	Title	Phone Number	Email Address
Abby Markoe	Executive Director & Academic Director	410-402-0085	abbym@baltimoresquashwise.org
Taralyn Gonzalez	Program Coordinator (Squash)	917-628-7205	taralyn@baltimoresquashwise.org
Dwight Raney	Program Coordinator	443-939-7327	

- *Location:* 3600 Clipper Mill Rd. (Meadow Mill)
 - Squash sessions: Meadow Mill Athletic Club
 - Academic sessions: Suite 107 in the Meadow Mill complex
- *Schedule:*

Day	Time	Volunteer Needs
WEDNESDAYS	3:15-5:45	2 squash 3 academic
FRIDAYS	3:15-5:45	2 squash 3 academic
SATURDAYS	1:00-3:45	4 squash 2 academic

- *Academic Volunteers:* You will work with a group of 3-4 students at a time on homework assignments, test prep, and supplemental educational projects from SquashWise.
- *Squash Volunteers:* As a squash volunteer, you will be on a court with 4 students at a time working on basic racquet skills, fitness, and match play with more advanced students.

** Some students struggle with basics in squash and academics. Please encourage large and small improvements alike. We want students to feel positive about coming to the program.

Volunteer Responsibilities & Expectations: We expect great things from our students, and in turn we have high standards for volunteers – you’re the ones who make it happen! We strongly believe that our students need continuity and stability in their tutors and coaches, and this is why we seek a commitment from you. This is what we expect from our volunteers:

- **Reliability:** Please be on time! If you are going to be late or absent make sure to give us adequate notice to find a substitute.
- **Enthusiasm:** If you come to each session showing that you are excited to be part of SquashWise, our students will follow your example.
- **Positive outlook:** Remember to give a lot of positive feedback to students. Couch every criticism in a supportive comment.
- **Communication:** We want you to communicate openly with students and with program staff. If you have concerns about anything—about the students you are working with (e.g. their effort during program sessions, their progress on the courts or in tutoring), about the curriculum, about safety, about your commitment, please come to us.
- **Integrity:** You set the example! No foul language, No smoking at or near the facility or in front of students. You set the example!

Student Values-S.C.O.R.E: make sure these values are rolled into every moment of the program

- Safety
- Cooperation
- Order
- Respect
- Effort & Enthusiasm

It is important that you prepare yourself for a variety of difficult situations arising with students. Think about the following scenarios.

- Your student tells you about a difficult situation at home (abuse, mistreatment, financial problems, lack of food). What action would you take?
- Your student uses foul language during a session. How do you react?
- Your student is consistently unmotivated and unengaged. How do you motivate him/her?
- You notice that your student is submitting incomplete assignments and/or shoddy work. What do you do?
- You observe inappropriate language or behavior coming from another volunteer. What to do?

WE THANK YOU! We know that you are volunteering your time to SquashWise, and we value that contribution as much as any financial donation we are given. We not only hope that our students will benefit from your involvement but that you will also, by developing deep mentoring relationships with our students, by learning about squash if it is new to you, and by knowing that you got in on the ground level of a brand new organization bound to make positive change in the lives of Baltimore’s youth!