



# SQUASH *The New Game in Town*

**The other game with a racquet is catching on around Northern Virginia.**

**by Rich Sanders at The Connection Newspapers**

Say the word `squash' and many people will think of a vegetable served as part of a meal. Few individuals associate the word with one of its other meanings — an indoor racquet game played by two people.

(A side note concerning `squash' in the food definition of the word is that it is a fruit, not a vegetable, and a part of the pumpkin family). But squash, the sport, is becoming more and more recognizable in the Washington, D.C. and Northern Virginia areas where numerous youth, high school aged youngsters and adults are participating in the highly strenuous, but invigorating game played in a walled court with a small rubber ball. Squash, the sport, has gained popularity among local health and fitness clubs around the area. Last week, two area venues, the Bethesda Sport & Health club in Maryland and Worldgate Sport & Health in Herndon, combined to host the 2008 National Capital Open Squash Tournament. The circuit event, which was held Jan. 29 through Feb. 3, brought together some of the world's top squash players from various parts of the world. Ranked worldwide professionals such as Laurens Jan Anjema, (ranked 19th worldwide) of Holland, Cameron Pilleary of Reading, England, and Aaron Frankcomb of Australia were among the numerous outstanding players showcasing their skills at the National Capital Open, which had a winning purse value of \$20,000.

"You have 20 of the world's best players playing their hearts out," said Connie Barnes, one of the tournament directors and a local advocate of the sport. "[Fans] are just aghast at how these guys hit the ball so hard. They are great athletes and their sportsmanship is unbelievable."

Connie, who works out of Bethesda Sport & Health, and co-tournament director Rod Barnes run an organization called AussieNick, which promotes and brings the fast-paced game to sport and health clubs around the beltway, including locations in McLean and Arlington. Connie Barnes, who along with Rod came to Maryland from Australia five years ago, said 250 adults and 250 youngsters play the sport at the Bethesda club.

"Numerous kids get on the court and they want to play all day," said Connie Barnes. "It's a lifetime sport that they can play."

SQUASH, which is known as handball squash in the U.S., is a wonderful fitness sport. Like tennis, there is a singles as well as a doubles version of the game.

"Squash is a fast game, and one must be skillful and thinking all the time," said Connie Barnes. "As a boy or as a 50-year old man, people can get sucked into it. It's a great, physical sport."

Doug Baumgarten, a squash pro who teaches the sport at Worldgate, said squash is fantastic for both conditioning purposes and fun.

"You always get a great workout in a short time period in squash," said Baumgarten, a South Riding area resident who competed in last week's amateur portion of the National Capital Open. "It's a great workout and great exercise. In the hectic times we live in, people want to use exercise and sports time efficiently and get a great workout."

Baumgarten said people often fall in love with the sport once they start playing it.

"It's fun and there is a strategic part in it," he said. "It almost has a chess match feel. It's mentally absorbing. Once people play it, they tend to get hooked on the speed of it and the fun and everything that goes along with it."

Baumgarten said squash does not translate so well on television because the ball is so small and it is difficult for a viewer to follow the action. But up close and live, there is nothing like it.

"I find it just incredible," said Baumgarten. "What got me hooked on squash originally was watching a live pro tournament. When I saw some of the top pros play, I said, 'I want to be able to do some of those things.' It's beautiful to watch with the combination of speed and technique. Tennis is not as close to the speed [of squash]. [In squash] it's a small space and you're so close to your opponent. You don't have [as much] time to react as in tennis. It's great to watch."

NUMEROUS METRO AREA private high schools, and a few public schools, include squash as a club sport program. Those schools include Whitman, Langley, Holton Arms, Madeira, Maret, St. Albans, Landon and Episcopal High Schools. Barnes is coach of the Landon and Whitman school teams. One of the popular youth programs run by the AussieNick organization is Squash Empower, an urban youth development program that combines squash camps, academic tutoring and mentoring for disadvantaged boys and girls in D.C. The program is in its second year. Barnes' squash Empower web page states the mission of the program.

"We aspire to develop positive self-esteem and discipline through academic, athletic and personal achievement," it reads.

While squash has long been popular in the U.S. within elite status groups and at Ivy League colleges and prep schools, it is also catching fire within the mainstream sports community. Connie and Rod Barnes have a passion for sharing their love of the sport throughout the D.C. area with individuals of all backgrounds and income levels.

"Parents see it as another option in the winter sports season," said Connie. "You can play for 45 minutes and it's great meeting and playing with friends and family. If mom and dad and their kids come to the [local] health club [to play squash], they can have quality time with their kids and get exercise. American families love being together."

Barnes said her organization will continue targeting pockets of Fairfax and Loudoun Counties, among other areas, throughout 2008 to spread the love of the game with individuals within health clubs and schools. Those interested in bringing the sport to their sporting clubs and schools can contact Connie at [cbarnes@sportandhealth.com](mailto:cbarnes@sportandhealth.com).

*Doug Baumgarten  
of South Riding  
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