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Succeeding at squash—and life



Gustavo Duarte, 15, of the Hyde Park Complex and Pierol Perez-Torres, 14, of Fenway High School
Photo by Craig Bailey

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Squash is only one activity on the agenda for more than 100 young men and women who will spend the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday weekend at Northeastern.

Middle and high school students from nine cities across the country, including Boston, Baltimore, the Bronx, Harlem, Denver, Philadelphia, San Diego, Chicago and New Haven, will be in town for the 2010 Urban Squash Team Championships.

Some 125 students will pack the courts of the Badger & Rosen center, home to SquashBusters, an after-school urban youth development program on the Northeastern campus. Roughly 160 students will compete at Harvard's Murr Center.

The National Urban Squash and Education Association (NUSEA), an organization that has led the creation of urban squash programs throughout the country, including SquashBusters, will host the three-day event.

Over the course of the weekend, teams of young squash players will compete for top prize in different age groups. They'll also take tours of Northeastern's campus and, in honor of Dr. King, read their pre-prepared essays on how they have overcome adversity.

For SquashBusters founder and squash champion Greg Zaff, the weekend's slate of events aims to reinforce the youth program's commitment to athletics, academics and community service. Zaff is now the executive director of NUSEA.

"The whole mission of the program is not to create squash players, but to create good citizens and kids who succeed in life and in college," Zaff said. "The goal of the program is to use squash, school work and service to help students become successful and happy in life."

NUSEA pursues those goals through activities that include squash lessons and tournaments, academic tutoring, community service, cultural events and study opportunities in countries such as Brazil, Ghana and South Africa—all intended to teach students the importance of integrity, concern for others, appreciation, respect and effort.

Touted as the first enrichment program of its kind in the United States, it has been successful for those who complete the program: 100 percent graduate from high school; 93 percent earn a college degree.

"That's what matters the most," Zaff added. "Graduating from college is a fundamental ingredient to success. Trying to give these kids the experience that helps them achieve their best is very important to us."

SquashBusters and other urban youth squash programs around the country are helping to close the achievement gap, according to Peter Roby, Northeastern's athletic director and a member of the SquashBusters' Board of Directors.

"I don't think there's any question that it's been a great equalizer," he said. "It's wonderful to see the kinds of

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opportunities students are being exposed to as a direct result of the program.”

Teresa Soares-Pena, the executive director of SquashBusters, credits the effectiveness of the program less to squash instruction and more to its ability to build deep, long-lasting relationships with students and families.

Roughly half of the students smashing squash balls over the weekend will take a tour of Northeastern’s campus in order to get a feel for college life. They’ll tour academic buildings, the Curry Student Center, the Marino Center, Snell Library and the John D. O’Bryant African-American Institute.

“The tour lets the kids see what college is all about and what school could look like in the future,” said Tricia Williamson, associate director of admissions. “They get excited about taking classes and living with their friends and if this is what helps plant the seeds for doing well in school, then that’s wonderful.”

To learn more about Squashbusters, visit: <http://www.squashbusters.org/>

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