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Ivy League Imports Squash Stars From Unlikely Places

By NANCY KEATES

An athletic competition between Cornell and Columbia this past weekend featured two star players who share an inner-city upbringing of the sort that's rare in the Ivy League.

Most extraordinary, however, is what these young women play—squash, that bastion of the privileged.

Reyna Pacheco grew up an illegal immigrant, sleeping on floors and sofas in a rough section of San Diego after her mother fled Mexico with no money and no job. Now she's one of the highest-seeded squash players at Columbia University. Jesse Pacheco (they are not related) is the current captain of the Cornell team and an All-American, currently ranked 14th in the country. She's from the Bronx, the daughter of a single mother from Ecuador who lost her job when Jesse was in middle school.

The rosters of top college squash teams are populated with students who come from wealth. But under the umbrella of the National Urban Squash and Education Association, 14 programs in 15 cities now shepherd underprivileged kids from elementary and middle school through college, offering them squash training along with academic tutoring and more.

"The goal was not to diversify the sport of squash. It was to use the game to help kids' lives," said Greg Zaff, who started the first urban program, SquashBusters, in Boston in 1995. His idea was to use the discipline required on a squash court to impart lessons about hard work and responsibility.

Squash, it turned out, is also an ideal vehicle for propelling underprivileged kids into some of the nation's most exclusive colleges, since that's where squash is played. Urban squash kids are now playing on teams at Harvard, Trinity, Wesleyan, Dartmouth, Hamilton and Bowdoin, among others.

"Squash coaches want good players. Admissions officers want good students from a diverse background," said Mr. Zaff.

Squash is like the violin: Success depends on developing muscle memory and perfecting technique by practicing over and over, said Tim Wyant, who heads the NUSEA. Not only do some kids from urban squash programs have to worry about food and shelter and adequate transportation in order to play three or more times a week—they also face unusually affluent competitors who have private coaches, squash courts at home and the money to travel to tournaments. The urban programs have been around for a decade, but only now are their players penetrating the top college level.

"The entire time I was in high school, I was just surviving," Reyna Pacheco said.

Reyna considers Jesse Pacheco a hero to every urban squash player. Jesse is the best player ever to come out of an urban squash program. She was first to be recruited to play at an Ivy League school and this year became the first All-American from an urban program, said Mr. Wyant. Jesse started at CitySquash in the Bronx in middle school and went on to earn a full scholarship to a boarding school in Rhode Island, where she played well enough to be recruited by Cornell, among other schools.

Reyna, who is only 4-foot-11, first heard about urban squash in 2007, when she was in the eighth grade. That year, Renato Paiva, the director of an urban squash program in San Diego, spoke at her charter middle school in La Jolla, Calif., a 45-minute bus ride from her neighborhood. Reyna was regularly getting suspended for fighting and had terrible grades.

"It was a daily struggle just to get to school," said her brother, Jesus Pacheco. "Our lives were never stable."

So Reyna jumped at the opportunity to play squash, partly because she liked the idea of free shoes and a racket—and partly because she saw it as a chance to redeem herself.

"I wanted to prove I had the ability to join something and that I had something to offer," she said. "It was hard because it was so different from my family."

After passing three Saturdays of try-outs, she became the captain of the San Diego urban squash program's team.

"She was very defensive at first. But she was a spark of energy," said Mr. Paiva.

At first, Reyna said, she was suspicious of the squash program. She didn't understand that people could be generous for no reason. But she quickly learned to ask for help. She stayed late at the squash courts, watching the paying kids clinic and then playing those kids afterward, pleading for a ride home or taking a three-hour bus ride back to her neighborhood. She solicited donors to finance her travel to tournaments and mined Mr. Paiva for advice and suggestions.

By the middle of the eighth grade, Reyna's grades had improved dramatically. "With squash, I saw that when I worked hard, I could see the difference right away. If I listened and I tried, I would get better. I started to be able to do that with education too," she said.

But she constantly worried about how her illegal status would hinder her chances of going to college.

Reyna had made friends at squash camp in San Diego with one of the other campers, Saskia Pownall-Gray, from Weston, Conn., who asked if she wanted to stay in her hotel room instead of going all the way home every night. Saskia's parents, Dickon and Lisa Pownall-Gray,

began shuttling Reyna to tournaments around the country and bringing her to their home for holidays. During her junior year, the Pownall-Grays hired two attorneys to get green cards for Reyna, Jesus and their mother.

Now a sophomore on a full scholarship at Columbia and a Gates Millennium Scholar, Reyna is grateful for urban squash, though she still struggles to find her place: "I don't belong with the rich kids, and I don't belong at home."

But, she said, "I can breathe now."