

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

**Western New York boasts a hot junior squash scene**

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**By Zoe Pearce**



What is squash and why are so many teens starting to play it? Technically, squash is a racquet sport played by two players for singles and four players for doubles in a four-walled court with a small, hollow rubber ball.

The reason so many people are getting involved in the game is because it is a fun and challenging contest of agility - a strategic game that tests your mental and physical strength.



An increasing number of colleges are building squash programs and looking for high school players to fill their rosters. Also, given Buffalo's winters, squash is a very practical sport because it is played indoors and can, therefore, be played regardless of the weather.

While squash has long been popular in Buffalo, junior squash has evolved.



Sally Russell, director of junior programs for the Buffalo Squash Racquets Association (BSRA), explained how disorganized squash programs were in the recent past and how a special effort was needed to revive junior squash in Buffalo.

"The BSRA realized in order to grow, one of the building blocks would be a successful junior program," she said.

Eventually, this led to many area schools starting or improving their programs, local clubs offering after-school and weekend clinics and city adult leagues opening play to juniors. Many professionals and volunteers began quality coaching for juniors on high school teams and at area clubs.

John Rooney, a two-time Irish National Champion and former assistant coach at Yale University, was recruited to come to Buffalo in 2012 by the Buffalo Tennis and Squash Club. His arrival has been transformational for junior squash in Buffalo.

"When I came to Buffalo, I was taken by the sense of community that was here... Buffalo is a big city but has a feeling of being a small town where everybody knows everybody, and I like that," Rooney said.

He has started the John Rooney Squash Academy to accommodate the growing demand for junior squash coaching in the area. The number of kids playing junior squash is growing substantially each year.

In fact, according to U.S. Squash, high school squash is one of the fastest growing areas in the game today.

There are five high schools in Western New York with squash teams: Nichols School, Canisius High School, Nardin Academy, Buffalo Seminary and the Gow School.

Leyton Johnston, a junior at Nichols and one of the highest nationally ranked junior players in Buffalo, said, "The Nichols squash team has been a consistent high point in my squash career and over the past four seasons, the team has had great success."

"We have been nationally ranked in the top 45 at the close of the last four seasons and we are currently the seven-time defending champions of the Buffalo High School Squash League," Leyton added.

Clare Tompkins, a junior at Nardin Academy, said, "The friendship and camaraderie that grows between my teammates is priceless and being part of the team gives me a

sense of belonging that I will never forget about my high school career.”

Clare dedicated herself to playing squash in ninth grade and is now one of the best players at Nardin.

There are many talented squash players and coaches in the community.

Steve Joyce, coach of the Canisius squash team and a former high school squash player at Nichols, said, “Junior squash players are like sponges, they absorb everything ... I will say girls listen better so there’s less time spent repeating myself.”

Joyce not only coaches Canisius but recently turned over head coaching responsibilities at Nardin to Danielle Forsyth, a former player at Nardin and Hamilton College.

Buffalo’s high school squash season leads up to nationals. Every high school team sends its top seven players to compete among the best teams in the country. The competition from East Coast powerhouses and boarding schools is intense, and the talent is inspiring. Buffalo’s teams will participate in the upcoming nationals tournament Feb. 6-8 in Hartford, Conn.

In addition to high school play, there are tournaments that take place in the Buffalo area as well as tournaments that require travel.

Leyton said, “I play two national level tournaments each month, traveling to cities such as New York City, Boston and Philadelphia.”

He is currently ranked No. 42 in the Boys U17 division.

In addition, Buffalo high school players currently ranked nationally by U.S. Squash include, from Nichols: Sara Rimpler (Girls U19; rank 97), Isobel Brinkworth (Girls U19; rank 132), Samantha Vanderhorst (Girls U19; rank 142) and Jack Vanderhorst (Boys U15; rank 47). Canisius also has two nationally ranked players: Kingman Bassett (Boys U17; rank 79) and Matt Dukarm (Boys U17; rank 89).

The rankings are established by competing in national tournaments.

“The biggest thing to achieve is to create an academy, a group of players who train and travel together, to become a tight-knit group,” Rooney said.

As the area’s junior squash community continues to grow, there is increasing concern because of the need for more places to play. Nichols and Buffalo Seminary have courts, and clubs like the Saturn Club, Buffalo Tennis & Squash Club, the Buffalo Club and the Jewish Community Center offer additional places to play, but the amount of available court time is inadequate.

There are a number of people interested in finding ways to build more courts and make the game of squash more accessible.

Since squash provides a playing opportunity at some of the country’s top colleges, more and more students want to make squash part of their high school experience.

According to Joyce, many Buffalo junior squash players have taken their squash skills to college. Former Buffalo junior players are currently playing at Notre Dame, Fordham, Harvard, Denison, Boston College and George Washington University.

The future looks bright for junior squash players as Buffalo continues to put itself on the map as a serious squash town. Those interested in playing can find more information at <https://bsra.ussquash.com/>, the BSRA's website.

Zoe Pearce is a junior at Nardin Academy.