



# PUBLIC SERVICE

BY BILL BUCKINGHAM & CHRIS MCCLENTICK

As you wend your way down Pitt Street on the lower east side of Manhattan, the tangle of bars, bodegas, coffee shops and apartment buildings are interrupted by an ivy-covered, walled oasis. While at first glance Hamilton Fish Park may seem like many of the other 1,800 public parks in the city, with the familiar pulsating thump of a shirts and skins basketball game being contested on the black top concrete right next to splashing camp kids escaping the searing summer heat in one of their two

sparkling swimming pools. But as you move through the park you can hear an altogether different sound, that seems out of place.

This might be the only park in the world where you will hear it. That's because last April a squash court arrived right beyond the basketball courts. Public Squash, a New York non-profit organization, in partnership with the New York City Parks Department, opened the first outdoor public squash court in Hamilton Fish Park.



The court is modified for the outdoors. It stands 18.5' tall, nearly 32' long and 20' wide. It has a blue plastic floor with drainage capabilities and is open-air with no roof. The court was installed on one of Hamilton Fish Park's four handball courts and has been permitted through NYC Parks' Adopt-a-Park program. Through its website and benefit fundraisers, Public Squash raised more than \$70,000; they also received an interest-free loan of \$30,000 from a supporter of the project. The court, which will stay up for a year, cost around \$85,000 to install.

While a squash court may seem incongruous with the grungy, hip vibe associated with Manhattan's Lower East Side, Ryan Wall, one of the founders of Public Squash, sees it as a perfect fit. "We were talking to a middle-aged man who has lived in the

neighborhood his whole life," Wall said. "He used to belong to a club in the city, but it became too expensive, so he stopped. Now he is out there playing two to three times a week. People come off the basketball court and wander over. I think the glass structure with the blue floor is a like magnet that draws people to check out the space."

The NYC Parks Department has been a partner in the project from the start, according to Wall, and has been impressed with the reception. Based on NYC Parks dashboard data—including image searches, requests and reviews—within the first ninety days of opening the court ranked 302 out of all park attractions in NYC. Hamilton Fish, according to the park director, has also seen an uptick in its seasonal membership.



For a first-generation project and considering the elements, the court has held up well. Like any public facility, there has been some wear and tear, but like playing on an outdoor tennis or basketball court, the unique bounces and uneven surfaces are part of the charm. However, Wall thinks the structure needs to be re-considered a bit. "We are looking for a solution with minimal maintenance that could handle ten million people."

Now that the first pilot court is open, the hope is to replicate it around the city and around the world. "We are looking at courts in cities like Barcelona, Miami, Paris and Toronto, as well as other parks here in New York," Wall said. "We are going to reach our goal of twenty courts by 2020. We think this a great way to get squash into the Olympics. Squash needs to become more of an outdoor summer sport, and this is a great way to do it."





While the court employs "street rules" involving first-come, first-serve play and a suggested limit of one hour of court time, there was one particular moment of scheduled programming that garnered global attention. Recently retired three-time world champion Nick Matthew and rising U.S. star Andrew Douglas challenged one another to an exhibition on

the court during a Friday afternoon in July. More than a hundred spectators gathered around the court, and more than 18,000 people from around the world tuned into the live broadcast and replay on Facebook and Instagram.

The court itself is something to behold, but to see one of the sport's legends walking out to warm-up on it was unbelievable.

# THE WORLD IS WATCHING

It was the culmination of a three-year-old idea. CitySquash students sat around the court studying the match, locals took an extended lunch break to stop by, and the regular New York squash fanatics came out in force to witness the momentous occasion.

Douglas and Matthew were instantly dripping with sweat as the sun beat down on the high-80-degree day, and yet the duo sparred for an entertaining five games and nearly forty-minutes.

Everyone had a smile on their face before, during and after the exhibition. The world-class squash entertained, but it was the palpable sense of a new era and opportunity for the sport that lingered with those in attendance.

"You New Yorkers are lucky, and should all take advantage of this court," Matthew said afterwards. "It's showcasing squash in a new way. Hopefully it continues to grow and more courts are on the way."





# THE GOLDEN HOUR

The ideal time to play on the court may be at dusk. As the sun sets over Manhattan, there is still enough light bouncing off the surrounding buildings to track the black ball as it bounces around the court's blue floor and white walls. But there's no sun to lose sight of lobs in, the temperature is cooling off and eventually the park's lights flicker on to provide enough lighting until the park closes at 9pm.

Weekly evening trips to the court became a summer staple for local player Cory Collman, (above, right) who was orphaned from his regular squash courts when the Yale Club closed down for summer renovations. On one night, a couple of former college players vacated the court to Collman and two other players: Taru Goel, (above, left) an avid NYC league player, and DD Maucher, who lives in the neighborhood and stepped on court for the first time in decades thanks to the court. The four players quickly established a cordial rotation, taking their time to warm up and switching opponents after each game.

"The experience of playing a sport as the light is fading and you're trying to squeeze in those last few points is a nostalgic experience that most of us have not had since childhood," said Collman, a thirty-five-year old who picked up squash five years ago.

"Being under the open sky getting some good exercise in with a friend is a powerful thing. The breeze feels good when you walk off court, there are trees around you, and the acoustics are much improved over the usual echoes of a club. I find it all much more calming. Also on a glass court you also feel like you're on the pro tour."

In all his weekly matches, Collman said he has met a wide variety of players, not just limited to the "New York squash nuts," but also curious locals trying the sport first the first time and overseas players who added the court to their list of must-see attractions when visiting New York City. "I just hope that outdoor courts are something that the parks department continues to embrace," Collman said. "As this court has shown, there is a critical mass of players in the city that will use this form of recreation if available in public spaces. It should be supported because it reflects the needs of the city's residents."

This month, the court's first season will come to an end. Public Squash and NYC Parks will disassemble it for the winter months. As the proverbial sun sets on the court's inaugural season, it has reinforced the broad and deep potential for the sport in outdoor public spaces. **SM**

