

LETTER FROM AMERICA



James Zug reviews the 2015 Squash Summit and looks at the new public squash initiative in the USA

Squash Summit 2015 was a two-day US Squash conference held in conjunction with the Delaware Investments U.S. Open. Although there have been a few gatherings of industry leaders before, this was the first-ever fully-fledged squash symposium. More than a hundred people came to the Sheraton, the tournament hotel in Philadelphia, to hear 15 presentations. These talks always led to informal break-out sessions and extended conversations among those in the audience

The summit featured presenters from outside the squash world. The keynote speaker was Lisa Baird, the chief marketing officer for the United States Olympic Committee. She discussed evolving and deepening marketing platforms, and turning the USOC from a 17-day proposition every two years to a more year-round part of the U.S. sporting culture. Jessica Kruskamp, a staffer at New York Junior Tennis & Learning, spoke about how her non-profit organization (founded by Arthur Ashe in 1969) frames its fundraising message; Kenneth Shropshire, an author and professor at the University of Pennsylvania, talked about racial diversity and sports, and a new, non-profit body called the Ross Initiative in Sports for Equality, which he has launched with the owner of the Miami Dolphins; and Jaret Posmentier, the vice-president of Sharp Communications, a public relations firm in New York, discoursed on the marketing of the 2015 J.P. Morgan Tournament of Champions.

A number of squash leaders also gave presentations, including Roy Gingell, the World Squash

Federation's director of refereeing, Tommy Berden, the PSA's chief commercial officer, and Kevin Klipstein, the CEO of US Squash.

However, perhaps the highlight of Squash Summit 2015 was a presentation about an innovative approach to the perennial squash issue of access. Alex Wakefield Wessner, Ryan Underwood Wall, Shawn Dragann and world No.61 Chris Gordon spoke about the Public Squash Foundation. Created in April 2015, Public Squash aims to build outdoor squash courts.

Originally squash was an outdoor sport. The first courts at Harrow School, where the game was created in the mid-19th century, were roofless and open to the elements. Most popular sports – like football, basketball, cricket, tennis and golf – are played outdoors, so why isn't squash?

Dragann and Wall, friends since attending St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia together, are leaders of a search optimization firm. After

college, they started playing squash. "Instantly we were hooked," they said. "It was never easier getting up in the morning. It was all about bragging rights at the office. On that court we became great friends. We love the game. We love the pace, the focus and the inability to turn down a match. It's about those micro moments, where you know you're getting stronger and becoming a smarter player. You play once; you're never the same. Not enough people know this feeling. We are determined to change that."

In researching squash, they learned that in the past four years squash courts have been searched seven times more in the U.S. than handball courts. At the same time they discovered that there are exactly 2,009 outdoor handball courts in 560 parks in New York— but not one squash court.

They created the Public Squash Foundation and approached the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, who agreed to help Public Squash take on two projects. One is repurposing some of the 2,009 handball courts and some of New York's underused outdoor racquetball courts into squash courts. Many of these are three-wall courts that would inexpensively convert into squash courts.

Public Squash's first initiative is even more

groundbreaking. It wants to deposit a purpose-built, four-wall, roofless glass court in New York parks. Public Squash has partnered with ASB to create a prototype, as ASB has built more than a dozen outdoor courts, including three on cruise ships. The new court will be inexpensive, with walls that are protected against vandalism and a sprung, weather-resistant floor. The courts are also portable. This was essential in meeting guidelines for the NYCDPR, who would require a lot of paperwork if the squash courts were a permanent installation. Instead, Public Squash will cart the courts away to a nearby warehouse each winter. The glass walls also are symbolic. "The glass walls make the court and the game visible," said Wall. "That is exactly the purpose of the project, to make squash accessible to the general public."

Public Squash has raised more than \$50,000 to fund these initiatives. In the spring of 2016 the first Public Squash court will appear in East River Park, a park in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, right under the Williamsburg Bridge. After that, who knows? "Since Squash Summit 2015 we've been approached by people in Australia, England, France and South Africa," Wall said. "We know this is a concept that will work elsewhere."



A rendering of the first Public Squash Foundation court, built by ASB, and located in a New York City park