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Sports

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Making a racket in the School of Squash

By MARK PATTON, NEWS-PRESS SENIOR WRITER

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It didn't take Sebastian Paredes long to show that he had a nose for squash.

His coach noticed it when Paredes was just a toddler, waiting for his mom to get off work at the Santa Barbara Athletic Club.

"I remember him as a 2-year-old, with his nose pushed up against the glass of the squash courts, wondering what was going on inside there," Robert Graham said. "He looked pretty curious about it all."

Curiosity led to a passion which, 13 years later, has him ranked among the top junior squash players in the country. Paredes, a 15-year-old sophomore at Dos Pueblos High School, is one of 20 players to get selected by the National Urban Squash & Education Association for its national junior training program.

"Of all the squash players who've come out of the Santa Barbara School of Squash, he really has the most potential," said Graham, who serves as the school's executive director. "He's a great athlete, and if he works hard at his squash and keeps his grades going, then he's going to have a lot of universities clamoring for him to play on their squash teams."

Seven of the squash school's graduates have already continued on to college, including David Quintero, who is now playing for the team at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine.

"On David's first day back from college, he came to visit us," Graham said.

The sport has given Paredes some of his earliest memories.

"Dad and I would come to pick up Mom from work, and we'd get here a little early sometimes and watch people play squash," he said. "After that, I started just hitting by myself, then I got into some training with Debbie (Brown) and Orla (O'Doherty),

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Sebastian Paredes is taking his squash game to the national level.

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who were the directors of the program back then.

"I used to come play every Saturday."

The Santa Barbara School of Squash was started at the Santa Barbara Athletic Club a decade ago, combining sport with school tutoring and mentorship for sixth graders.

"We're lucky that the club still lets us play here," said Graham, who is one of the school's founding board members. "We really appreciate them."

"The Santa Barbara Athletic Club has been our home for the 10 years of our existence, and they've been very generous."

Paredes got the School of Squash to consider taking younger players, gaining acceptance when he was just in third grade.

The local school, one of 25 sponsored throughout the country by the National Urban Squash & Education Association, now has 35 students.

"I did some swimming and soccer for a couple of years, but then squash started to get serious," Paredes said.

He also got more serious about his schoolwork. The School of Squash meets four times a week, which includes an hour of academic work at the Louise Lowry Davis Center.

"I'm taking honors classes now in English and Math, which I hadn't been taking before, and I'm thinking about taking some more advanced classes next year," he said. "It opens up more ideas for me."

Paredes, the son of Javier and Lourdes Paredes, was selected for NUSEA's training program after attending the national trials in Philadelphia last month.

"I was really nervous when I heard that I'd have to fly alone," he said. "So were my parents. Phoenix and Philadelphia are big airports, and I was afraid I might get lost."

His anxiety vanished soon after his arrival.

"The kids there were really friendly and made the environment very comfortable, even though I didn't know anybody," Paredes said.

Graham received glowing reports about his pupil from the NUSEA organizers and coaches after the two-day trials.

"They loved the attitude and the effort that Seby put in, and they like him as a human being," he said. "They've invited him to join their squad officially, which means he'll get more opportunities."

NUSEA's support includes paying Paredes' entry into monthly tournaments as well as 15 hours of private lessons at the Santa Barbara Athletic Club.

"They're also going to pay for him to go back to Philadelphia in April for the National Under-17 Championships," Graham said. "They also asked us, 'Let us know what else he needs.'"

"As long as he keeps up his end of the bargain, which is training in squash and keeping his grades up, then he's going to have a great six months ahead of him."

The travel has now become the thing he likes best about the sport.

"You get to go to places that you don't usually get to see," Paredes said. "I get to travel often now, and meet people from different regions, and from different cultures."

He's seeing the world now, and conquering the best of its young squash players.

Mark Patton's column appears on Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday. Email: mpatton@newspress.com

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