

Boys Varsity Squash Makes Mark at Nationals

Will Robinson, Feb 15 2011

St. Andrew's boys' squash returned tired but happy after their four-day road trip to Connecticut, where they competed at Wesleyan and Trinity in the largest squash tournament in the world, the High School Nationals, and finished 2nd in Division IV (50th in the country). Along the way they beat Pomfret (CT) 5-2, Rye High School (NY) 4-3, and Episcopal High School (VA) 4-3, before falling to Deerfield (MA) 5-2 in the final.

St. Andrew's opened the tournament mentally prepared for a tough match against a game Pomfret squad who went on to win the consolation. Though inexperienced (their #1 was a hockey player who had only been playing squash for one year), Pomfret fought hard up and down the lineup, extending points and making St. Andrew's earn every win. It is critical in these matches where only two players play at a time to get off to a good start; St. Andrew's did that on Friday with solid opening wins from Michael Ding '12, who took advantage of his opponent's mid-court tins, and Riley McDonough '13, who as #7 started every match and went 4-0 on the weekend. Though at #3 Pep Ruckpanich '13 dropped a tough match to the speedy left-hander from Pomfret—after Pep began counter-dropping he held match points in the 4th game but couldn't close it out—while Graham Dworkin '12 started well but faded at #5, St. Andrew's was able to hold on, thanks to authoritative victories from Z Roach '13 and Captain Alex Lynch '11, as well as the usual five-set nail-biter from David Ashpole '12.

The second round ratcheted up the intensity. St. Andrew's faced off against a scrappy Rye squad, their adversary in the Division IV finals two years ago. A hard-fought four-set win from Michael Ding and a helter-skelter five-setter from Riley McDonough gave the Saints some early breathing room, but Rye quickly evened the score as Pep Ruckpanich and Graham Dworkin fell in straight sets to their opposition—Pep's opponent had been undefeated all season and did not lose a match until he fell in five sets to Hill in the finals of the Classic Consolation. A clutch five-set win from David Ashpole put St. Andrew's nose in front going into the final two matches. Things, however, looked grim; while Z appeared increasingly discouraged and frustrated against a quality opponent, Alex Lynch dropped the first game against the 72nd ranked player in the world, Karim Amir of Rye. When things seemed bleakest, a cameo appearance from Alex's future coach, Paul Assaiante of Trinity—well-known to all St. Andrew's students for leading the wonderful clinic that kicked off our season—in the form of advice relayed by Jim Zug, Assaiante's co-author and stalwart St. Andrew's assistant, saved the day; buoyed by Assaiante's suggestion, Alex began avoiding the Egyptian's flashy attacks and pushing up the court, volleying at every opportunity. The four-set win which clinched St. Andrew's advancement proved a confidence boost to our senior captain and a great victory worthy of the storied program to which he graduates next year (though Assaiante still chewed him out afterwards).

A few hours' intermission (including a short catnap in the van), and St. Andrew's had to face its nemesis, archrival Episcopal High School. Sharing its moniker with the country's best team, all season EHS had proved nearly as insurmountable a foe, wrenching a 6-3 victory from St. Andrew's in Middletown, and, only the week before, a heart-breaking 5-4 win in Alexandria, in spite of the absence of its third-ranked player, Penn Agnew. The match started off neck-and-neck, as Riley McDonough jumped out to an early lead against RJ Drucker (who had beaten him in five sets the week before) and Michael Ding fell behind to Jack Rauch, who beat him three times this season. When Riley was able to secure a win after four tense games, the team score was knotted at one-all. Pep Ruckpanich took the court against Penn Agnew, who showed his quality, and took the match in four grueling games despite Pep's improved patience and decision-making. On the other side, Graham Dworkin secured the biggest win of his career, despite a lapse of concentration in the

fourth game, as he won in five over Episcopal's Jack Richardson. Now at two games all, it was David Ashpole's turn to play the match of his life, attacking with conviction, authority and pace to triumph in three over Episcopal's error-prone #6. St. Andrew's needed to win only one of the last two to win the match—a situation we had encountered the previous week, as we dropped two five-setters to lose 5-4 at the last moment. Though Alex Lynch had twice previously pushed his opponent to five-sets in a losing effort, this time it was not to be, as the precise, four-corner attacking of Episcopal's TR Wall brooked little resistance. Meanwhile, Z Roach was in trouble on the show court. Down one game to love and 6-10, he fought off a total of six match points to take the second game 15-13 and level the clinching match at one game all. It proved a decisive blow. Overflowing with confidence, Z triumphed in four to give St. Andrew's its only win over EHS this season. After the match, the jubilant Saints showed just how much the win had meant to them, and in how high esteem they held their vanquished opponents.

The Division IV final on Sunday proved an anticlimax after the high of Saturday afternoon's win. Deerfield was a good team—perhaps too good for Division IV. Frustrated all season long by opponents of the highest quality, Deerfield brought a battle-hardened squad that included four seniors into Sunday's final. Despite valiant efforts from Riley McDonough, who pulled off his second five-set victory of the tournament, and Alex Lynch, who in spite of suffering a strain in his hip-flexor in the third game, managed a tough four-set win, the middle of St. Andrew's lineup proved no match for the experience and solidity of Deerfield. Despite the loss, the Saints left Connecticut proud of their accomplishments and amazed at how far they had brought their squash in the mere two and a half months the season lasted. The team would like to thank Tad Roach for his support and for coming to the final; the Lynches and Desrosiers for their extraordinary generosity throughout the season and especially at Nationals, as well as all the parents who came to watch us play this season; Ray Chan-a-sue, the pro at Vic-Mead Hunt Club, for his patient work with them all season; and Jim Zug, without whose trenchant advice and patient encouragement we might have lost to Pomfret in the first round. Eight out of ten players return next year, united by their shared love of squash and with high hopes for another extraordinary season.