

Karen Arango · Mar 8, 2024

# Community Perspectives: How the Athletic Club of Columbus Developed an 80-Player Women’s League

By Karen Arango , published in [Squash Magazine by US Squash](#)

The Athletic Club of Columbus is different from most other clubs that offer squash. With the building being over a century old, weight-bearing pillars building constrict the club’s four squash courts to a very nonstandard size – 32’ long by 16’ wide (vs regulation courts at 21’ wide). The size of the courts force the game to become a battle of the lob and most players just play through lets.

As a result, the club has never developed an elite-focused program; instead, over the past century and especially the past 30 years, volunteer member Squash Commissioners built a thriving in-house league that blended competition with camaraderie and social interaction. The format was a hit; before the pandemic, in 2019, the league had 160 players split into four teams of 40 multi-level players. Despite this success, though, with the club’s increasingly diverse 21st-century membership, it was becoming noticeable that all league players were men. That is where this story begins!



If lets were called properly a game would take days.

## RULE 1: ANYTHING THAT GETS MORE PEOPLE PLAYING SQUASH IS GOOD

Jim Massie, the Club’s Squash Commissioner, wanted to get more people playing squash after Covid had chopped the league to just 40 members. He reached out to an old friend and player he knew from another club, Molly Tafrate, to see if she was interested. After some thought, however, Tafrate proposed creating a women’s league. The idea was a winner but was not going to be easy. The pair decided to get the existing squash-playing women back on the court, perfect the format, and then bring in new women.

## RULE 2: A WOMEN’S SQUASH LEAGUE IS ABOUT MORE THAN SQUASH

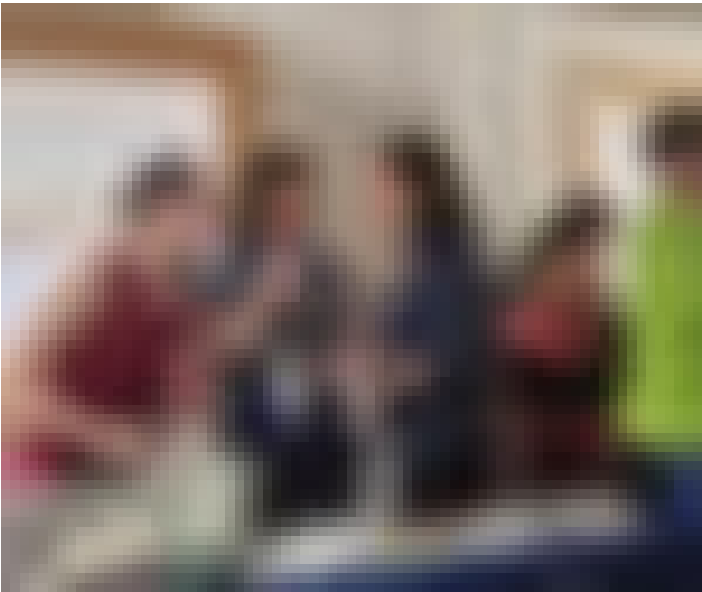
Tafrate had played a role in the club’s previous attempts at starting a women’s league. Since the club did not have a squash pro, it would, from time to time, hire a travelling pro to come to the club. In 2016, one such travelling pro helped the women by explaining the basics of squash and being on hand for several evenings to answer questions, but there had been no consistent format. Occasionally the pro would suggest for two people to play, but for the most part the women enjoyed a glass of wine and catching up with their friends.

When the pro left it got worse. “We would just show up on Wednesdays at six and stare at each other,” Tafrate recalled. “Eventually you would work up the courage to ask, ‘Hey, do you want to play?’ but if they said, ‘I’m good,’ or whatever, you were stuck. I’m really introverted and that would hurt, even if it had nothing to do with me. So we would just coordinate with friends beforehand and play with them. That way no-one would be embarrassed and we’d be guaranteed a good workout.”

Instead of playing in a team format, Massie suggested starting with a box league which could be built around volume of play, where players were rewarded with how much they played as well as whether they won. As long as they had eight to 10 women, the box format would work. The women would know who they were scheduled to play each night. And they would continue to play matches on league night so everyone would be at the club together on the same night. This would foster community and camaraderie.

Tafrate liked that idea. “If I knew who I was supposed to play each week, I could show up with purpose,” Tafrate said. “Now for an ice-breaker, I can ask someone, ‘Excuse me, do you know so-and-so? By the way, I’m Molly.’ It seems simple, but by the end of the night I know two people – the person I asked for help and my opponent. That adds up quickly.” She assured Massie that they could get the eight to ten players he needed, since the previous leagues had drawn that many or more. To make sure their instincts were correct, though, they reached out to Holly Babeaux, a woman who had everyone’s contact information, and she helped them poll previous players. To their relief they had immediate interest! “Once the women knew we were getting the gang back together,” Massie recalls, “the biggest question was ‘When do we start?’”

**RULE 3: WOMEN ARE BUSY. FACILITATE COMMUNICATION AND SCHEDULING.**



Molly Tafrate (left), with former players Jess Fleming and Linda Hodge.

Still, there were some critical details to iron out. Attendance protocol was a top priority. Players made it clear that while they wanted to play sports and exercise, their time was not to be wasted. “I would rush out of meetings for the old league, get there, and find no one willing to play,” said Andrea Schmitt. Another, Katherine Covault, agreed: “For me, squash is my workout for that day. I’ve got a family and an hour at most. I want to work out, have a glass of wine, talk with my friends and get home.” If they were showing up, they said, they intended to play squash.

Massie was prepared for this. If a woman was available to play, he said, she would be guaranteed a match. All the players had to do was tell him when they wanted to play and show up at that time. He would only give them matches who were also going to arrive at that time. Still, that led to more questions – a couple of the women who had children, or work hours that were erratic, wanted to play but were afraid of leaving someone without a match if they had to cancel at the last minute. Could they ONLY play on league nights? And what was the latest they could cancel without incurring a penalty?

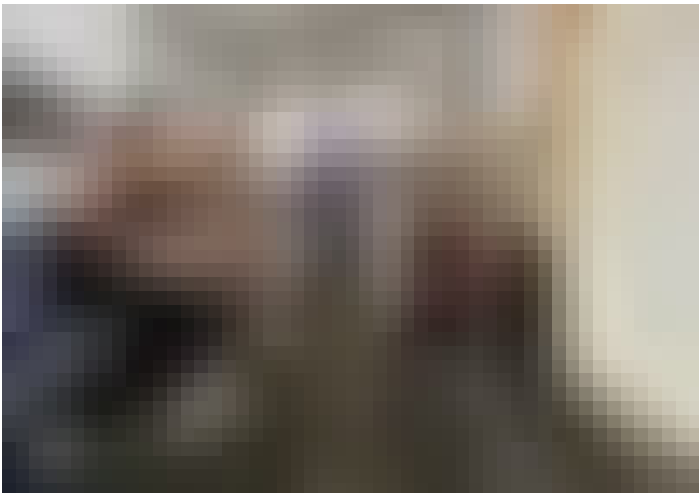
**Lesson – Don’t ever make a woman choose between her family and playing squash**

In contrast to the Men’s Team League, where any deviation from the set schedule resulted in a forfeit (to keep it from looking like the Commissioners were playing favorites), Tafrate and Massie instituted a policy of maximum flexibility. If someone had an issue on league night, they would be reassigned to play someone self-scheduled. And Massie would approach the other women playing at that time to find a substitute. As he said, “When a woman planned her day around playing squash, we did not want to let her down. Either someone was going to take the match and play twice, or I was going to hit with her.”

These answers satisfied the old guard and Massie and after four weeks of preparation and promotion, and with Massie coaching newcomers to the game, the Women’s League was launched on October 6, 2021, with twelve players.

**RULE 4: LISTEN TO YOUR PLAYERS AND MODIFY ANYTHING THAT DOESN'T WORK**

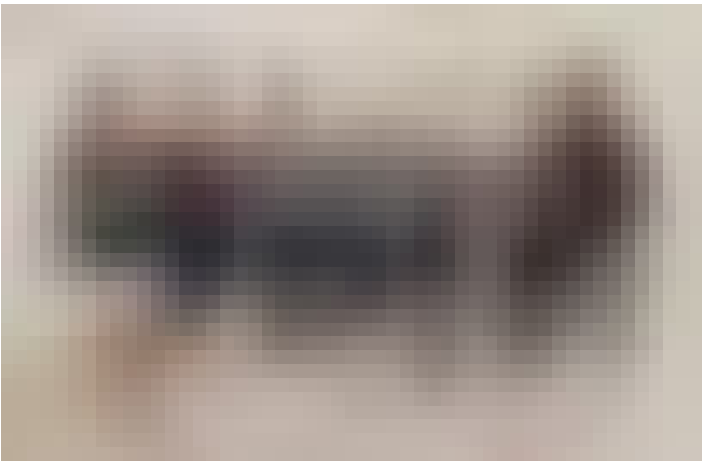
The first box league had all 12 players in the same box. Players were encouraged to play as many matches as possible and to play others twice. The format encouraged participation even more than winning. With so many new players to the game, organizers used blue dot balls to extend the rallies, which gave players valuable hitting experience. And when there were matches with different skill sets, the more skilled player encouraged and helped their opponent to get better. Players had such a good time on the first night of the women’s league, they were so excited to come back the next week. In fact, they had eighteen players show up for the next league night!



League night in the first league

Massie was determined to make sure the women had fun and continued to want to play. He made it a point to ask what was working and what wasn’t; when he noticed some wine was going unopened, for instance, he asked if the selection was okay and a few women revealed that they actually would prefer beer. He ordered it and they emptied the beverage tray. When he asked what they wanted the labels to say on the awards for the end of the season, the women said they would actually prefer something practical like massage gift certificates. He got six of them from the club spa. And when he asked if they wanted the polo shirts he was ordering for the men’s league, one

player, Alex Seymour, spoke up for all of them. “I have an entire closet full of those things from corporate events, where they order for men and we’re like an afterthought,” Seymour said. “I’ve never worn them once.” Instead, the women requested racerback tank tops, selected from several choices and logos Jim gave them, and drove the entire ordering process from beginning to end.



Players pose after designing their shirts

Women who had been in the previous leagues appreciated the difference. “I got into squash (in 2018) because I heard it would be a good activity for my kids,” said Courtnee Hawkins, a league player. “When it started back up after COVID, though, there was a new energy. I’ve been involved with the club for years as they tried to engage women, but now women were taking charge and engaging themselves. It wasn’t just a fun way to kill an evening anymore. It was something I wanted my friends to be part of.”

“I was new to Columbus and the club and wasn’t meeting people,” said Shaz Kojouri, a friend of Hawkins who agreed. Standard mixers weren’t doing it for her, as she found she had little in common with the other people after they ended. When Hawkins told her about squash, though, she decided to try. “I’ve never been an athlete or enjoyed sports, and some of my opponents were way better than me. In lieu of wiping the floor with me, though, or making me feel like I was wasting their time, they turned our matches into coaching sessions. The kindness and camaraderie locked me in.”

**RULE 5: WORD OF MOUTH WILL SELL YOUR PROGRAM**

After the initial box league with eighteen players was a success, it was time to change formats to accommodate the differing skill levels and growing number of players. After talking it over with everyone, the women were interested in trying out a team league. The most competitive players wanted to play constantly, but they also wanted to mix it up and play for a cause other than themselves. Massie had a format he had used in other leagues; if they could get six more players, he said, they could have four teams of six, and play an eight-week league with playoffs. The players started recruiting all their friends. They told neighbors on walks, brought friends in who played racquet sports and sold them on memberships, and even accosted strangers. “At the Christmas Party, Erika (Pedrick) and I were running around grabbing ladies by the shirt and being like ‘You! You look athletic! Come play squash with us!’”, laughed Katherine Covault. When it came time to draft teams, they had not the twenty-four Massie had hoped for, but forty women ready to play.



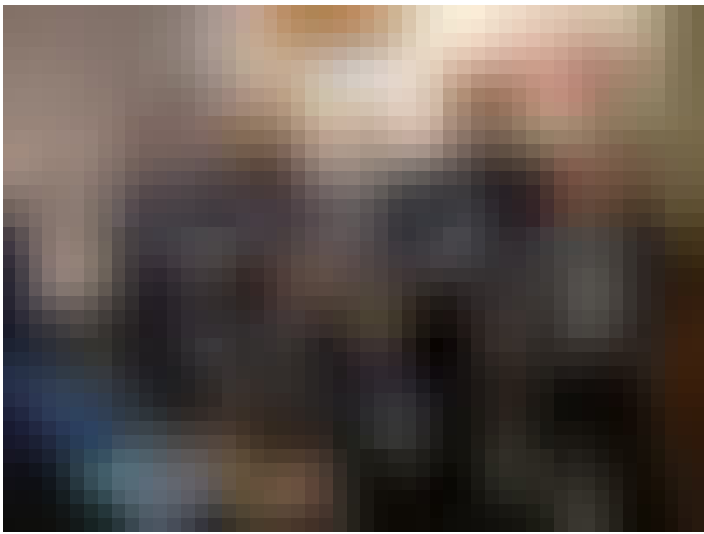
Squash and the social experience

Angela Sabatini was one of those players who got the full sales pitch. “When I first joined the club, there was not a new member social or event that I attended where squash went unmentioned. So many people only had positive things to share. It didn’t matter that I had never played or picked up a racket, I was instantly welcomed.” Another, Nicole Phillips, was active with several Club committees already, agreed. “The thing that really made the league stand out to me was that it was Women’s-only. At a club that has more active male members than female members, it was wonderful to get a chance to make female friends.”

As word spread that squash was for everyone, women with backgrounds from other sports came in to test themselves. And the chance to share the sport she loved with other women attracted former junior squash player and new member Lindsey Turner, immediately raising the standard of play. Amy Tucker, who had just started playing in the fall and taken fourth in the initial league, was ecstatic at the challenge. “We were like, ‘So THAT’S what this game is supposed to look like. Bring it on!’”

Still, while the women had played in the box league format despite the skill differential, the team league format exposed the problem that players were scared of letting teammates down. As Brittany Gibson, a new player who had been most drawn to the social scene, said, “I had a bit of a panic moment when we first started because I realized other people were paying attention to how I was playing, and their outcomes depended on me in some ways.” Phillips added, “I definitely considered quitting because I was not particularly good and I felt I might be slowing some of the other ladies down. Our matches were not very competitive.”

Massie knew that, while competition and structure were important, it was important to adjust if things were not working. So after meeting with the captains, he changed the format halfway through the league season and started matching players based on skill level rather than their rank on the team. This breakthrough quickly closed the gap in the teams and improved morale as women were competitive win or lose. The players



Some teams even order uniforms!

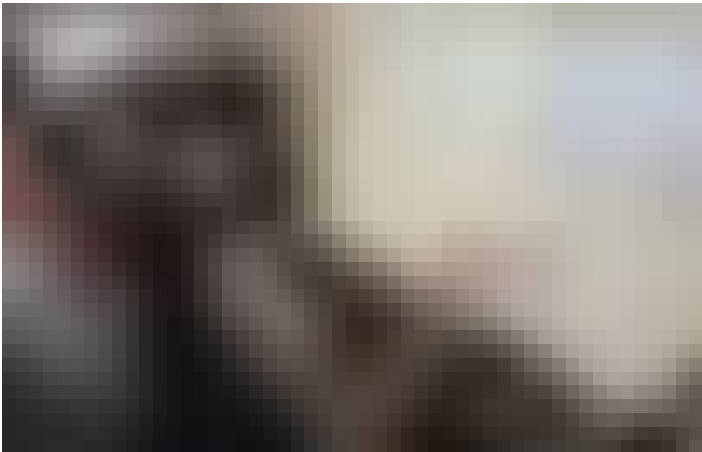
started a tradition where they picked team colors and got trinkets like silver hair scrunchies so they could recognize teammates and cheer for each other. And the players towards the bottom of the ladder began to find their niches. "It made for much more competitive (and thereby enjoyable) matches for everyone," Phillips said. "Now I jokingly say that I am the welcoming committee for the new folks when they join and are entered into the lower bracket!"

**RULE 6: THE CLUB MUST ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT YOU**

At every step of the way, the club's administration was openly encouraging. From finding the best deals with the food and beverage budget to promoting the women's league in a weekly newsletter, everyone from the Athletic Director to the General Manager made it clear that women's squash was a source of pride for the

club. Nowhere was this more evident than at a particularly critical juncture in January 2022. Seeking new challenges and opportunities to improve, several of the women wanted to join the historically male Team League. This had prompted discussion among the squash player base, both male and female, and the Board had quickly weighed in. Women, they said, were welcome in any activity the Club had to offer.

"We just wanted to play against the best to get better," said Amy Tucker, who had been the first to try and join. And while the vast majority of women had no desire to play with men, they nevertheless saw this as a validation and appreciated the club's stance. Now, not only are major events far more crowded with co-ed play, but squash has taken on a family aspect that it lacks at most other clubs. Half the Women's League and a third of the Beer League players have partners who play squash, and as Tafrate points out, the club's decisive investment will soon pay off further. "After all, most of us have kids," she teases.



Co-ed holiday parties routinely sell out

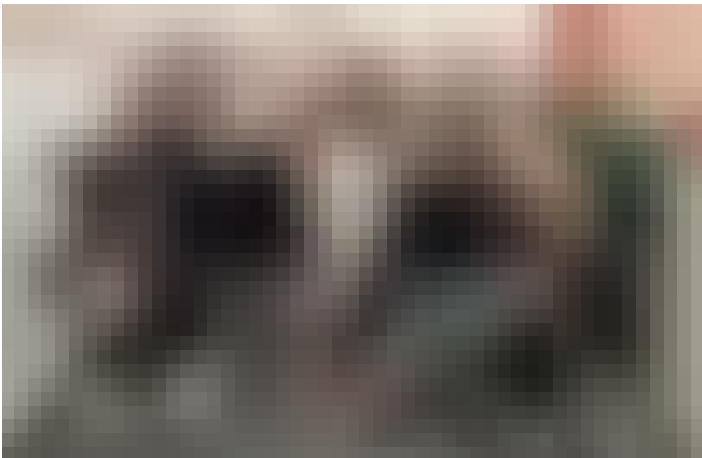
**RULE 7: TRAVEL WILL UNITE YOUR COMPETITIVE PLAYERS**

At the end of the first Women's Team League, demand was so high that the women tacked on another eight week box league, with fifty-five players in four different boxes. And some players still wanted more squash. They had found a sense of purpose and belonging. "That struck a chord with me," Massie recalled. "The feeling of common cause in sport, with friends." An idea occurred to him. He'd gone to squash events at other clubs before with men, and had loved team athletic travel in his youth. Were there similar events for women? A quick Google search turned up the Howe Cup, the premier event for women's squash in the United States. "Not only was there an entire tournament for women," Massie said, "but it was a team tournament. Perfect!"

The concept was a little intimidating at first. "Sure, whatever," Tafrate laughs. "We're going to go play on regulation courts, five feet wider, with no formal training." But the idea stayed with them. Squash had brought out the competitor in many women; were they merely a social club, or did they have what it took to face opponents who had been playing for years, or even decades? There was only one way to find out. The players took trips to Cleveland, Toledo and Cincinnati to prepare. They measured up with other clubs physically, but technically, as Tafrate said, "Oh boy. A lot of us hit two-handed backhands that we got from tennis or field hockey or some other sport, and our footwork was...not good." Moreover, with their home courts being only sixteen feet wide, the ACC women routinely caused or played through interference without noticing because such contact was routine in a tight space.

The issues weren't resolved by Howe Cup, but after an initial adjustment period, both the C and D teams went 2-2. Still, after taking stock of the situation and weighing their travel experiences, the women realized they weren't going to be competitive at the highest levels. Their lack of technique meant they couldn't seize control of rallies offensively and the lack of practice time on regular courts meant even the properly trained (and now club champion) Lindsey Turner was struggling. If they were going to compete, they needed the help that only a pro could bring.

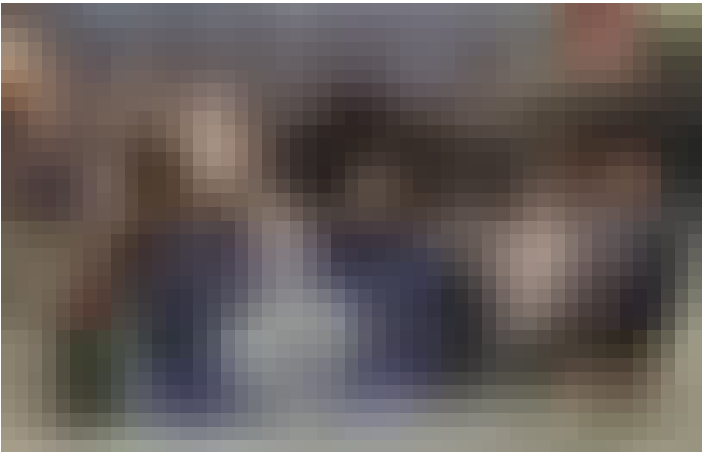
Once again, the ACC rose to the occasion. For the first time in over a century, it posted a job application for a squash coach, with the caveat that the person had to start a program for kids. Finding the right coach took time. Not only did the person have to take on an unproven job with incredibly nonstandard courts, but they had to



The traveling team goes to Cincinnati



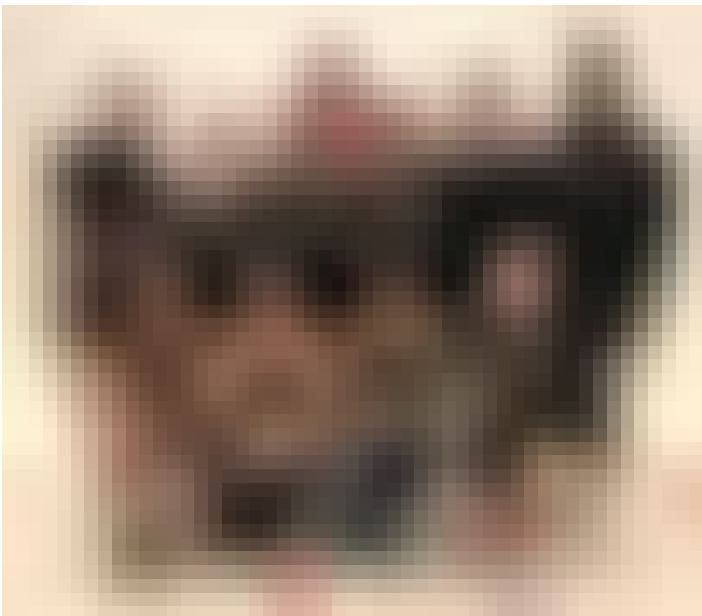
be comfortable in a highly social atmosphere with both men and women and have experience with juniors. The search dragged on for over half a year, but in late spring, the stars finally aligned. Scott Denne, who in his squash career had coached the US Junior National Team, been head pro at four clubs, run dozens of summer camps and been the two-time Liberty League Women's Coach of the Year at St. Lawrence University, expressed interest in the program.



The 2023 Howe Cup Team, with Denne (right)

Denne took the job in September of 2023. The Women's League prepped two D teams and a C team and just two months later, at Howe Cup, the women saw a critical difference.

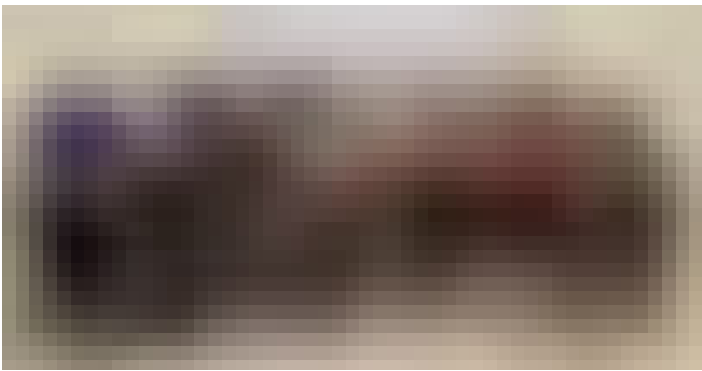
This time they lost in the semifinals, to the eventual champions and took fourth in the C division, and took third and fourth in D division.



The 2022 Howe Cup Team

RULE 8: EMPOWER YOUR PLAYERS

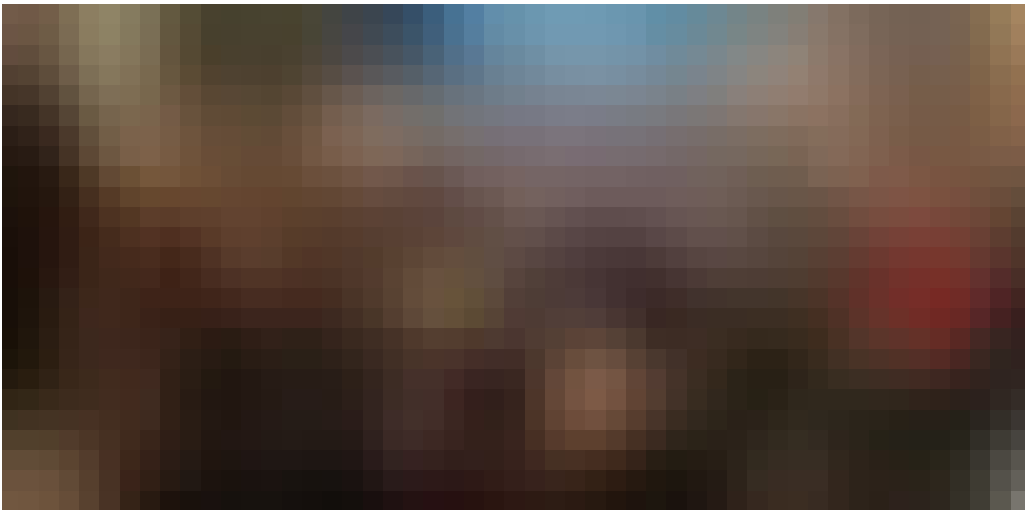
By February 2023, sixty-five women were in the second team league, with players assigned to their teams rather than selected by captains leading to better balance and plenty of matchups. It was time for the women to take ownership of the league, dividing up the work that Jim Massie had done. While he had worked closely with Sabatini, whose strong organizational skills had been invaluable, her experiences had convinced her and others that the league was a multi-person job. After talking it over, the women invented The Committee, with volunteers each responsible for one aspect of organizing the league – scheduling, communication, budget, apparel, league night experience, ordering food and beverage, and the after-parties.



Keep the competition fun, and the fun competitive!

The transition was seamless and highly successful. The fall 2023 league, the first run entirely by the Committee, had eighty-three players with six brackets, with the lowest one focused on social play using the blue dot ball. "That's the bracket where "I love you" comes first," joked a regular, Kris Tann. "When you grab the double yellow dot, it's now, 'I love you...but I wanna win!' Everyone knows where the cutoff is and finds what's right for them." The success continued into the new year, with the third Team League (and seventh Women's League overall), starting in January 2024 with seventy-six women. "We seem to have stabilized at around eighty," Tafrate said. "The ones who leave, as best as we can tell, don't leave because of us. It's because the sport just isn't right for them. And that's okay! Squash is a tough sport! Meanwhile, the ones who we lose due to travel, pregnancy, family obligations, whatever – they can't wait to get back."

Both Shaz Kojouri and Sabatini are among those who came back. Sabatini, who took a short leave of absence from the club, realized there was nothing like the Squash League outside the ACC: "The fact that there are 70-plus women who come together to, yes, play a game, but also be one another's support system, cheerleaders, intel and friends is truthfully a magical thing that is irreplaceable." And Shaz, who missed an entire year due to a broken ankle, agreed: "I've met fellow power women in all different fields. Signing up was my best decision ever. We've really become a big family, and I love it."



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