

# THE ROAD TO SQUASH WAY

## Part One: Revolution from Below

Throughout the twentieth century, there were two versions of squash singles in the world: “hardball” and “softball.”

Hardball, the North American version of the game, on eighteen-and-a-half foot wide, “narrow” courts, hewed closely to the original design at Harrow School, where squash was invented in the 1850s. Hardball favored shot making and aggressive play. It was a great game and there were hardball courts all over the world. The most famous one was the Royal Automobile Club’s “American Court,” built in 1950 in London.

Still, softball, with its twenty-one-foot-wide, “wide” courts, was the norm in London and everywhere else . . . except the U.S., Mexico, Canada. It favored fitness and endurance, and although different, was also a great game.

The first U.S. softball courts (two of them) appeared at the Uptown Racquet Club in Manhattan in September 1976. Six months later, two other New York public clubs, Broad Street and Park Place, opened with one softball court each. After nearly a century of hardball, softball had arrived.

But growth was slow. For the next decade, no other city erected courts except Seattle, with one at Tennis World of Seattle in 1977, which soon closed, and one and then another at the Seattle Racquet Club.

## A Growth Spurt

In the mid-to-late 1980s, this changed. The accelerating globalization of the game was the main catalyst. Hardball playing Americans were heading out: US Squash was fielding men, women, and juniors for the world individual and team championships. However, the international game was softball and the Americans were not winning.

Softball playing internationals were coming in: there was a flood, led by Jahangir Khan, of players coming to North America to play in pro hardball tournaments and to work as teaching pros. They brought their game with them.

Moreover, Olympic gold loomed large. In 1986, the International Olympic Committee recognized squash, and the World Squash Federation made its first-ever push to get squash—softball squash—into the Olympic Games, for Barcelona in 1992.

Softball started to grow. From 1985 to 1988, two dozen softball courts appeared around the U.S., mostly in non-traditional squash locales: in three Arizona cities, in three Florida cities, at the Vail ski resort in Colorado, and even at a Las Vegas casino (Caesar’s Palace). About a

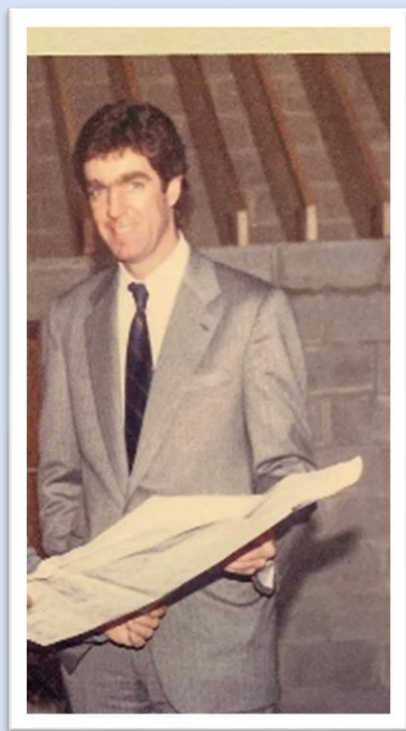
hundred racquetball-converted twenty-foot-wide squash courts also opened. And the Northwest hubs of Portland and Seattle added more softball courts.

These numbers paled against the approximately 3,100 U.S. hardball courts, but the three years of change raised eyebrows. Still, along the Eastern Seaboard—the traditional core of American squash—softball courts were non-existent outside of Manhattan. Then in 1989, the game came to Philadelphia.

## **Keating In the Beginning**

It started at the storied Cynwyd Club. By the mid-1980s several players were advocating for softball. They pointed to the fact that Cynwyd would be the first in the city to have a wide court, that it was a version that appealed to women players (Cynwyd was famous for its women's program), that you could play softball all year round, and that it was the world's game.

In 1988, as a part of the Club's seventy-fifth anniversary, it tore down two 1913 squash courts and an outdoor tennis court wall and built a new structure. Dan Keating did the work and led the charge.



Keating (left) ran Daniel J. Keating Construction, which he started in 1975, four years after graduating from Villanova. Keating was a leading builder in the region and one of the largest in the country, doing thousands of projects large and small in thirty-eight states, including hotels, casinos, convention centers, airports, courthouses, office buildings, private homes, and even Lincoln Financial Field. He was a longtime squash player at Cynwyd and also played at the Philadelphia Country Club. A southpaw, he thrived on the left wall in doubles and was a keen singles player, having a regular game with Richie Ashburn, the Phillies Hall of Fame outfielder. “We had a pack of guys at Cynwyd that I played with in the 1980s,” said Keating. “It was one of the greatest pleasures of my life to have those friends and those times on and off the squash court.”

In March 1989 the Cynwyd Club opened its new \$400,000 squash facility, with an additional doubles court, a new hardball singles court (with an expandable side wall) and the Philadelphia area's first softball singles court—all built by Keating.

## **Schellenberg Creates a Tournament**

Cynwyd immediately took to the game. In June 1989 the Club, led by one of its best players, John Schellenberg, hosted the Cynwyd Cup, a \$5,000 men's pro softball event, which was the first of its kind in Philadelphia. The draw was oversubscribed: twenty-five softball pro

players, ranked from world No.25 to No.176 entered. The event drew coverage from local newspapers and good crowds. The semis and finals, played over a summer weekend, were packed, even though it was a time when, as Schellenberg said, “most members tended to go to the Jersey Shore.”

In 1990 the Cynwyd Cup returned as a \$7,500 event, and local pro and future U.S. Squash Hall of Famer Tom Page entered, bringing in a capacity crowd on a Monday night for his opening round match. A bowling award was commandeered and turned into the Cynwyd Cup’s permanent trophy. For all of the 1990s, Cynwyd continued to host the event. In 1993 the event even served as the U.S. Open and, for the first time ever, included a draw for women, nearly forty years after the U.S. Open men’s draw had been founded. It also offered equal prize money to both men and women, another first.

The event found a new purpose in 1994 and adopted a new name: The Philadelphia Open.

## **Tarantino Enters the Picture**

Thomas Tarantino was an avid player and a member of both the Racquet Club of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Cricket Club. He pushed the two clubs to add softball courts. In the fall of 1989, as the RC celebrated its centennial, Tom donated the Club’s first softball court. Not to be outdone, the Philadelphia Cricket Club then installed three, one-upping Tarantino’s request for two.

With three clubs having courts, Schellenberg and Tarantino turned the Cynwyd event into a citywide open, justifying its new name. Its goal was to introduce the game to all the clubs in town.



## **The Philadelphia Open**

Like dominoes, they all soon added softball courts and joined the open: Berwyn, Germantown Cricket, Gwynedd, Merion Cricket and Philadelphia Country all transitioned. The work was usually done by Dan Keating, who built more than fifty courts in the area. Keating also did the courts at Payne Whitney Gymnasium at Yale. “There was no business plan,” Dan said. “We were breaking even on the jobs, IF we were lucky. There’s a saying in construction: ‘you don’t know if you are making money or losing money until it’s over.’ Well, squash courts were a challenging business.”

Hardballers around the city sometimes decried the transition. Philadelphia had been the home of the game since a court was first built in 1900 at the Racquet Club and it had been the home of US Squash since 1904. If it went softball, the rest of the country was sure to follow. In a September 1990 letter to the board of Cynwyd, a prominent member and former president of U.S. Squash blamed a “very vocal minority” who were pushing the softball game. Not so. As more and more members played softball, it became Cynwyd’s most popular game. So much so that in December 1990, Cynwyd converted that brand-new 1989 hardball singles court, after less than two years of play, to softball . . . simply by expanding its sidewall. In 1993 Cynwyd transitioned its other two hardball singles courts (both with inferior lighting and untrue front walls) into a third softball court.



The Philadelphia Open reached its high point in 1996, when the Racquet Club hosted its men’s and women’s squash championships. Calling the night “Rugs, Racquets, and Rock and Roll,” the Club also presented championship play in racquets, court tennis and squash doubles, provided wine and beer tastings and featured, yes, a rug exhibition. Over a thousand people attended, the largest event in the Club’s history.

*Airgas, led by Peter McCausland, (center) were Philadelphia Open sponsors.*

By the late 1990s, Philadelphia—and the U.S.—were firmly committed to the softball game, and it was players like Keating, Schellenberg and Tarantino who drove the transition.

As for the Philadelphia Open, its work being done, it closed.

## Part Two: Evolution from Above

If it was a grassroots effort that spurred the initial switch to softball, it was a push from the top that led to the next great milestone.

In the decade that followed the transition years, all the existing Philadelphia clubs converted to softball courts, and Philadelphia regained its role as the leader of squash in America. More courts came in. A mega-club in the suburbs, Fairmont Athletic Club in King of



Prussia opened in 2007: it had twelve singles and two hardball doubles courts. Berwyn Squash, the first public squash club in the country, celebrated a remarkable fifty years in 2023. Many of the local private schools built courts.

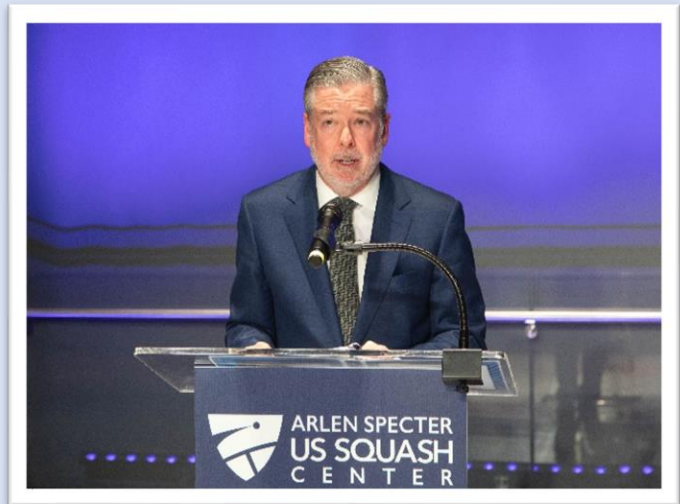
But it took one man to start the next chapter.

## Fry Enters the Fray

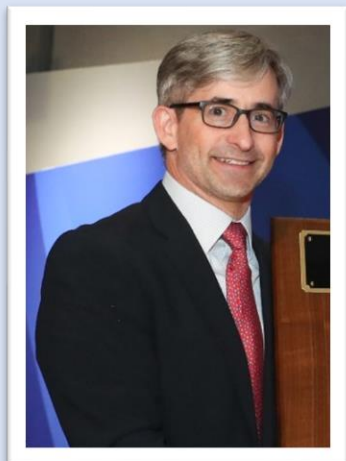
John Fry was introduced to the game in the way so many others have been: a friend suggested they play. At the time, Fry was a young administrator at the University of Pennsylvania and they began playing singles at 5:30 in the morning. He loved it and joined Merion Cricket Club so he could play doubles near home, and soon he had a regular 6am doubles game there. His kids fell for squash, too (Mia played varsity squash at Williams, Nat at Drexel). “This is the best game,” Fry said. “Squash was, if I may, a game-changer for my family and me.”

Fry (*right*) became the president of Franklin & Marshall College in 2002. He revitalized its squash program, bringing in a top coach, former world number one, John White, and renovating the squash facility.

When he became the president of Drexel University in 2010, he set about doing the same thing. He turned the five old hardball courts in the basement of the Athletic Center into softball courts, giving Drexel a total of seven when combined with two recently built courts upstairs. And he lured John White from Lancaster to University City to help convert Drexel’s club team into a varsity powerhouse.



*John Fry, the president of Drexel, played a central role in creating the Arlen Specter US Squash Center.*



At the same time, US Squash was getting its act together. Kevin Klipstein (*left*) had come on board to serve as President and CEO. He was increasing membership, expanding play, revising governing structures and creating partnerships with other squash organisations. It was only a matter of time before he began courting Drexel.

In 2011, Fry was asked to join the board of US Squash. He did, and in turn he offered US Squash the chance to bring the U.S. Open, the country’s flagship event, to Drexel, initially with a three-year commitment that, in 2013, was upgraded to a ten-year contract. That first year was exciting and difficult. In just seven weeks’ time,

the tournament was organized and its all-glass-wall court was set up in the Athletic Center's basketball arena.

Drexel's squash team, having just gone from a club to a varsity sport a few weeks earlier, saw their new head coach, John White, compete in the Open's qualifying round and hit a ball 170 mph on a courtside radar gun.

The Open's prize money in 2012 was \$175,000, the largest purse in U.S. squash history. At the time, that was amazing; in retrospective, it was embarrassing, not for the amount but for how it was divided: \$115,000 went to the men, while only \$60,000 to the women.

In 2013, US Squash announced prize-money equality. In an instant, the U.S. Open was big news—Billie Jean King issued a supportive statement—and a trailblazing pioneer: in less than four years, all of squash's biggest titles embraced parity for men and women.

With equality as a tailwind, the Open became much more than just a series of matches on a glass showcourt. It celebrated Women in Sports Day, Character in Sports Day, the Arlen Specter Pennsylvania JCT, the Squash Summit, the U.S. Open Film Festival, SquashSmarts clinics, and U.S. Squash Hall of Fame inductions. The Open and its corollary events was the busiest week on the American squash calendar.

## **We Have a Dream**

Then a giant move. Drexel and US Squash deepened their partnership to embrace the long-dreamed-of idea of a national squash center. The conversation had started years before when Fry was at F&M and he thought of a national center in Lancaster, but after the success with the U.S. Open, it began to coalesce in Philadelphia. Klipstein approached Fry with an idea that there might be a way to do it on Drexel's campus. "With the trust in a capable partner in US Squash after the successes of the U.S. Open, Drexel was able to consider collaborating in such a mammoth project," said Klipstein.

After much searching, the notion focused the Philadelphia Armory, an historic 1916 building on Drexel's campus. Owned by the City of Philadelphia and located between 32<sup>nd</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> Streets just north of Market Street, the twenty-thousand square-foot facility was used by the National Guard's 103rd Brigade Engineer Battalion, as well as a five-university Reserve Officers Training Corp program. It also served as an indoor recreation and intramural facility and a practice facility for the Drexel women's softball and men's and women's tennis teams. And the University's annual homecoming dance was held there—Snoop Dogg and DJ Jazzy Jeff had headlined it—and concerts were, too, including Nirvana, Run-DMC and the Mighty Mighty Bosstones.

The Armory was perfect for a new vision of squash in America based around access. It was located in a federal Promise Zone and the underserved West Philadelphia neighborhood of Powelton Village. A national squash center would not be just a training locale for elite athletes, but also a community center where thousands of people would be able to learn the game.

The cost to transform the Armory was set at \$35 million. Money had to be raised and squash needed a financial hero.

## Arlen and Shanin



Arlen Specter had served as the U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania for thirty years (1981—2011). Like John Fry, he had come to squash as an adult, learning the game at law school and then becoming a regular player after he turned forty. Specter loved squash: he played nearly every day, up to 350 days a year. Indeed, he was the most well-traveled squash amateur in history, playing on courts all across America and in more than one hundred countries.

His son, Shanin, had taken up the game and was quite skilled. He knew his father had spent his life playing on public courts and believed that the game was simply too good to be restricted to private clubs. Like his father, he believed in access.

*"Hello dear, this one's for you"*

And Shanin Specter was more than a believer. He had begun donating squash courts to various institutions: to his high school, William Penn Charter; to his college, Haverford; to his law school, Penn; to his club, the Racquet Club (which displays the above wisdom); and even to Drexel—the two recently built courts that John Fry had found were the Kline and Specter Squash Center.





## What Else Might He Do?

One night, one dinner, that's all it took: John and Cara Fry ate with Shanin and Tracey Specter. The next day, the Specters pledged \$10 million for the national squash center, and Kevin Klipstein announced that the facility would be named in honor of an avid player, Senator Arlen Specter.



*The Specter family gave the lead gift in honor of the late Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter: (l-r) Tracey Specter, Shanin Specter and Joan Specter*

The Center, however, needed an Executive Director to complete the necessary fundraising. Only one person had both the squash gravitas and the business acumen to fill the position: Ned Edwards (*below, at the pre-construction Center site*). He was a four-time, first team All American at Penn, a number one ranked amateur, a top professional player, and the leader of U.S. teams in five world championships. He had coached at his alma mater for six years, had worked in wealth management and executive recruiting, and knew everybody. With his help, the fundraising was completed, and, in 2019, construction began.





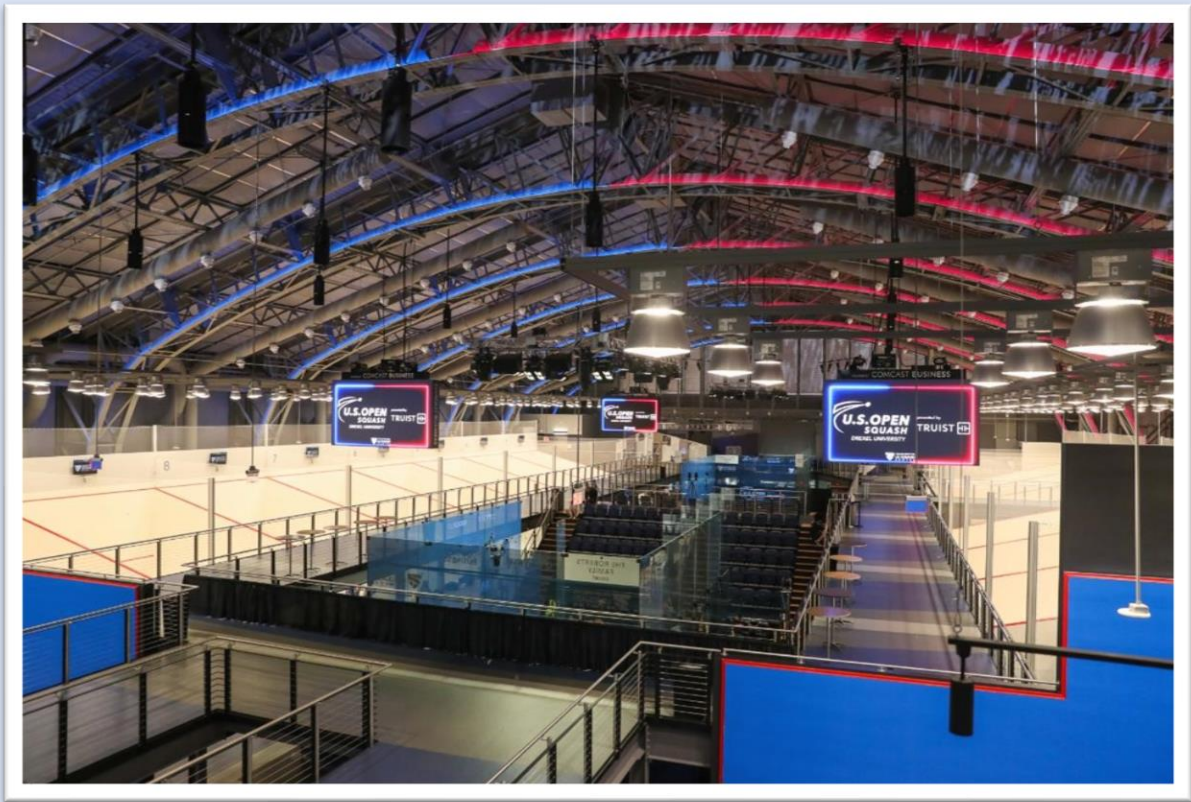
## Keating At the End

Drexel was in a construction boom and it was only logical to use their regular architects and contractors. But squash courts weren't regular construction. The project soon floundered. Drexel and US Squash took a deep breath and hired a different contractor: somebody who just happened to have a lot of experience building courts, Dan Keating. Dan brought in his own team, in particular architect Van Potteiger. They expedited the approvals process and began work before Covid-19 could shut the project down. There were supply chain issues, but the Center still opened its doors in the spring of 2021.



*Dan Keating and Van Potteiger (r) guided the Specter Center from a set of architectural plans to a spectacular twenty-court reality.*

The long-dreamed-of national center, the Arlen Specter US Squash Center, opened with twenty courts: eighteen singles and two hardball doubles. The world's largest community squash center, the Specter is a spectacular success.



The Specter Center has offices for US Squash's burgeoning staff. It is the home the U.S. Squash Hall of Fame—John Fry was inducted in 2022. It displays artifacts from the history of the game, including a twin-handled trophy from 1890 believed to be the world's oldest squash trophy. It is the home for Team USA, where a dozen members of the national team train. It is the member club for hundreds of adults.

That's not all. It is a hotbed of junior squash, where seven neighboring public high schools have teams playing league matches, fielding players who had never heard of the game before. There are summer camps, regional and national squads, and the world's largest individual (the U.S. Junior Open) and team (the National High Schools) events. And it houses classrooms for SquashSmarts, Philadelphia's after-school enrichment program.

Finally, true to its origins across the street at the Athletic Center, the center hosts the U.S. Open.

With the Arlen Specter US Squash Center, Drexel University's Kline & Specter Squash Center, and the Penn Squash Center, there are now thirty-seven singles courts and two doubles courts within a couple of city blocks of each other. It is the highest density of squash courts in the world.



The City of Philadelphia could not help but notice. In late November 2022, it renamed 33<sup>rd</sup> Street between Chestnut and Arch Streets. “Squash Way” is now a one-way street leading directly to the future of the game.

#### **Photos, with thanks from:**

Keating / Philadelphia Open – Cynwyd Club

Joan Specter – Specter family

Tarantino plaque / Wall message – The Racquet Club of Philadelphia

Fry / Specter Family – Jay Gorodetzer

Keating and Van Pottle / Specter Center / Klipstein / Squash Way / Edwards – US Squash

