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Rank, Competition, and the Etiquette of Community at a Squash Club

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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Rank, Competition, and the Etiquette of Community at a Squash Club

Monograph

by

David Levine

Graduate Program in Anthropology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
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Abstract

This research uses a micro-level approach to focus on the day to day lives of squash players at a Toronto squash and fitness club. How different members conceived of the club as a community was one important aspect of my research. The club's skill hierarchy and structure were also important ideas that influenced the everyday behavior of members, as it affected who members tended to develop relationships with. The greater social status of higher ranked players and how this was maintained is another important theme of this work. Members' squash identity was usually grounded and initiated within the context of the squash club and often took the form of a kind of group identity, even though there were some exceptions. The last part of my work focuses on a "ritual of reversal", known as the Calcutta tournament. This tournament mostly acts to reinforce the *status quo* of the club, but also opens up the possibility for change. I used semi-structured interviews and an intense form of participant observation called "experiential positivism" to carry out my work. My work reveals that even playing squash at a club, a practice many would consider to be mundane or trivial, is in reality quite complicated because it is a unique social and cultural environment that has its own structures, rules and idiosyncrasies.

Keywords

Squash, Community, Identity, Hierarchy, Social Status, Calcutta, Ritual, Rank, Structure, Competition, Experiential Positivism.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The Anthropological Study of Sport

Sport is an area of fascination for billions of people throughout the world and serves as high drama for many. It also has the ability to connect and divide entire nations, sometimes simultaneously. The Olympics are a prime example of a sporting event that can divide and unite nations, as both national pride and an ideal of sportsmanship and togetherness through competition serve to create this tension. Given sports' popularity and ubiquity throughout the world, it is not surprising that so many academics have focused on it. Sport studies have a fascinating history, especially from the 19th century onwards. How sport connects with body culture movements and theories of social order, morality, nationalism and politics have been well documented.

One area of sport research focuses on ritual. The rituals and routines of baseball players in Gmelch's "Baseball Magic" (1971) show how ritual and magic are not just the stereotypical domains of ancient cultures or groups. These baseball players actually use magic and ritual on a regular basis to gain control over activities that have chance in them (Gmelch 1971:1-2). Sport has also been looked at in the context of male initiation rituals, with some authors also arguing for many sports being a form of ritualized male homosexuality (Dundes 1978 :86-87). Some have also argued that male initiation within sport is used as a "deliberate act of identity construction and confirmation" (Clayton 2012:2).

It became clear throughout my research that a focus on sport could yield important insights into a wide variety of topics. One of the strengths of sports research is its ability

to use different levels of scope, with both macro and micro-level approaches yielding important results and insights into human behavior. For example, sport has often been studied at the national and international level. Focuses on the relationship of sport to colonialism, national identity and the politics of identity have produced considerable amounts of literature, and contributed to fields that go beyond what many would consider the domain of sport. Work such as Stuart and MacClancy's on protest and social change in the context of soccer in Zimbabwe (1996 :167-180) is an interesting example of how the study of sport can be about much more than sport.

My own research is interesting from a number of standpoints. My focus, the sport of squash, has yet to be studied academically. Although squash is a global sport, played in about 180 countries, my own research will be at the micro-level of analysis. My focus will be on a Toronto fitness and squash club. From this point on, my main research club will simply be referred to as "the club" or "the club where I did my research." My research focuses on the actual functioning of a squash community. I will focus on the day to day aspects of this community, and will elaborate on how the squash club itself is a practice. In other words, I will show how what is seemingly mundane and trivial is in reality a fascinating and complicated social environment.

I was interested initially in how ideas of identity and community might connect with participation in sports, with the focus being on a squash club. These ideas ended up being part of the focus of my research, but other themes emerged as more prominent and important. The other themes that emerged as more prominent were hierarchy, club structure and social status.

Much of this literature review will focus on some of the other projects and ideas that have been the focus of sports anthropology, as well as how others have explored the

concepts of community and identity in the context of sport. For example, “You can Break so Many More Rules: The Identity Play and Work of Becoming Skater Girls” (Kelly et al., 2008) is an interesting analysis on gender and identity. The article focuses on the identity of female skateboarders between the ages of 13-16 years old. These girls are at first mocked and made fun of for their attempts to participate in a world that is generally dominated by males. The girls persist, and eventually come to participate in an activity that allows them to take on alternative identities in opposition to mainstream views. Skateboarding in this study is used more as a vehicle for exploring issues of gender, alternative/oppositional identities and breaking barriers. The idea of oppositional identities was relevant to some of the informants I spoke with, especially as it related to how they conceived the idea of community at the club.

There have also been studies of how sport relates to the community. An important article that focuses on the idea of community sport is Foley’s (1990) “The Great American Football Ritual: Reproducing Race, Class and Gender.” The author’s main argument is that the sport of football is used to reproduce class, race, and gender norms, as well as socialize future generations. The author argues that both the coaches and players work to actively reinforce the idea of men as warriors. The mostly affluent white female students take on the roles of cheerleaders, providing temporary distractions from what is ultimately the more important event going on at the time, that of the football game. Another way community sport is used to reinforce these norms is through something called the “Powder-Puff Football Game.” The girls put on the football uniforms and play a serious game of football, while the boys dress up in women’s clothing and make up and proceed to act in a ridiculous manner (Foley 1990:118). This radical reversal of everyday cultural roles and practices ultimately serves to reinforce the

status quo by showing how ridiculous any other reality is compared to the norm. This article affected my own ideas about sport as a type of ritual. At the club, there is a tournament called the “Calcutta.” I will argue that this tournament actually represents a kind of ritual of reversal, reinforcing the *status quo* and structure of the club.

“The Wrestler’s Body: Identity and Ideology in Northern India” (Alter 1992) focuses on the lives of wrestlers in northern India and the idea of physical self-development relating to morality and the national character of a country. Key to Alter’s work is the idea of one’s identity being tied to their physical body and movements. In a sense, training oneself to be a wrestler is seen to be an important step to transforming oneself into a moral body and an engaged citizen. For Alter, Indian sport directly links the physical culture of a strong moral body to the issues of politics and national identity.

Giardina and Donnelly’s “Youth, Culture and Sport: Identity, Power and Politics” (2008) uses youth sport to reveal the complexity surrounding the supposed purposes of sport for children. There is also a focus on the seemingly benign elements of youth sporting events that in reality are used to reinforce the *status quo*, as well as project a unified view of something as complicated and multifaceted as national identity and race politics. One chapter focuses on the Little League World Series (LLWS) that takes place every year in the United States (White, et al., 2008). In 2002, then US president George W. Bush made a speech that made references to heteronormativity, the importance of the family, religion, and several other sentiments that can be viewed as normative. The authors point out that there was a purpose and agenda behind Bush’s presence and speech, highlighting the potential for sport to be used politically.

Another book, “America’s Games: a Critical Anthropology of Sport” (Brown, et al., 2008) looks at American sport in the context of how it has incorporated “others”

(immigrants, foreign nationals and so-called “coloured” people) into sports, and how ideas of morality, ethnicity, identity and nationalism play out in various contexts. The chapter “Why Baseball, Why Cricket? Differing Nationalisms, Differing Challenges” (Mamjundar and Brown 2007), focuses on how sport took on different roles in the former British colonies of the United States and India. The authors argue that since the United States had won a war to gain its freedom, it had little need to compete with the English in a shared sport. Instead, they invented a myth that represented baseball as being born in the United States in order to fashion a separate identity for itself. Baseball in the United States, through the invention of myth, is used to construct a national and collective identity. In contrast, India had never defeated the British in war, so they used sport in a different manner. It became of paramount importance for India to compete with and defeat the English empire in cricket and other sports. Beating the English was especially important during colonial rule. The authors argue that Indian cricket was used to remedy deeper, more serious allegations that underplayed native abilities. Ideas of self-respect, manliness and self-worth were at play and at stake as well (Mamjundar and Brown 2007:12).

Susan Brownell’s “Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People’s Republic” (1995) is another example of how sport is used to elucidate ideas of morality, national identity and how the body is viewed from a cultural perspective. One example of this can be seen with the idea that female athletes in China rarely play past the ages of 24-25, as this is a time that women are expected to marry and produce children. In most other countries, athletes between 24-29 are considered to be in their prime. Cultural and social ideas of fertility and women’s roles in society have strong effects on women’s participation in sport. There is also a significant amount of discussion on how China

tended to only allow or focus on sports where they saw an opportunity to represent their abilities favourably to the rest of the world, showing their use of sport as both potential political posturing and as a form of social control. There are similarities in this work to Alter's (1992) wrestling book with regards to a focus on the physical body and its relationship to morality, cultural norms and nationalism.

It is clear that sport has been written about academically from many different standpoints. There has been some work on community sport, and a considerable amount written on how sport affects the identities of the individuals, groups, regions and nations that play them. My own work takes a different approach by exploring the micro-level activities and lives of squash players at a squash and fitness club in Toronto. In other words, instead of focusing on a sport in the context of larger processes like nationalism, ethnic identity and politics, my work instead focuses on the specific and seemingly mundane world of a squash club and its inhabitants. Although these macro-level structural and ideological constraints are important, my own work will start from a different premise. This premise is that sport, in this case squash, is something interesting in and of itself, and I am interested in how members organize it and engage with it. As my research progressed, I came to see that everyday sport participation itself should also be a consideration and focus. The works of both Brownell (1995) and Alter (1992) influenced me to look at the everyday play and practice of squash players. Although I do not focus on the politics or culture of the physical body in the same way as these two authors, their work was important for showing me the potential complexity and meaning of seemingly mundane every day practices and activities within sport.

1.2 Methodology

I used standard anthropological methods to carry out my research, including: participant observation, semi-structured interviews and an intense form of experiential ethnography called “experiential positivism”. I carried out 12 semi- structured interviews, with the average interview lasting for approximately two hours. Although I spent most of the research period at my home club, because of my participation in inter-club play throughout the greater Toronto area (GTA), I was able to visit many different clubs and speak to squash players at other clubs. This included both getting on court with these players, as well as interacting more informally in the context of post-match dinners and socializing. As a result, I was able to gather more information to provide a richer picture of both squash players and squash clubs. I also participated in club social events, which took the form of parties that followed the finales of leagues and tournaments. I was also given the opportunity to help run some squash programming and assist with new player evaluations. All these opportunities allowed me to get a picture of the social landscape from many different perspectives.

Robert Sands is one author that has focused on the concepts of identity and community in the context of sport, and his ideas influenced my methodology in the field. Sands’ (1995) ethnography “Instant Acceleration: Living in the Fast Lane: the Cultural Identity of Speed” introduced me to the method of “experiential positivism”, which shaped my research. In this book he focuses on the cultural identity and social dynamics of the sprinting team at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Sands’ work has several similarities to my own research, with the major differences being the sports on which we chose to focus, as well as the number of people we each worked with, with him

focusing on a considerably smaller group (about 10-12), as opposed to working with a group of hundreds. Sands (1995:8) makes explicit the importance of both solid empirical work, as well as an “epistemological flexibility that allows data to be discovered and described and advanced as primary means of testing and validating models of social reality.” “Experiential positivism” can be described as an intense form of participant observation, whereby the researcher becomes deeply involved enough in the activity to theoretically allow them to get at the cognitive understandings and intuitions by which the activity is ordered. As Sands (1995:11) points out:

I was able to tap into my own feelings, perceptions and experiences and use myself as another informant; to use my complete participation to elicit material as if I were (as I was) another sprinter. The ability to cognitively and behaviourally assume the identity of a collegiate sprinter allowed me entrance to other dimensions of experience besides observation and passive participation. I was able to validate and unify the picture I was forming of social interaction and group dynamics of collegiate sprinters.

Participation in the activities of the people an anthropologist is studying has long been an important strategy for understanding important aspects that make up the lives of the people in question. My research is no exception in some ways. However, one major difference is that in village life there are usually a number of fundamental activities on which an anthropologist could focus. This is evidenced by the fact that we have anthropologists who specialize in religion, political economy, kinship and other fundamental aspects of groups/communities. My own research community has only one fundamental shared activity, and this is the lifeblood of the group itself. Only through a consistent and direct participation in the sport itself was I able to effectively get at the subtleties of what life looks like at a squash club. In other words, I lived the full life of a core member during my research period, participating in leagues and tournaments, as well

as making new friends and playing partners. This is why I believe it is of paramount importance to practice this strategy of deeply experienced ethnography, or experiential positivism. Although there are other important aspects of a squash club, such as the social events and the time spent *not* playing squash, I could not have accurately described these other phenomena without a deep commitment to playing squash and to being a squash player. This commitment allowed me to develop a mental picture and schema of what it is like to be a squash playing member of this club. It allowed me to internalize the culture of playing squash in a manner that would have been difficult to achieve without this deep commitment.

To give an idea of the importance of this approach, I want to describe some of the areas of my research that would have been negatively affected had I not spent as much time actually playing the game, making new friends to play with and setting up matches. I would have been lost trying to understand the subtle dynamics of playing relationships. Who wants to play with whom, why people would want to play with someone for months and then never want to play again, and how people maneuver their way through different relationships at different skill levels are all subtleties that would have been difficult to tease apart. I could have asked members about who they want to play with and why, but developing a relationship with someone based on playing squash, and then living through its evolution provided me with insight that would have been otherwise impossible to get at. This is due to a lot of these rules being internalized and rendered unconscious, making direct questions about it to members ineffective. I also would not have gained an as in-depth understanding of what it meant to move up and down the rankings. I was a member of this club before I did my research, and did improve significantly while I was there. I did not notice anything interesting about this process until I experienced it again when I

was paying attention during my fieldwork. I perhaps could have elicited some of the parts of this ranking process strictly through discussions with informants, but in reality, much of it was subtle enough that it was not thought of consciously by most members. Only through my own direct and intense experience with the ranking process was I able to get at the fundamental workings of this concept. Once I had this mental picture, I was then able to elicit information from my informants on these topics.

1.3 A View of Squash – On-Court and From the Inside

Before giving an overview of the remaining chapters, I will first describe what the game of squash looks like, and the different ways it is organized both locally and internationally. Squash is a racquet sport that uses a small rubber ball slightly larger than the eye socket. It is played in a small room that is 32ft long, 21ft wide and 15ft high (to front wall out line). The floor itself has a number of lines that demarcate important areas of play. There are two square boxes located on each side of the mid-court. Players serve from these boxes. There is a straight line that runs latitudinally, dividing the court into two halves, and connects with the top part of the serving boxes. In the middle of this latitudinal line is a longitudinal line that divides the back part of the court in two larger rectangles, and also forms what looks like a T. The top of this T is the area in which most players try to place themselves in, as this is the most central and therefore more advantageous spot on the court. The front wall also contains a number of markings and lines. There is a bottom line that is 19 inches above the ground. Below this line is a hard surface called the “tin”. When a player strikes this area of the court it is considered out of bounds and also makes a loud sound. A second line is placed in the bottom third of the

wall, and a third line is located at the top. Between these second and top lines is the area that must be used to hit a serve. First serve is decided by the spinning of one player's racquet, where one person calls out up or down, or some other signifier depending on the symbols of the specific racquet for when it falls flat to the ground. A serve requires a player to have one foot in the small box on either side, and one foot outside of it. The ball must strike between the top line and second middle line and then bounce in the opposite rectangle from which the player served (the smaller boxes on either side are within the larger rectangles). A player serves, alternating between sides, until they lose a point. Once a legal serve is hit, the ball can bounce once before the other player must hit the front wall with the ball. A ball that hits the floor first, bounces twice or is hit out of court is considered dead, and a point is awarded to the other player. Players may strike the ball off either of the sidewalls or the back wall, as long as the ball eventually reaches the front wall. The ability to use the sidewalls adds a dimension to the game that most players find intriguing and enjoyable. Although the court does not appear to be large, especially when expert players are using it, every beginner is surprised at how much ground there is to cover to get to the ball. The game itself is very grueling physically, with one able to burn approximately 1000-1300 calories playing for an hour. Since it also requires a lot of strategy and thought (due to the difficulty of hitting a winning shot as players become more skilled and experienced), many have referred to it as "physical chess" or "chess on legs."

Squash has a number of national and international governing bodies. There are over 180 countries that play the sport, and all have their own national federations (with some being considerably larger and more involved than others). The World Squash Federation is the highest governing body for the sport. There are professional tours run

for both men and women. The men's professional tour is governed by the PSA (Professional Squash Association) and the women's professional tour is governed by the WSA (Women's Squash Association). It is currently not an Olympic sport, but it is recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and currently shortlisted for entry into the 2020 Olympic games. Part of its bid effort included unifying the sport of squash in its scoring system. At one point, squash all over the world (professionally, nationally, club level, etc.) used different scoring systems. All were played best of five, but had varying scores to reach in order to win games (9, 11 and 15). Today, all professional, international, national, and regionally sanctioned events use "point a rally" (PAR) scoring to 11 (point every rally regardless of who served, games up to 11, best of five games).

Every country runs its own national tournaments, with different provinces and states also holding their own tournaments. At the club level, players often participate in leagues that involve competing against other players at their own level on a weekly basis. Clubs also hold their own championships and tournaments, with most being considered "closed", meaning that only members can participate in them. One tournament I am participating in is called the "Maccabiah Games", a tournament held in Israel every four years. It features over 35 sports and 9000 athletes, and I will be playing squash there. The Professional structure is not unlike tennis. There are tournaments throughout the world, with some being more important than others (e.g., more money and ranking points at stake). A 12-month average ranking points score is used to determine the world rankings, with Egyptian Ramy Ashour currently ranked #1. Squash is a truly international sport, as players from all over the world compete at high levels. Countries that dominate

the sport today are Egypt, England, France and Australia. Bigger tournaments have total prize pools of \$300,000 and smaller tournaments can offer as little as \$5,000.

Although the more popular form of squash is played one on one, there is also a doubles form of the game that is quite popular. It is played with a harder and bouncier ball in a larger court, and is generally considered to be easier to play for those who are older or are dealing with injuries (but it is a very challenging and fast game for those who do play it at a high level). There is a league throughout the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) that has clubs put together teams of various different levels to compete against other clubs. This takes an individual sport and adds a team context to it. It is a great opportunity to socialize and meet squash players from other clubs and regions. I have also heard of leagues run within individual clubs that put different ranked players together on teams to compete against one another.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

In the next chapter I discuss community at the club. How the club is structured is of great importance and includes issues like how members interact in the context of squash programming and the managerial structure of the club. A key concept in this chapter is that of the “Micro-Community”, which constitute the many different groups of members’ playing circles. These micro-communities will be discussed in the context of how they are created, who participates in them, and what participation in them entails for the member and the overall community.

In chapter three I focus on the stories of four informants. Each one will have their micro-community levels of participation discussed and scrutinized in order to evaluate if higher participation levels correspond to stronger feelings of community and

identification with the club. Skill level and its relationship to micro-community participation and feelings of community will also be discussed in some detail. Key here is that it is possible to count things at the club, in this case micro-community participation, and that these quantifications can be used to evaluate member feelings of community.

In chapter four I focus on hierarchy and social status at the club. Hierarchy refers to skill levels and how those with similar skill levels are likely to play against one another the majority of the time. This hierarchy can become internalized, resulting in the feeling that it is only normal to play with those around your level, and the idea that to ask those not at your level to play is odd or improper. One way of analyzing and scrutinizing these ideas is to focus on what I consider to be the lifeblood of the club, that of playing relationships. These are the relationships formed, however briefly, to actually play squash matches. By analyzing who plays with whom why, and how these relationships both develop and eventually disintegrate, we can begin to understand how the skill hierarchy takes shape and how powerfully entrenched it is, as well as why this hierarchy is so easily internalized by the majority of the members. Why some members vehemently oppose this hierarchy and structure will also be detailed, and I will pose an alternate way of operating, one that includes more significant interaction between players of different skill levels. Why this “culture shift” would be difficult to employ and the views of the professionals at the club (henceforth known as club pros or pros) will feature prominently in this section on a potentially new way of doing things. My own perspective as a researcher will clash with the goals of the club and pros, as well as the realities of the hierarchy itself.

In chapter five I focus on many of the ideas discussed in chapter four, but I will take a community-level look at the processes behind the concept of internalized hierarchy and the strategies used by players to reduce potential areas of conflict. I will use a number

of examples to show how the club as a whole has a way of transitioning players from one skill level to another, with much of it being done unconsciously. A focus on these community-level processes will allow me to show how complex a process this is, and how the members themselves shoulder much of the responsibility, even if it is done subconsciously.

In chapter six I focus on the feelings of individual and group identity in the context of community. Although most members did not express strong feelings of personal identity with the game of squash (despite some exceptions, which will be discussed), many expressed a feeling of group identity that was initiated by the squash club or a similar type of squash environment (for example a tournament). Key here is that this feeling of group identity was mostly initiated by being immersed in a squash-specific environment. Many informants used squash participation as a vehicle for accomplishing goals connected to more core parts of their identities. For many, squash outside of the club was merely an interesting talking point or viewed as a way to get a good workout. However, once inside the confines of the squash environment, peoples' connections to squash and their fellow members became apparent. Why some identities are not place specific and why some are only relevant during specific times will also be discussed in detail. How squash participation affects the core identities of some informants will also be discussed.

In chapter seven I focus on several important concepts and ideas that have already been discussed. However, I will discuss these things in the context of something new, that of the Calcutta Tournament. The Calcutta Tournament is a betting/handicap tournament that is amongst the club's most popular events. It will be looked at as a kind of "ritual of reversal", as this tournament provides an equal playing field for all skill

levels. What this tournament means for the club's structure, how it relates to and is affected by the skill hierarchy and its transformative potential will all be discussed in detail.

I conclude my thesis by discussing some areas of future research that will arise from the work I have described here. In my conclusion I will discuss the ways that a micro-level understanding of day to day practice adds a new dimension to the work on sport, identity, the body and nations

Chapter 2

Community at the Club

The fitness and squash club where I did my research is a fascinating and often complicated social environment. I will most often refer to this club as “the club” throughout my thesis. In this chapter I will explore the sometimes frustrating and pervasive concept of community. I recall early on having a conversation with someone at the club about the squash community as they saw it. I mentioned to them that as anthropologists we spend a lot of time discussing what the term “Community” means and how to apply it. They responded with: “Fair enough, but that’s your job!” It was just a passing comment, but it made me realize something important: I can dissect and struggle as much as I want with the idea and definition of community, but that will not change how or even whether people on the ground actually use and conceptualize it. In this chapter I will focus on the physical layout of the club, how members interact with one another and how these factors affect peoples’ feelings of community. I will also look at the kinds of relationships members form. The core concept I will explore in this chapter is something I have termed “Micro-Communities.”

I will explore these ideas of community by analyzing structural elements of the club. Structural elements include things like club ownership, attitude and customer service, the physical structure and layout of the club, as well as how the actual playing of squash is set up at the club. The club is a fitness club with a large squash program. I will compare and contrast the club with my experience and knowledge of clubs that are

strictly squash clubs. This approach will provide a richer explanation of why some people develop feelings of community and why others do not. Member interactions at the club can all be placed in the context of the concept of “Micro Communities”. Micro communities are pockets of people that play squash in various different forms. These micro communities can either be “pro-driven” or “member-driven”. I will define these terms when I begin my discussion of micro communities at a later point in this chapter. I will show how and why these micro communities form, how they relate to people developing feelings of community, and if this leads some members to identifying with the club. Each member’s unique positioning, background, skill level and personality all have roles in determining how they will relate to the club and the other squash members.

2.1 Comparing Different Kinds of Squash Clubs

The first step to understanding the concept of community at the club requires an examination of what the physical and managerial layout of the club looks like. This allows me to analyze some of the differences between “pure squash clubs” (PSC) and “fitness clubs with Squash” (FCS). Not all pure squash clubs are set up in the same way and not all fitness clubs with squash are setup in the same way, but there are similarities across both setups. A PSC is a club that has its main focus on members playing and enjoying squash. There are no significant spaces dedicated to weights and cardiovascular machines in these clubs, although most dedicate some space. The majority of space at PSC’s is dedicated to the playing of squash, as well as some space to socialize (which includes eating and drinking). The main point here is that squash clubs take different forms.

A fitness club with squash (FCS), like the club at which I did my research, has both a different feel and physical set up as well. The majority of the club's space is dedicated to fitness, cardio programming and areas to workout. There are a considerable number of large studios dedicated to holding a variety of fitness classes, including activities like yoga and Zumba. Another major difference between PSC's and FCS is the amount of space dedicated to offices for managers and personnel to sign-up new members. At a few of the PSC's I am familiar with, there is not much space dedicated to this purpose. FCS have many offices where managers work tirelessly on signing new members up. This contrast is related to the philosophies of different club types. The large corporations that run these FCS depend on the monthly dues of members to make a profit. They also rely on most members not showing up with regularity, as this would drive up their costs significantly. PSC's generally do not sign up more members than the club can accommodate reasonably. They too rely on membership fees, but also derive a significant portion of their profits from the sale of alcohol. In other words, one club seeks to sign up as many people as possible with the hope they will not show up, and one club seeks to encourage members to come out regularly, drink and socialize with one another.

To get to the squash area where I did my research, a member must to go into the club, pass through front desk security, have your card read and then exchange your card for towels. You then have to go up two flights of stairs to get to the change rooms, and then down another flight to get to the main squash hub. Once at the main squash hub, it is another flight of stairs down to get to the actual courts to play. Once downstairs, there is a long hall. There are seven different courts that can be accessed from this hall, with doors opening up into large rooms with courts. Some of these rooms have ante-rooms to put clothing, towels and other equipment down. Other doors lead to rooms that just contain

squash courts. It is also possible to go from the men's change room and downstairs to the long hall with court access without going through the main squash hub. The squash hub has several features worth noting. There is a large workout floor with cardio and weight machines directly above the hub. One must go down a small set of stairs to reach the hub from this other workout floor. The hub is basically a narrow hall that extends above four of the courts below. All four of these courts are visible to spectators from above, while the other three remain hidden from view. It has two long brown benches, placed in two rows of stadium-style seating. These benches can hold about 75-100 people total. From these benches, one can view the action on two of the courts. Unfortunately, these benches are quite uncomfortable, and many members expressed to me that it was not a very comfortable area to hang out in for long. Sandwiched between two courts is the squash pro shop and office, where members can purchase equipment. The area overlooking the last court is used as a stretching and exercise area by all members of the club. There are no televisions, comfortable chairs or couches to sit on, and no bar or restaurant. There is a juice and snack bar at the entrance, but I have never witnessed any squash players hanging out there.

Pure squash clubs that I am familiar with have markedly different set ups than my club. These PSC's setups encourage members to remain after matches and hang out. There are lots of couches, chairs and tables, with most of them allowing for a good view of several courts. There are also bars and restaurants where food and alcohol and other beverages can be purchased. They also have televisions throughout. Some FCS have inviting seating areas and bars, although it is less common. There are sensible reasons for these contrasting setups. For example, if all members of the club I did my research at showed up at once, most would not get towels, there would be considerable lineups for

weight and cardio machines, most would not get into the fitness classes and there would be little space to use to stretch and cool down. It is for this reason that squash programs often risk getting eliminated when fitness chains buy out smaller clubs. Squash members are not ideal members for clubs that do not derive most of their profits from food and alcohol sales. Squash members use the club on a regular basis, and use lots of towels and shower supplies. To put it more bluntly, a dedicated member is a negative thing from the perspective of the fitness club model. It is unsurprising that squash memberships have considerably higher retention rates than fitness memberships. These factors have an affect on how squash members at the club relate to one another and on how and why some members develop feelings of community and attachment and why some do not. One informant, Stanley, expressed dissatisfaction with the setup and feel of the club. Stanley, a student in his mid-20s, felt that the club where I did my research had a sterile and unfriendly feel to it. This was partially due to it being owned by a large corporation. He also felt the design and interior layout were not conducive to socializing. At the club, one has to enter a private room to get onto a court, rather than having a main area that can access all the courts (like at most PSC's). The lack of comfortable seating was also an issue for him. Stanley has been a member of both a PSC and FCS, and much prefers the PSC.

Most of the members of the club work as professionals in fields like finance, marketing, health, law and business. The average squash member at the club is in their mid to late 30s, and there is a considerably higher percentage of men than women (about 4/5 would be male players). Gender will not be a focus of mine because of space limitations. The average age is driven up partially because there are so few junior players at the club. Club management and service are key areas of conversation among the

members of the club in which I did my research. In discussions with several members, there was a high level of dissatisfaction with some of the ways the club operated. When the club changed ownership from a smaller private company to a large fitness chain, the new owners bought new gym equipment and did serious renovations to improve the physical space. They put in a few new televisions as well. Even though these structural improvements were lauded by some members, there were a number of new practices that many found frustrating. In the past, there were more managers, and each one was responsible for different parts of the club. Today, there are four main types of staff: those that work at the front desk, personal trainers, custodial staff and managers who try and sign up new members. The head pro, who was here before the new owners came in, has also noticed changes in the operation of the club. For example, under the old ownership there were monthly meetings for all club managers, and now he is lucky if he meets with his own manager once every few months.

A lack of communication and the subsequent confusion between different staff members and programs is not the only issue that has been described to me. A number of years ago, shortly after the club was bought by new ownership, a diagram was floated around the club that showed the current squash courts and main squash hub being transformed into a café, storage and more fitness studios. The new owners were doing this to get a sense of how dispensable squash was at the club. The removal of the squash program at the club would not have been an unprecedented action, as the same company had recently terminated the squash program at another club they purchased. However, with an active roster of squash members nearing close to 500 at the club and the subsequent revenue generated from this, the pro was able to make it clear that it was an easy choice to keep this strong squash program running.

There were also a significant number of daily issues that members complained about. Things like inadequate towel service, especially on squash league nights, was an oversight that many squash members were dissatisfied with. Many members remarked that it was the same pattern every week of increased towel need for league nights, yet nothing changed. Having towels to use during the match and shower with after are basic necessities, and service in this area was consistently disappointing for members during the summer of my research.

Another issue was lockers. I overheard a member complaining that it did not make sense that those who paid for lockers got half the space of those using free day lockers. This member ended up getting into a heated argument with one of the membership managers in the locker room. There was name calling and a considerable amount of aggressiveness displayed by both parties. The manager's response to this dissatisfied customer is unsurprising when we look at it within the context of the fitness model of operation, where any one member is relatively unimportant.

Another common grievance was related to membership cancellation. There are anywhere between three and six membership managers on hand throughout the day, all keen to give club tours, and all with the ability to sign up people to new memberships. However, cancelling a membership is trickier. I talked to someone who had to come in three different days because they were not allowed to cancel their membership over the phone or by email, and the one manager at the club who *could* cancel their membership was only available on select days and times. It is these kinds of experiences that frustrated many people I spoke with.

2.2 Squash Programming and Micro-Communities

Squash programming represents the ways that members engage in playing squash at the club. There are a number of different ways members can come together to play squash, and I will outline them now. Before I go into detail about the different kinds of squash programming available at the club, I need to explain the concepts of “Pro-Driven Programming” (PDP) and “Member-Driven Programming” (MDP).

PDP is considered anything that the squash pros of the club set up and run to facilitate members playing squash. A good example of this would be a pro running a skills clinic for members. MDP can be considered anything that the members themselves set up and run in order to play squash. The most basic example of a MDP would be one member asking another member to play, and then booking a court and playing. Both Pro-Driven Programming (PDP) and Member-Driven Programming (MDP) are connected to the main focus of this chapter, that of “micro communities”. Micro communities can be defined as groups of two or more people who interact with one another through squash, or have a shared common history, background or shared personality traits. These micro communities tend to form around the playing of squash, but not all of them fit neatly into this definition.

All of the following micro communities discussed are created as a result of PDP. The most popular PDP that leads to micro communities would be the leagues. There are usually two or three different leagues running at any time, with each league falling on a specific night or day, largely depending on the season and demand. Leagues involve dividing players of similar skill up into boxes, and then having them play those in their respective boxes to see who can accumulate the most points based on total games won.

Based on the performance of each player, you can move on to play better or worse players in the next league box. Regardless of how one does in the box, there are always some new players in your next league box. A league runs for 10 weeks, with each box having three weeks of play and a final week for the league championship matches. The leagues have many positives. According to the club's head pro, who runs the leagues, the most effective way to get a new member attached and involved with the squash program at the club is through participation in a league. This is because it allows participants to engage with a lot of new people, as you are likely to play somewhere between eight and ten different people over the course of the league. You also get to know the pro better and meet others who are close in skill level. This creates a larger network of potential participants for future MDP. At the end of a league there is a finals night where people come out to watch, prizes are given out for the champions and runners-up of the different levels, and everyone is invited to come out to a bar for food and drinks when the matches are finished.

The most popular leagues fall on different nights, and each one of them can be considered its own micro-community because they have different participants (although there is some overlap), with one of them catering to more advanced players and one of them catering more to beginners and intermediate players. Presently, a member can participate in as many leagues as they want, but this was not always the case. Due to court availability, in the past members were asked to choose between playing in one league or another. When this rule was changed and some members started playing in both, they were amazed because they were now interacting with people they had never seen before. The significance of this will be discussed in greater detail in chapter five.

The next important micro communities are the round robins. There are two of these, each of which is run by a different pro and on different days and times. The round robins have members playing three person squash for well over an hour, cycling between different opponents throughout. Each person gets at least one chance to play against the pro as well, which most members really enjoyed. Round robins afford members the opportunity to meet a lot of different people at once. Because you get a chance to play so many players in one session, you can usually find a few people who you would like to play with again. It is also an opportunity to interact and play with members of different skill levels than your own, although the pros generally try to put similarly skilled players together on court. However, even though the round robins are theoretically open to all skill levels, they attract higher ranked players. I have attended dozens over the years and have rarely seen beginner players participating. Why this might be the case will be discussed in chapter 5.

Another kind of micro-community produced from PDP would be tournaments. Each tournament is considered its own micro-community, although there is a core group of members that play most tournaments. Tournaments are important enough to the club overall to warrant their own discussion in the chapter focusing on the **Calcutta Tournament**. The Calcutta Tournament in particular, a handicapping/betting tournament, is extremely popular at the club, and I will dedicate a chapter on it due to its unique set up and significance to the club's overall structure. The main reason the Calcutta Tournament is unique is because players of any skill level can play against one another, which does not occur during other tournaments or league play.

I will now turn to a brief discussion of member-driven programming (MDP) and micro communities at the club. One of the most creative examples of a MDP is the

Saturday morning round robin group. Many years ago the head pro decided to create a Saturday morning league. It was a success but the pro decided to not run it during the less popular summer months, opting to restart it during the fall, a time when squash participation levels are higher. However, many of the league members continued to book courts to play with one another on Saturday mornings throughout the summer, and were booking them at the start of the fall as well. When the pro saw that the members were booking their own courts on Saturday mornings, he decided to shift the league to Sunday evening instead and left the courts open to continue to be booked. This highlights the potential for a PDP like a league to create a MDP. Almost 10 years later, it is still going strong. Although the personnel has shifted over the years, it has maintained a steady core for much of its run. The courts are now officially booked off for a special round robin that these players participate in. Official permission to participate in this round robin is not required, but asking any of the regular participants is a courtesy most people give. However, this round robin is not in reality open to all members, as a certain skill level is expected. When I was talking to one of the regulars of this round robin, he pointed out that one of the things he liked best about it was the fact that everyone was around the same skill level. Once again, this idea of similarly skilled players being grouped together will be discussed in chapter five.

Another micro-community at the club consists of those members who are not in the online system and play only the same small group of people. This micro-community is not linked into the club, as these members know very few people and tend to only interact among themselves. Another way to look at this micro-community is as a group of members who do not participate in any PDP. Another micro-community is one not based on the actual playing of squash. It is the “pre-current corporate ownership” group. This

consists of people who were members before the most recent corporate takeover, giving them an important collective history. It was not uncommon to hear these members talk about a time when the club had a different “feel” to it, a feel most of them missed. In other words, there was a certain amount of nostalgia expressed in the way things used to be. In the first instance, the micro-community is closest to a friendship circle, where squash is a kind of currency, while in the latter, it is a shared history of the club overall that marks membership.

The last micro-community I want to discuss is a hybrid program, as it requires both pros and members working together to ensure that it is run properly. This is the T and D micro-community. “T and D” stands for “Toronto and District”, a squash league in the greater Toronto area where clubs play against one another in friendly competition at different levels. To run properly, club pros need to ensure that teams at various appropriate levels can be assembled, and they also need to coordinate with individual team captains to ensure court availability. It is the responsibility of the team captains to put together a team each week, enter scores, set up dinner, coordinate with other teams and ensure new and proper equipment is available. It clearly has member-driven qualities to it, as without the strong efforts of many members, T and D would cease to run. The reality of this was made clear to me when the captain of the team I played for no longer wanted to be captain for the next season. No other members wanted to take on the responsibility, which means that there will be no team at that level until someone else volunteers to be team captain.

The reason I have chosen to focus heavily on the micro-community concept is because it provides insight into a number of issues important to my research. They provide a clear model for how members generally interact within the club, and they also

help identify why a member might develop feelings of community or not at the club. Also, through a close examination of any member's micro-community membership and interaction, I can better understand why this member is likely or unlikely to have strong feelings of community and connection to the club and its members. I realized after thinking through this concept that through counting the different micro communities to which people belong, I could actually predict and try to understand whether they would have more positive feelings of community or connection to the club. In other words, it is possible to rank members' levels of participation in the club through the quantifying of relationships, in this case the micro communities they participate in. The logic behind this idea is that higher numbers *should* correspond to a higher likelihood of having a positive interaction with fellow members/pros on any given day someone is at the club. More consistent positive interactions should correlate with more positive feelings of community, solidarity and connection to the club and its members, or at least a connection to the squash program within the fitness club.

There are clear patterns emerging from the information presented thus far. First, members divide themselves up into various groups based on skill level. There is some cross-level interaction, but overall it is limited. This feeling of division between members based on skill level did not take away from having a positive feeling of community at the club for most of the people I talked to, although it was a major problem for some. With these ideas in mind, and in conjunction with members' micro-community participation, in the next chapter I turn to a discussion of why some specific informants express feelings of community and identify with the people and squash program, and why some members do not. As I pointed out earlier, the biggest factors affecting this outcome relate to club

structure and one's level of participation in micro communities. I will also discuss the relationship between the skill levels of members and positive feelings of community.

Chapter 3

Micro-Communities and Club Participation

In this chapter I focus on the different levels of connection to the club and feelings of community of four informants based on their micro-community participation and general experience at the club. I will also explore the relationship between skill level and feelings of community. I will do this through an examination of four different informants. There are several sources of disappointment amongst those members who did not feel a strong sense of community at the club. Their complaints centered on the lack of cross-level interaction, as well as the limited facilities and resources that would make socializing and connecting with other members (other than just through squash) easy. I will discuss these four informants in detail, but will also mention other informant ideas where relevant.

My first informant had a number of issues with the club and did not feel a strong sense of community. They had some friends at the club and enjoyed playing squash, but there were too many structural and other issues that made it difficult for this person to conceive of the club as a strong squash community. This informant will be known as Rick.

Rick is a business professional in his late 30's and is originally from the United Kingdom, but has been in Canada for many years now. He is ranked in the top 20 squash players at the club. Rick was raised in a squash environment from an early age, starting out in a junior program. He has also played competitively at a high level for many years. Rick's issues with the club were threefold: not enough cross-level interaction, a tendency for members to simply play their matches and leave shortly after, and the set-up of the

club itself. As Rick explained to me when I asked if other members followed proper squash “etiquette” (with the term “etiquette” purposely left vague), he remarked:

No they don't. Because I find that a lot of players won't play anyone that's worse than them. They will only play people who are the same level, and when you are a better player you kind of have an obligation to get other people involved in the sport. You should be getting on court with people who are learning, people who are trying to improve, you should be offering up advice and tips (August 2012).

For Rick, this created fractures in the club's overall community. Unsurprisingly, he is a strong proponent for playing members of different skill levels and does so on occasion.

Rick also observed that many members simply played their matches and left to go shower shortly after. They may sit around a bit and chat while they cool down, but usually not for much longer than was necessary to cool down and have a quick drink of water. He hypothesized that this behavior was a result of there being no bar/food area, and no comfortable seating where people can just relax, drink, eat and chat. Given that he came from a squash environment that promoted cross-level interaction and that had food/drink and comfortable socializing areas, it makes some sense that his experience at the club would be comparatively limited. As I mentioned earlier, Rick has still made friends at the club, but it certainly falls short of his expectations for what a proper squash environment/community should look and feel like.

Rick's micro-community involvement also affects his club experience. He participates in one of the house leagues, knows both the club pros and plays members of different levels on occasion. He also attends end of league social events sometimes.

Rick's micro-community participation levels are reflective of a member who has some connection to the club's other members and programs, but nothing substantial. He does not participate in the Calcutta Tournament or the round robins. The social event after the

Calcutta is especially important, as members of *all* levels get a chance to interact on a social level with those they rarely get a chance to engage with. Rick also does not play squash at the club with great frequency, sometimes taking off months at a time. When he is playing at the club regularly, it is usually about once a week. It makes sense that he would have developed some relationships here, but in light of Rick's past squash experiences and expectations, he is not participating in enough micro communities to have become enmeshed in the club and to have subsequently developed positive feelings of community. His feelings of connection to the club are below average.

Another informant, John, feels that he is a part of a squash community at the club and identifies with the squash program and its members. John is in his mid-30s and works in finance. He did not play squash as a junior, but instead learned with his friends at university. He is a solid player, usually ranked somewhere between 80th and 90th at the club. Despite not being enmeshed in a pure squash club environment or having participated in a junior program, which both tend to breed an ethos that leads to playing all levels, John happily plays members of all different ranks. He believes that you can have fun with anyone on court if you know how to play the right way. He is extremely outgoing and friendly, and this undoubtedly contributes to strong feelings of community for him at the club, as most return his friendliness with their own. Having a friendly attitude and demeanor, as well as playing members of all levels are important for John, but they are not what ultimately lead to positive feelings of community at the club, although they are connected. For John, it is the idea of familiarity with lots of members, and also a strong connection to the head pro and squash program.

John was effusive when speaking of the head pro, remarking that "he's invested in the community and involved. I never get the impression that he's only doing his job; I

think he takes pride in the work he does.” John also credits the head pro for saving the squash program from destruction and removal at one point, and is convinced that “so many people are here and invested in the squash program, and I think a lot of that is attributable to (the pro).” John also stressed to me the squash-specific nature of his loyalty to the club: “if they got rid of squash would I still come to this gym for exercise?” he asks. “I’m almost certain my answer would be no, this gym does not have my loyalty, the squash program has my loyalty.” The squash program and head pro clearly mean a lot to him, but there other factors that are important for establishing a so-called “squash community” at the club for John. Before I turn to John’s insightful comments on the importance of feelings of familiarity and how they tend to arise to help answer this question of building a positive community feel, I will briefly discuss this idea of familiarity at the squash club.

John and I were discussing the possibility of a squash community when he had a moment of great insight that has helped me think through some of the important issues I was seeking to understand. He believes that there is not just a generic squash community at the club, but rather, because of the idea of familiarity, there is actually a real one. He pointed out that especially as you get older, it becomes harder to meet new people and make friends. Many of his friends and close family have gotten married and had kids, so he sees them far less now as a result. This is only natural, as people who get married and have kids have limited time to see their friends, especially if it is not in the context of another couple outing or event that involves kids. So depending on how busy a close friend of yours is because of a multitude of reasons, including work, relationships, children or even physical distance, you may not get a chance to see them on a regular basis. One of the main reasons members are going to the club is to get exercise, but it is a

“value added” experience because of the social nature of it. Unlike your non-squash club friend who is often busy, you get to see many of your friends/fellow members on a weekly basis or more at the club. You get a chance to catch up on their lives and touch base on a regular basis. So these people that you see and catch up with every week may not be your best friends, but as John points out, “people you see regularly become part of your life on some level.” John remarked to me that this is what he thought the squash community could be.

Even though John has positive feelings of community, my interview with him revealed a more complicated picture of his own relationship with the game of squash itself. He enjoys playing the game, and remarked to me that it is a great conversation starter with extended family and acquaintances, but was not sure the game itself was more than that. Here is John’s candid and revealing response to the question of “what if a doctor said stop playing squash?” (a question he asked himself):

I’d probably be a little sad, it would affect my routine, it wouldn’t be the end of the world; I guess I would miss seeing all the people on Monday nights and stuff like that, but it doesn’t really effect who I am. I have met a lot of really good people playing squash, so from that perspective, if I couldn’t play, I would be sad, it’s not just routine, I’ve met some good folks. I think I told you indirectly as I was looking for a job this time, I was amazed at how many folks are on Linked In, people asking me how the job thing is going, good for you, good luck, great news, actually you don’t expect you are going to meet friends when you play a game of squash, but you you do. I would miss that if I couldn’t play, but I don’t know it’s the game itself I would miss...I would miss the people and the routine as opposed to the game, the game is just exercise. If we all had a running group, that would be fine too...(August 2012).

For John this reveals a complicated relationship to squash. He alludes to the importance of community and personal bonds, but is unsure of the actual importance of playing the game itself. How this fits into ideas of personal and group identity will be explored in more detail in chapter six. John participates in many micro-communities. He plays in a

house league, goes to round robins, knows both pros, plays people of all different levels and plays in the tournaments, including the Calcutta. He always goes to the social events after leagues and tournaments conclude. His micro-community participation level is well above average, and this reflects his strong feelings of community at the club, as well as the many relationships he has developed during the years he has been at the club. I will now turn to an analysis of another informant of mine, someone with a unique set of circumstances surrounding them.

The next informant I want to discuss will simply be known as “Dust”. This name was chosen by my informant because she liked the sound of it. She played squash as a junior at the club many years ago and still plays today, although not as much. When she first came to the club, she was in her mid-teens and had only been in Canada for a few months. She is originally from the Caribbean and has been playing squash for approximately six years. She plays at a high level, somewhere above John and below Rick. Dust was a novelty at the club because of her status as a promising junior player. She describes her experience overall as very positive. She felt a strong amount of support from the majority of people she interacted with, and felt part of a group of friends at the club. Despite being quite shy at her previous club, she matured into a friendly and talkative member at the new one, partially because of the support and friendliness of the other members.

Although her experience overall was very positive, there was one incident that was not very pleasant. Dust was playing an older gentleman one day, and at some point he pulled her aside and said to her “you are a 15 year old girl, what could you possibly know about squash? Let me make the calls from now on!” There are various “calls” that can be made in a squash match. During the course of a squash match there is the potential

for players to block each other when trying to get to the ball. Depending on how this occurs, there are rules in place to ensure fairness. Sometimes there are situations when players bump into each other and neither are at fault. This can lead to a “let”, and the point is replayed. There are also occasions when a player hits a shot to an area that would make it dangerous for the other player to play the ball. Because one player was at fault (the shot was played due to error/incompetence), potential points can be awarded, which are known as “strokes.” This did not happen again to Dust with anyone else. In fact, as she improved more and more, most people started looking to her to make the calls. Although this incident did not have a major impact on Dust, it does reveal some of the stereotypes of what a young girl at a squash club *should* know and what she *should* be able to do from a playing perspective. I heard a lot of discussion amongst a few of the older players regarding their discomfort with losing to a girl. The fact she was a girl with the potential to beat them was a source of anxiety and outright surprise by some members. I will now turn to a discussion of Dust’s micro-community participation and what this might mean for her experience of community at the club.

Years ago, when she first came to the club, Dust participated in a house league, played people of different levels and played all tournaments, including the Calcutta. She also knows both club pros. Dust also attends the social events after leagues and tournaments. She used to be at the club five or more times a week. As I mentioned earlier, Dust was quite shy at her old club and was mostly unwilling to ask older players for games. Most members at the club I did my research at were quite supportive of her, and were happy to play matches against her outside the context of leagues and tournaments (where you have no choice). This gave Dust a lot of confidence, and now has no trouble chatting and playing with most members. The support she received at the club by most

members was a massive contributing factor to her positive feeling of community and club connection.

The last informant I want to discuss briefly is Tom. Tom in his mid-30s and works in marketing. He is the lowest ranked player of the four I have discussed. He falls somewhere in the middle of the skill ladder. He does not usually play in house leagues, but knows both club pros, plays in round robins and tournaments, including the Calcutta. He attends the club's social events as well. He is a vocal supporter of the Calcutta Tournament, enjoying the cross-level interaction and fun of the tournament immensely. Tom has expressed to me that he would love to see Calcutta Tournaments be played on a more regular basis in the future. His micro-community participation is above average, but not as high as Dust or John. Tom has strong feelings of community at the club and believes that outside social events after tournaments are vital for this feeling. He sees these social events, especially the Calcutta, as a way to unite members. I mention Tom because although he is a lower-ranked player, he still connects strongly to the club.

3.1 Skill Level and Its Relationship to Feelings of Community

An important relationship to consider is that of the connection between skill level and positive feelings of community. Rick is a very strong player, but did not have a strong feeling of community at the club for a number of reasons. John is a solid player but much weaker than Rick, yet had very positive feelings of community and connection to the squash program and its members. Dust's skill level falls somewhere between Rick and John, and she has very positive feelings of community at the club. The last informant, Tom, is an average player at the club, and he too felt a part of a community at the club and thoroughly enjoys the social events as well. Their examples show that there is not a

simple 1:1 ratio between skill level and satisfaction/positive feelings of community. There are a number of ideas to consider here regarding skill level and community.

Most members I spoke with expressed a desire to improve their skills and to become more highly ranked. However, none of them expressed a desire to be the best in the club. In other words, improving at something that one spends a lot of time at is important in its own right, but the timeline and amount of improvement are variable. It also appears that there could be a correlation between extremely high skill levels and dissatisfaction. Those at the very top of the skill ladder rarely interact with other players, as they rarely participate in leagues or round robins (due to a lack of on-court competitiveness with the majority of members). This makes these players less likely to participate in tournaments and social events, and thus less likely to know and interact with many people overall. Those members who are closer to the middle of the bell curve are more likely to participate in leagues and round robins, resulting in a larger group of people they know on some level.

The other issue to briefly consider is that of positive feelings of community and skill level. I want to make clear that since the focus of my research was not on gender, I will not be making any grand claims relating to it. It is possible that Dust's experience was related to gender but I cannot know for sure. The question is, would she have had a similarly positive experience had she been a lower skill level and not a promising and highly ranked junior player at the club? Part of the reason Dust's experience was so positive was because of the strong support she received from many members, and this support may not have been as forthcoming had she only been an average player. I do not have a definitive answer to this question, but it is certainly something to think about.

It appears that skill level is not implicated in a 1:1 ratio that matches up with club satisfaction or strong feelings of community. As my examples showed, a range of different skill levels had varying degrees of satisfaction with and connection to the club. Very highly skilled players are less likely to have strong micro-community membership levels though, thus making it less likely for them to have positive feelings of community at the club. It appears that a more relevant factor is micro-community involvement levels. The relationships between different ranked players and what this means for the club as a whole will be discussed next in chapter four.

Chapter 4

Hierarchy at the Club

In this chapter I will discuss and analyze several concepts and issues that relate to hierarchy and the club. How hierarchy affects the club's structure, how its members interact, who they interact with and which members form playing relationships are all important in understanding the overall social environment of the club. From my research and observations, it appears that the structure of the club is based on a powerfully entrenched skill hierarchy. No one denies that some players are better than others, as this is a reality of playing a competitive sport like squash. The skill hierarchy I refer to is one that is more informal. It is one that places value on a member based on what rank or level they are at. Members avoid playing other members who are lower-ranked for several reasons. Most like to play those at their own level, but there is also a sense that being a higher-ranked player allows someone the right to not have to play someone who is ranked lower. At our club, members will rarely ask higher-ranked members for games, partially because of this informal skill hierarchy. Members police themselves in this matter, through a complicated system of clearly defining skill levels and who individual players should be playing against. There are no formal rules stating that a player must only compete against players of similar skill levels. However, there are ways that this idea is reinforced by both other members and the club pros through squash programming. Why this might be and how the club's structure reinforces these ideas will be something I discuss in significant detail throughout the chapter.

Member experiences of the skill hierarchy vary widely. Some are hyper-aware of it and have expressed dissatisfaction with its effects, some vehemently deny it, but most

either have little awareness of it or accept it as normal. It is important to note that most of the effects I noticed and discussed with others are subtle. The conscious interactions between higher and lower ranked players seem similar on the surface to other interactions at the club, even though I have observed subtle differences. Analyzing the evolution and eventual ending of playing relationships at the club will also be a useful vehicle for discussing how relationships form at the club, whom people tend to form relationships with, and why these relationships start and end. How the skill hierarchy affects playing relationships will become apparent throughout the chapter. Before I begin my discussion in earnest, I will first need to define and discuss some key terms and concepts.

Hierarchy is the first concept that requires a definition. There are a few concepts that fall under the umbrella idea of hierarchy. The club's structure, or the way members tend to interact and play with one another, is largely dictated by skill level. By "skill hierarchy" I mean that one's skill level at the club will greatly affect whom they are most likely to play and interact with. It also means that people are most likely to interact and form relationships with those closest to them on the skill ladder, another idea I will explain shortly. Internalized Hierarchy is another concept that falls under the umbrella of hierarchy and refers to the fundamental acceptance by most players that it is justified that someone who is ranked higher than you should not be asked for a game or expected to accept an invitation to play. This chapter and the concept of hierarchy will not make sense without an explanation of the club's ranking system.

4.1 Squash Ranking Systems

Every new member who joins the squash program gets on court with the head pro before they can participate in any leagues or tournaments. This is not mandatory to play squash at the club in member-driven programs, but it is required if the member wants to participate in pro-driven programming like leagues and tournaments, since they are both set up by skill level. The new member gets on court with the pro in order to have their skills evaluated and to give them a tutorial of the game if necessary (mostly related to player safety). Once the assessment has been completed, the head pro will enter the player into the online system. Each person is given a number (eg. 3.0), and then slotted into a huge ladder of close to 500 members. A 3.0 would be in the middle of the ladder, with beginner players starting as low as 1.0 and the top players coming in near 5.0. There is a significant difference in skill between a 4.0 player and a 4.2 player. Every player can check how their points would change based on the outcome of a match against any player in the club. Very small amounts of points can be won or lost. Key here is that a player who is ranked even 0.2 points higher than a potential opponent stands to risk many points if they do not win. In fact, in this situation, it may not be enough to just win, but the slightly higher ranked player will need to win convincingly (sometimes 3-0 or 3-1) to avoid dropping ranking points. Unsurprisingly, there is a lot of anxiety associated with fluctuating ratings.

This anxiety over ranking points is not shared by all everyone, but is a concern for many, even though members express it in different ways. These specific ratings are used to group members for things like tournaments and leagues, and are used more generally by members to evaluate one another, know where they stand and ultimately to figure out

which members they want to get on court with. To help better understand the dynamics of the club's ranking system, it will be helpful to discuss more common ranking systems, like the lettering system and another form of the challenge ladder.

The ABCD system is used for T and D (Toronto and District) league play and for larger province-wide and national tournaments. The key to this system is the amount of grey area in it. For example, what letter you are in this system can depend on which city you are playing in. For example, I am a C player in London Ontario, and a high D player in Toronto. In provincial tournaments, most people tend to play up a letter, creating an effect where everyone who would normally play in one letter category moves up artificially to the next highest one. Generally players find out their letter ranking through participation in various competitions, be it tournaments or T and D, and usually consult with their club pro to get an idea of where their current skill level is likely to place them on the scale. Within each letter there is also a considerable amount of variation. Although a player of one letter would not play in a different letter category, there is enough variation within a letter to allow for play against players of different skill levels. Also, since it is often unclear who is at the top of one letter and the bottom of another, you get a good amount of variation in tournaments and T and D play as well.

Another system that is used is a simple challenge ladder without a number rating associated with each player. It has everyone listed on a ladder. The way people are ordered on the ladder can be done in a couple of different ways. It can be based on who joined first, with subsequent additions being placed lower on the ladder. The ladder administrator can also place people based on their perceived skill level relative to current ladder members. Ultimately the ladder will sort itself out as far as who should be where, so getting the initial rankings perfect is not a concern. There is usually a rule stating that

players can only challenge three to five spots (depending on the ladder) higher than themselves, and if they win, they take that person's spot. This ladder has the benefit of no one having a clearly defined rating, similar to the ABCD system. It is more restrictive though, as usually there is a cap on who you are able to challenge at any given moment.

There are a number of practical differences between these various ranking systems. As some members have expressed to me, there is a certain amount of "judgment" that goes on because of our ranking system. If you see that you need to beat player X three games to none to not lose any points, most members are hesitant to play them. Currently, I would need to beat the person ranked 10 spots lower than me three games to none to not lose any points. Since level dictates to a large degree who members will ultimately play in leagues and tournaments, many of them expressed anxiety over risking even the minimal loss of ranking points. For many there is not enough grey area in the system, which results in the pigeon-holing of people to an extreme degree, creating somewhat artificial barriers to playing with a variety of members. Compare this to the letter system, which contains the most grey area. There are times, for example at regional and national tournaments, when a player ends up on court with someone else who is much worse/better than them, but the majority of the time, you can enjoy games with people a little better/worse than yourself, and this system makes this a regular possibility. The ranking system at the club where I did my research uses a very specific points system. This ensures that playing someone a little better/worse is much less likely, mostly because of the threat to ranking points that goes along with potentially playing someone like that.

4.2 Internalized Hierarchy

I will now turn to a discussion of internalized hierarchy. Internalized hierarchy predicts that members will accept as normal that who plays with whom should be dictated by skill level. I will also provide a few counter-examples in the form of members who are dissatisfied with the current set up and also outline their ideas for how to go about changing the culture at the club. Throughout my time at the club, I observed dozens of examples of what I call “internalized hierarchy.” “Internalized Hierarchy” can be defined as a conscious or unconscious acceptance that it is normal for only those who are of equal or very similar skill level to play squash together. It is not just acceptance, however, as a key element to this internalized hierarchy is the member support and upkeep that the hierarchy receives, ensuring that things stay the way they are. For example, even though our online challenge system allows a player to challenge any other player on the list (high or low), it is rare to have a person challenge someone to a game who is considerably higher or lower ranked.

How lower ranked players treat higher ranked players, both in the context of competition and in more general interactions, is one important effect of this internalized hierarchy. There are also a number of subconscious elements that are entailed by this internalized hierarchy, and can once again be seen in interactions between higher and lower ranked players. When I asked people why better players were not encouraged to get on court with lower ranked players, or why one rarely saw players of markedly different skill levels on court together, the answer I usually received was that it was a waste of time for the better player (although most put it more politely). Over the course of my fieldwork I encountered dozens of examples of internalized hierarchy. The most basic piece of

evidence can be seen with the fact that players of slightly different skill levels rarely play matches with one another outside the context of something like a round robin or a special tournament like the Calcutta.

Even the round robins, which were described in chapter two, reflect the skill hierarchy in two important ways: which members actually participate in them, and with whom they actually play during the round robin itself. The round robins are open to any and all members regardless of skill level, which is made clear in weekly emails inviting members to participate. Despite its theoretical inclusiveness, it does not always work this way in reality. There are a range of players who participate in the programming, but there are a few factors that still keep the hierarchy strongly intact. Despite participating in dozens of round robins, I rarely saw a player below the level of 2.5 participate in any of them. This means that for some reason, beginner and novice players are almost exclusively avoiding the round robins, despite the open invitation. You see 3.0 and above players most of the time, although I would say that often the majority of participants (especially in one of them) are level 3.9 and above. When there are a mix of different skill levels participating, the pros do their best to put people of similar levels together on court, meaning that only if there are not enough players will there be much chance for interaction between higher and lower ranked players (other than the obligatory game with the pro for all participants, high and low ranked). There is a beginner one that caters to new and novice level players, as well as the Saturday morning round robin group, whose membership is made up entirely of above average players at the club.

A logical question to consider at this juncture is: if the round robins are explicitly open to all skill levels, why is it that not all levels do not equally engage in them? One possibility is that higher ranked players play more frequently, which is consistent with my

own observations and intuitively makes sense. Even though higher ranked players play more frequently, it still seems too coincidental that so few 2.5 players and lower ever participate in the round robins. When I began to ask questions and pay attention to this issue, things became clearer. I was sitting around the main squash hub one evening when the head pro asked a 2.5 to get on court with a 2.9, as the 2.9's regular partner did not show up. The 2.5 expressed a fear of embarrassing themselves on court and did not want to risk giving the 2.9 a bad game, not challenging them enough and not giving them the good cardiovascular exercise they want. They also expressed a preference for not playing on a show court, preferring to instead play on one of the three courts that cannot be viewed from anywhere in the squash hub. This makes sense from the standpoint of wanting to at least contain their embarrassment to a hidden court.

I also experienced this phenomenon on a more personal level. The pro asked if a beginner player (around 1.5) wanted to play with me, and the beginner was very hesitant. The beginner explained to me that they were really bad and did not want to embarrass themselves. Another example is even more illuminating, as it occurred during a tournament (the Calcutta) where cross-level interaction is the norm and often a requirement. I was matched up with a beginner player in the first round, and they were nervous the whole time and felt somewhat embarrassed to be on court with me. It is difficult to argue that the only factors relevant to these members' actions is the internalized hierarchy, as personality could also be part of it. However, given the regularity with which it occurs, and the fact I have seen it happen to a number of different people, it convinces me that there are real consequences of this internalized hierarchy. A discourse that I did not hear or experience in any of these cases was the potential to learn from someone more skilled or get something out of it from that standpoint, even though

most members were aware of the potential benefits of learning from a better player. It is important to point out that there were some members with whom I talked that were keen on playing those better than them, but most of them still expressed the need to make sure they were able to ensure the better player still got something out of it (for example being able to at least make them do a bit of running). This fear and anxiety showed by lower ranked players explains why the round robins cater to players who are more experienced and higher ranked.

Witnessing lower ranked players express fear and anxiety over playing with higher ranked players is one avenue for exploring how the skill hierarchy has been internalized. However, there are also more subtle ways of getting at this phenomenon. One strategy involves attempting to discover latent and unwritten rules. Often this takes the form of having a weird feeling that something is not right in a particular situation. This is one of the many advantages of using experiential positivism. I was playing one afternoon with a player ranked similarly to me when someone came to our court and said that the head pro had sent them down to join us and play (it was during a round robin). We obliged (generally people will listen to the club pro in these matters) and began to play three person squash. It became apparent quickly that this person was considerably lower ranked than my original opponent and myself, and this resulted in this ephemeral and hard to describe “weird feeling.” I believe that there were a few contributing factors to this odd feeling. When my evenly ranked opponent and I would have a rally, it was usually fairly long and intense, and then the lower ranked player would often make a quick error when they got a chance to play, thus making their own rallies quite short. We could see that the lower ranked player was frustrated with themselves for making errors (even though it is perfectly normal and understandable), but in the context of playing with

better players, the beginner was outwardly nervous and getting frustrated. There is nothing inherent here that should create this awkward feeling. People of different abilities often interact without difficulty, and I believe that if this skill hierarchy was not internalized, and it was common to see players of different levels on court together, this odd/icky feeling would not have surfaced. The feeling of being judged could also contribute to the feelings of discomfort on the part of the lower ranked player. However, this too can be considered an effect of the internalized hierarchy. If the on court interactions between different ranked players was more normalized, the lower ranked player would potentially see an opportunity to learn, rather than possibly embarrassing themselves in these situations.

Unsurprisingly, the leagues and tournaments are set up based on skill level as well. This is common, and most of the people I talked to actually preferred this. I also agree that it makes sense in general to compete with those closer to your skill level, but not at the cost of creating an environment that makes getting on court with anyone but a person near your skill level feel odd or weird. There are a number of potential programs that could be implemented that would still allow people of similar skill levels to play together, but also encourage interaction between different levels. One such program, thought of by one of my informants, is called the “Peer Mentoring” program. This program would theoretically involve members volunteering to play with and help other members who are less skilled/lower ranked than themselves. Its purpose would be to help members learn new skills and improve, introduce people to more members and also have the better player feel good about mentoring and helping another player. Why this idea was not originally met with positivity by the club pro is something that will be discussed in detail in chapter five.

4.3 Internalized Hierarchy – Deference and Praise

Now that I have established some of the fundamental effects of the skill hierarchy, like dividing people up based on skill level, I want to outline some of the other important effects of internalized hierarchy. The main effects of this internalized hierarchy can be seen in the interactions between members of different skill levels. Two important consequences of the internalized hierarchy can be seen in the consistently positive feedback given to higher ranked players by lower ranked ones, and the deference shown by lower ranked players if they do end up on court together (again, this is uncommon but does happen sometimes). This is done mostly unconsciously by lower ranked players. It is also important to note that these benefits are relative, but also more obvious with very highly ranked players. In other words, a 3.0 will have deference shown to them by a 2.5, but as you move higher on the ladder, you are more likely to get positive comments from more people (because there are more opportunities to showcase your skills, for example during T and D play which usually features 4.0 players and higher). Also, there are far fewer 4.5's compared to 3.5's, which makes that level of achievement more notable and special (and members are aware of this). There is one practical advantage for higher ranked players at my club. This is the better programming available. Although the round robins are theoretically open to all levels, I have established that they draw higher skilled players due to fear and embarrassment on the part of lower ranked players (fear of giving a bad game or embarrassing themselves, both part of the internalized hierarchy).

One area where higher ranked players' status can benefit them is when they end up on court with a lower ranked player. Even though the club pros generally try to get members of similar skill levels on court during the round robins, there are times when

players of vastly different skill levels end up on court together. This preferential treatment can also be seen during the Calcutta tournament, an event I will focus on in great detail in Chapter seven. From everyone I talked to and my own observations, it became clear to me that lower ranked players consistently showed deference to higher ranked players in a number of different ways. One indication was a minimal amount of arguing or disagreement from the lower ranked player on calls that would likely be disputed between players of a closer skill level. Not only do lower ranked players rarely challenge higher ranked players' calls (even on something like the ball being out or not), but if they do, it usually ended in them backing down.

There is also a lot of assumption of blame that occurs when lower ranked players compete against higher ranked ones. For example, there could be a rally where there seemed to be a few plays that perhaps were questionable (as in a potentially illegal looking play by the worse player), and then post-rally the lower ranked player will ask if everything was done okay and if the better player wants to redo it. Again, it is a kind of deference and appeal to the higher ranked player's superior skill, which in most players' minds translated to superior knowledge and understanding. Sometimes lower ranked players do not know the rules and require and seek clarification, but I have also seen players who have been around the game for 30 years doing the same thing. There appears to exist a sense of guilt on the part of lower ranked players, something I have personally felt before. There is a sense that if I win a point against someone who is ranked higher than me, I must have done something unfair, so I need to clarify and make sure it was clean. This kind of thinking makes sense in the context of the club, where there is a culture of separating higher and lower ranked players, so it is not strange that when they

do come together there is a certain amount of discomfort on the part of the lower ranked player.

This is a situation I have seen reproduced in the professional game as well, when I watched the world number one play someone ranked in the 80s (the player ranked in the 80s is also professional but much worse than the world number one). Despite both being professionals on the tour and competing for their countries, the lower ranked player showed many of the same signs as those at the club show against better players. He did not take what were some obvious points (points that could have potentially been given to them but instead played on), gave the other player far too much credit and complemented their shots more than is common between closer ranked professionals.

Just like there seems to be a certain way of acting for the lower ranked player, there also appears to be a kind of responsibility on the part of the higher ranked player to ensure both of them get something out of the time on court together. Any time I have played someone at the club who was better enough than me that they could control who wins the vast majority of rallies, they ensured that they gave me an opportunity to win some points, rally with them and get some running in as well. The majority of informants I spoke with said it was important for the better player to ensure the worse player had fun, and many even said they should try to teach them something and give them a positive experience. So even though this situation does not arise with great frequency, most people still maintain that there is a clear protocol for how to act and a responsibility on the part of the better player. However, some informants also mentioned that they had gotten some negative responses when their opponent felt like the better player was not trying. In other words, the better player needs to walk a fine line between ensuring a fun game, but also not appearing uncompetitive. I conjecture that even though the lower ranked player on a

deeper level knows the better player needs to play down to them to ensure fun for both parties, there is also a part of them that feels bad (likely because of the internalized hierarchy) for seemingly wasting the better player's time.

One informant explained to me that he had encountered during his time at various different squash clubs (over a period of many years) a type of player who needs to destroy their opponent regardless of the situation. In other words, he has seen these people annihilate total beginners 33-0 (which means winning every point in a match). He found this to be completely unacceptable, and decided to take matters into his own hands. He did this by seeking out some of these people and lecturing them on why what they were doing was wrong, even deplorable, and on how they are supposed to act. Despite my informant's lecturing not being met with positivity by these players, this example shows how members sometimes police themselves.

As I mentioned earlier, there are two round robins, each run by a different pro. Part of the round robin experience is getting on court for a game with the pro who is running it. Each pro takes a different approach when they play the various members (who are generally much worse than them). One of them keeps rallies going and ensures the lower ranked player runs around. This is generally seen as the appropriate way to act on court. The other pro usually wins rallies very quickly, which is uncommon at our club when players of vastly different skill levels are playing one another. I have heard many members discussing how they found it odd that this pro played like that against them. This pro is great in general, and a wonderful person as well, but people still find it odd. This example highlights a couple of important points. No one has yet told this pro to change their style, likely because of his rank and position at the club. But members do find it odd enough that they discuss it amongst themselves. This serves to normalize what

most members find to be the more appropriate strategy. In other words, this is a way for them to police themselves through the discussion of inappropriate behavior and a potential warning to those who do not know the etiquette.

Both the discomfort of the lower ranked player and the responsibility of the higher ranked player (when they meet on court) are elements that reinforce the hierarchy. If the higher ranked player were to destroy and embarrass the lower ranked player every time they ended up on court together, there would be a significant amount of tension built up amongst the players. The socialization of higher ranked players that results in them taking on the responsibility of ensuring enjoyable play for both parties prevents this potential build up of tension. As a result the hierarchy remains intact. Most people I spoke with made it clear that this was the proper etiquette for how to act when players of vastly different skill levels end up on court.

The next indicator of preferential treatment for higher ranked players can be seen with the kinds of comments that get made to them on a regular basis. As I mentioned before, one's relative ranking/status can accrue some advantages in specific situations, but in this case, there usually needs to be a certain level of achievement by the player. There is no official ranking where this starts, but around the top 20% of the club is a reasonable estimate. Essentially, as you get better, you tend to get a lot more comments that praise your game and skill level. Comments about the length of rallies (long ones often a sign of a high level of ability) are quite common as well. Higher ranked players also get more opportunities to showcase their skills, as they have more access to programming like the T and D league. Having one's game constantly praised is an ego boost. If one reaches the very top of the club, about the top 2%, it becomes even more extreme. There is a great deal of effusiveness shown towards the top players, both directly

to them, as well as being discussed intensely amongst lower ranked players when they are watching a match.

Sometimes the comments are subtler, but they still follow a similar pattern of acknowledgment of a higher skill level on the part of the lower-ranked player(s). I want to give an example that happened directly to me. I was hitting around by myself one afternoon, and a couple friends of mine, both ranked significantly lower than me, were in another court playing. I saw them in the hall and we chatted for a bit. Since we do know each other a little bit and are quite friendly, one of them asked if I wanted to join them for some three-person squash. My friend framed their offer carefully though. She said, "I know you are way better than us and you probably don't want to play, but if you like you are very welcome to join us." I have no doubt that it was a genuine offer, but as you can see, this person felt the need to recognize my superior skill, and this supports the idea that it is weird or uncommon to ask better players to get on court with you at the club. I was not just another player that could participate and enjoy playing squash, I was a better player, someone to be treated differently and separately.

The last example can be seen in the praise high ranked players receive. Praising top players' skills is a common occurrence, but the most common line I heard uttered related to the kind of game they were playing. The game they play, according to many lower ranked players, is not the same one lower ranked players play. When people describe the game they are watching between the top players, it is almost always described as something different and ultimately better than what everyone else is doing. It is a way of separating them even more from everyone else, elevating their status by putting their abilities up in a place that is unreachable for 98% of the members.

It is clear that this internalized hierarchy results in lower ranked players both showing deference to and praising the games of higher ranked players. Put another way, there is a systematic process by which higher ranked players gain and maintain social status through this internalized hierarchy. Now that I have detailed this important phenomenon, I will now turn to a discussion of playing relationships.

4.4 Playing Relationships at the Club

A thorough discussion of playing relationships allows me to explore some of these unwritten rules in more detail. It also allows me to further illuminate and describe the club structure, as playing relationships are the lifeblood of the club. My discussion of playing relationships will include their evolution (how they form), the ongoing relationship and its progression, and its occasional termination as well. Before proceeding with this discussion, I will first need to define “playing relationship”. A playing relationship can be defined as any and all interactions between members who are currently playing, planning to play or have played in the past. This includes a range of different kinds of relationships. This helps to differentiate between members who have not played together but interact in other ways. It can be as brief and insignificant as playing someone for one game of three-person squash at a weekly round robin, or as lengthy and significant as finding a weekly playing partner that lasts for years. These relationships are the lifeblood of the club, or any squash club for that matter. Those playing relationships that develop into regularly scheduled matches (playing consistently with another member) will be termed “significant playing relationships” to differentiate them from simply playing a single match in league or a game during a round robin. Both are forms of playing relationships, but need to be differentiated for the purposes of my

analysis. Unsurprisingly, people are most likely to form long lasting playing relationships with those near or at their skill level. But there are lots of people at the club who would be at or around your skill level, so why do people develop regular playing partnerships with some and not others?

Members play with different people for a number of reasons. Some members play the same person every week, but end up doing more talking than playing. Others play a couple times a week and do nothing but play when they are on court. Some have monthly games or a rolodex of potential partners that they use when pro-driven programming is not providing enough gameplay for them. The most common way for a significant playing relationship to develop is through participation in a house-league. A significant playing relationship could also develop from participation in a round robin, but it is not as likely because there is less time on court with each individual participant, and the play is likely to be in the context of three person and not a standard one-on-one game.

Why are house-leagues more likely to produce significant playing relationships? League affords members the opportunity to interact with a person they have never met before. Whether you chat before or after, or even during the match sometimes, there is ample time to get to know them. There is often a formal introduction by the pro before the match as well. Compare this to a round robin, where you would meet the new person, play a game and then move on to play others, leaving less time to get to know new people. How the match itself goes is of paramount importance as far as compatibility and the likelihood of future interaction is concerned. If the two participants get along well off-court but lack competitiveness on court, it is unlikely they will play again, or at least unlikely they will play regularly. However, if the two participants have a satisfying and competitive league match, they are much more likely to play again, or at least add one

another to their rolodex of potential partners. If people get along on and off-court, this makes it even more likely for a significant playing relationship to begin, as it will begin to extend beyond just enjoying a competitive match. As I explained earlier, there is ample time to chat and socialize during the course of a match, so getting along well off court can be a significant variable for predicting future interactions. It is also possible to develop a significant playing relationship with someone you do not get along with off court, and this is something I will address in more detail later on in this chapter.

Although the majority of relationships are confined to the club and its social activities, members do develop friendships that extend beyond the confines of the court and the club. However, from my observations this is extremely rare. One informant I spoke with told me how he had met his best friend at the club many years ago. He explained to me that the two of them just happened to be unemployed at the same time, so they were able to play a lot during the days, and their friendship evolved from there. Being compatible on court was a factor here, as they were at a similar level. However, meeting one another during this difficult period in both of their lives helped strengthen their bond. They were able to play a lot, and having someone else there that could empathize with their difficult situation was integral to the development of their strong friendship. Today, my informant is the Godfather to one of this friend's children, which helps highlight how close their friendship has become. From the experience of my own significant playing relationships and many others I am aware of, I would say that this close friendship that extends beyond the club is not the norm for significant playing relationships. Most people in significant playing relationships do not see each other outside the context of the squash club. This would be true of my own and the vast majority of other ones I am familiar with. The more common significant playing

relationships that are confined to the club usually involve one of two types of off-court interaction, and this is what I will focus on now.

All significant playing relationships involve playing with some regularity, or at least there exists the potential for it (which could change when people move away or change clubs), but not all are alike in terms of how the players interact off-court. Some of those in significant playing relationships chat before, during and after matches. They not only enjoy the level of play on court, but enjoy catching up and interacting outside of it as well. However, I have also come across members of significant playing relationships who despise each other. In these cases, the participants are strictly concerned with the gameplay itself and little else. For example, one informant explained to me that there was a person at his old club whom he despised (and the feeling was mutual). However, since this person was best able to give him a competitive and enjoyable match, they played on a weekly basis. They would not say a word to each other before or after the game. They would warm up, play, shake hands at the end and see each other on court the next week.

Other informants I spoke with said they too would gladly participate in these kinds of matches, as a competitive match that also has the potential for defeating a hated opponent was an opportunity to relish. The informants who expressed this to me were almost exclusively ranked quite highly at the club. This type of significant playing relationship, one purely focused on game play and with two parties with a mutual dislike for one another, is not common at the squash club where I did my research. Most informants expressed that they would not compete against someone they did not like, even if the match itself would be competitive, as most of them were looking for a positive social experience when they went to the club. For some informants it also depended on the reason they did not like the person. If the informant did not like the personality but the

person played safely, they were more willing to participate. However, my informants expressed to me universally that playing someone who was at your level but played dangerously was someone to be avoided altogether.

As long as the participants involved in the significant playing relationship continue to enjoy their on court time together, the playing relationship is likely to stay intact as long as both members remain at the club. But what happens when one member of the significant playing relationship becomes considerably better than the other member and begins to win the vast majority of the games and matches? In other words, what happens when the competition becomes less equal? This could happen for many different reasons. One member could be improving much more quickly because of practice or lessons, or perhaps one member has dropped their fitness or playing level because of personal issues, injury or age. No matter what the cause of the change in the dynamics, its result is the same: a fundamental change in the significant playing relationship. I want to give a two-part example that highlights some of the key features and consequences of a fundamental change in a significant playing relationship.

The first part of the example is a personal one. I played one of my informants in a league match a few years ago. At that point they were still considerably better than me, and proceeded to beat me quite soundly. We played two months later in the finals of another league and I actually managed to win the match this time. More importantly, we both thoroughly enjoyed playing, as there were lots of intense and enjoyable rallies. As a result we decided to play a match outside the league. We ended up playing a couple dozen times over the next year or so (almost every other week). For most of these matches the level of play was very competitive and each person won their fair share. However, things changed at some point. I began to win the majority of games and

matches, and the games were becoming less close and less fun for both of us. Both of us could sense that a shift was happening, and there were a few key signs as well. For example, my opponent's reasons for why they had lost on any given day began to change. I want to make clear that my opponent did not make a big deal with excuses and that sort of thing, as it was more subtle than that. Instead of saying they were tired, slow that day, making too many errors, out of practice etc., they began to say things like "you're just too fast", "you have gotten too much better and I can't keep up." This was a clear signal to me from my opponent that things had changed. The difference now was that the focus was less on what they were doing wrong and more on what I was doing right. In other words, the outcome was now more in my hands. Part of the reason my opponent switched to this kind of discourse was because the other one about being tired etc. was no longer plausible. Accepting that I had gotten too much better was ultimately easier at this point. It also shows internalized hierarchy at work. Because this person knows how to act towards players who are higher on the skill ladder, it is unsurprising that he began to give me credit for my improvement, instead of focusing on things he was doing badly as he did earlier on in the playing relationship. There was a clear transition happening, and this person was following the script he and most others have internalized.

The question now becomes, how did our relationship change? Most importantly, we stopped playing on a regular basis. I did not say anything specific to my informant, but as he explained to me later on, he no longer felt it was right to ask me for games on a regular basis, as he knew I would want to play people closer to my skill level, but might feel compelled to play because we do have a history and relationship. Slowly there were fewer emails sent and we both accepted that we would play much less frequently (but still once in a while). It is important to note that at the time we accepted this without

specifically noting it or discussing it. This happened to my informant with someone else as well. He played this other person a couple of times, but it soon became clear that his opponent was much better. My informant asked the person to play a few more times (because they were family), but got excuses each time about why the person could not play, and they soon took the hint and stopped asking for games. When one person becomes obviously better than the other, the weaker player will either stop asking for games (or reduce the amount significantly), or will receive negative responses from the stronger player and will adjust accordingly. Some informants I spoke with said that it was the responsibility of the lower ranked player to recognize that the higher ranked player no longer wanted to play, and therefore to stop emailing or inquiring about future games. If the lower ranked player attempted to continue a playing relationship with someone who was no longer interested (due to a lack of competitiveness in the matches), then the most common way a player showed disinterest was through vagueness and non-commitment type language. They would say things like “I’m very busy right now” or “ya I’d like to play but I’m not sure when I can play, so I will let you know.” Usually it did not come to this, but this was the strategy a few players told me they employed when they wanted to avoid playing someone but did not want to initiate a direct confrontation. In this case the internalized skill hierarchy makes unpleasant interactions and confrontations between members less likely.

These examples are not outliers. This process of a significant playing relationship transitioning is common and also important to the club as a whole. Another informant I played with also began to change their post-match framing at one point, after it became clear I had advanced past them. Earlier on in the relationship, when things were more equal, they used to talk about making silly mistakes, but now they were conceding that I

was just too quick and that they could do nothing about it. Once again, the focus had now shifted to what the opponent was doing well, as opposed to what the player themselves was doing wrong. The internalized hierarchy ensures that players understand how to relate and interact with other members of the club, both off-court and on. It dictates to a large degree with whom members will form these relationships, as well as how they will potentially end. This makes it simpler for a member to maneuver their way through the structures and activities of the club. If everyone decided to approach other members using their own different strategies, the potential for confusion would be significant. This is not unlike other parts of our lives outside the context of the club. Most people have internalized how to act differently depending on the context. The way one acts at a doctor's office as a patient is clearly different than how to act at a party or in a university classroom. What is fascinating about the club (and other areas too) is that there are no written rules that describe how to relate to other members, yet there is consistency in the interactions and relationships formed. In the next chapter I will turn to a discussion of these processes by analyzing them at the level of groups and communities.

Chapter 5

Group and Community-Level Processes

As I previously discussed, there are a number of consequences that occur when the dynamic begins to shift in a significant playing relationship, usually because of a change in comparative skill levels. Some of these consequences include the way post-match excuses are framed, and the process by which the weaker player slowly contacts or approaches the higher ranked player less often, with an understanding that it is no longer reasonable to expect to play as frequently. The community itself has a way of helping to advance and improve member transitions out of their current playing groups and into new ones. It helps the transitioning player and also protects the egos of those of the skill group the player leaves behind. In other words, the process of one player improving and wanting to transition to play new players closer to their level can be a site of potential danger as far as members' emotional well-being is concerned. I will begin my explanation of this phenomenon by shifting my focus to the macro-level of the group and community processes that take place.

When a member views the online ranking list they get a clear idea of with whom they should be asking to set up matches. It is easy to look high above yourself on the ranking ladder and see the names and ratings of higher ranked players, but people accept that you should not invite these players for games or expect to get on court with them unless there exist special circumstances. In other words, since you have never played or had significant interactions with these members, it is easy to internalize the skill hierarchy without potential risks to the ego or psychological state of a member. However, what happens when someone you once had a significant playing relationship with suddenly

rises up to where all those other inaccessible opponents are? How do you tell someone that the reason you do not want to play anymore is because they are not good enough for you? How does a person go about shifting their mindset about a person from someone they once had a significant playing relationship with to the sphere of “too good for me” in the skill hierarchy without some emotional harm or discomfort? Two things tend to happen at this point. The weaker player has to find a way to re-internalize the skill hierarchy with someone who was once a regular playing partner, and the better player, because they too have internalized the hierarchy, realizes that they should be playing with higher ranked players, and their behavior will begin to reflect that. But how does this all happen so seamlessly?

5.1 Signaling – Talk Isn’t Cheap

As I got deeper into my fieldwork, I began to notice that members discussed a few topics with great frequency. They would talk about an improving player, ask who would win a match between two players and also discuss recent surprising victories. These topics are all interconnected. A frequent question that members ask is “how do you do against x?” This is a way to find out where you stand in relation to another player, and also gives you an idea of how you would do against a new opponent based on other results of theirs and your own. I heard different theories regarding why people might discuss other players’ improvement with such great frequency. One informant remarked: “I’m just surprised that more people even care, even comment as much as they do actually, I expect no comment and there always is, so there must be something to it.” Some believe it is nothing more than a convenient talking point, or even genuine happiness in seeing another person’s hard work pay off. I also heard ideas relating to people expressing envy for something

they do not have. All of these ideas have some merit and truth to them, but I believe that it is too prominent a phenomenon for it not to be something more deeply important to the structure and overall functioning of the club itself.

Before I discuss my hypothesis of why this intense discussion of member skill levels changing is so prominent, I want to briefly discuss some of the explanations informants posited above. I agree that some people are genuinely happy for other people as they improve. This is especially likely if the comment is coming from a friend, the club pro (because they are likely to have helped you improve), a significantly better player who agreed to go on court to play sometimes or someone who is much higher than you on the ranking list. These people have little reason to be anything but happy for you.

Another informant conjectured that it was related to envy. Their explanation made sense in some ways and I think it is likely a part of its purpose, especially when you consider that it links up with the idea of a higher ranking/skill level creating greater status within the club. As one informant told me:

It's envy. So sport, you look at somebody and you envy them because they have this skill set that I want, he has that Ferrari that I want, it's envy. Right? That envy is brought about from ability, hence it creates status (August 2012).

It cannot always be about envy though, as there are players who remarked on my own significant improvement who were considerably higher on the ladder than myself, with little threat to their positions in the near future.

While the various explanations informants offered are important, comparing them leads me to suggest that this constant talk of player improvement and discussions of surprising victories is actually part of a complicated signaling process. This signaling process aids in the smooth transition of players as they move up or down the skill ladder,

necessitating a shift in their roles and positioning within the hierarchy. As discussed before, the people you see above you on the ladder are easy to identify as off limits. However, transitioning from having a significant playing relationship with a fellow member to rarely or never playing with them requires more finesse and careful treading. I believe it is this phenomenon that helps the transition run more smoothly.

This signaling process has to be viewed from both the standpoint of the player who is moving up the ranks, as well as the core group of players who were once regular opponents. For the core group of players, it allows them an outlet for sharing their fears and worries. If everyone is talking about this person improving and the surprising victories they have had, it allows this group to bond together as those who are not moving up as fast. It also allows them a public showing of recognition for this person's new skill, which serves two important functions. Since lower ranked players tend to defer to and praise higher ranked players, this is an easy way to start showing a certain amount of deference and a "knowing of their place" in the hierarchy. It can also be a way to rationalize a member's future results against this person, since if everyone is talking about their rapid improvement and surprising results, the pressure is now off this other member, and little would be expected of them if they were to face this rapidly improving player. This can ultimately act to make defeat psychologically less painful for some players.

Another way to conceive of this idea is in the context of members sensing imbalance in the environment, a changing of the status quo. Members need to be aware of players who are rising in skill level around their level because they have internalized this idea that you do not ask higher ranked players for games. This means that someone at your level who is quickly rising will one day enter the sphere of people who are "off limits." This means that your relationship with this person must change in some ways.

The players who were once in the same playing sphere as the member who is rising up are the ones most affected by it. Consequently, they are the ones who discuss the change most intensely. In other words, this group needs to reorient its approach and understanding of that person within the hierarchy. They signal to each other and the person themselves of this imminent skill change, which allows an easier transition for both parties. Both the advancing player and the group left behind can now more easily internalize the change. I will now provide a couple of examples to help illustrate this process.

There are two members of the club who can be used as examples of this phenomenon of changing skill levels and the response of fellow members. One example is an informant and the other is myself. I will use my informant as my first example. This member came in as an above average player, somewhere around the 60th percentile of the club. This informant continuously makes an effort to improve, which includes practicing intensely, taking lessons, and generally committing themselves to becoming a great squash player. Most other members are aware of their commitment and could see that they had talent. As the person slowly progressed higher and higher, talk of their improvement and the unexpected victories they had won grew to very high levels.

Because my informant was moving to around my level or higher, I was fortunate to be part of the group that was discussing this person very intensely. I sensed that on one level this group seemed happy about this person's hard work paying off, but I also felt that there was an effort being made to protect their own egos as well. This person was clearly moving to a different playing level, and the core group around their level responded just as I would have predicted: ceaseless talk of their improvement and unexpected victories. Unsurprisingly, this kind of discussion by the core group has a

pattern to it. Talk at first is minimal, then intensifies significantly as the person is clearly transitioning and eventually turns to nothing as they fully transition to another level. It makes sense that talk would eventually die down completely, as the need for it ceases to exist once the transition is complete. One piece of evidence that supports this comes in the form of a player at the club who improved from beginner to top player many years ago. Rarely is the fact that they were once at a much lower level brought up, as the talk now is focused on their amazing skills and current ability. In other words, their transitioning to a higher level is no longer relevant because other members have long internalized their position at the top of the ladder.

The other example I want to share is a personal one. During the course of my fieldwork I improved my skill level. During this time I noticed a considerable amount of discussion about my game and some of my victories. The number of members who made comments to me about my rapidly improving game was considerable. These public expressions were done mostly by those around my own level. Because I have participated in discussions with other members about other players rapidly improving, my own transition was easier to understand. These members get a sense that something is changing. Most of these people were around my level, but some were better and some were worse as well. After a couple of unexpected victories at one of the club tournaments, I had dozens of people congratulate me on these big victories. This was an amazing experience from the standpoint of my own personal satisfaction, as it gave me a lot of self-confidence and good feeling. However, it also had the benefit of helping me solidify some of my ideas about the skill hierarchy and how people moved up and down the ladder so seamlessly. In some ways it was lucky that I did improve during this time, as it helped illuminate some of the unconscious behaviour that most people do not notice. I

realize now that this similar process likely happened to me during my initial time at the club. I improved from a 3.0 to a 3.8 during this time, a large enough increase to have created a similar situation as this summer. However, since I was just playing through it and thought about it very little from the perspective of other members, I did not think there was anything special going on and did not notice any patterns. This highlights the personal nature of fieldwork, and how who you are and what you do as a researcher have serious effects on the kinds of results and insights you can achieve. This also highlights the benefits of using an intense experiential ethnographical approach to research for this kind of work.

5.2 Anti-Skill Hierarchy Ideas

Two of the most fervent anti-skill hierarchy informants were raised in squash environments and clubs from other countries, affording them insight into this issue that members who have only played at the club where I did my research would not have. As I discussed earlier, most people I talked to expressed that they found it normal and understandable that only people of similar skill levels would get on court together. Although this is the norm, I want to show that it is not the only opinion that exists at the club. I encountered a few members who were critical of the structure because of its flaws, as it did not encourage better players to get on court with weaker players. Like any sport or skill, those who are more experienced and talented can be helpful to those who are less experienced and talented by teaching and mentoring them. Unfortunately, this is not encouraged at the club. Rick (see chapter three) had the following to say when I asked him about if members followed squash etiquette:

No they don't. Because I find that a lot of players won't play anyone that's worse than them. They will only play people who are the same level, and when you are a better player, this is very big since I came to Canada, so when you're a better player in the UK you kind of have an obligation to, (for want of a better phrase?) "get other people involved in the sport." So you should be going on court with people who are learning, people who are trying to improve, you should be offering up advice and tips. Since I came to Canada I find it, better players tend to keep themselves to themselves. I find that very frustrating." This informant partially blamed better players, but also blamed the structure of the club. They also said, "But I find here the squash programs don't support it either. Because they have this very structured league basis, all these little ranking lists, and because of how these ranking lists work, you can't even go on court with somebody whose lower down than you and have a fun game with them, because even if you go on and you have a fun game and make it 3-1, your ranking is crushed (August 2012).

Structure was not the only reason why things ended up this way, and Rick had another idea of why things might be this way:

I think part of its to do with almost social status. They see it as "well I'm a high status member", or whatever you want to describe it, "I can only play these guys, you're a low status member, so you can only play these guys," that's how it comes across. But we're doing this for recreation. We're supposedly all in this club, we all have a joint goal of having fun and getting fit. I mean it's supposed to be a club, so you are a member of a club, you are not a member of a tiny little group within that club (August 2012).

As mentioned earlier, Rick does his part to try and change the club culture, as he sometimes gets on court with players who are below his level of skill. However, one member is not enough to cause a culture shift.

Another informant, Emma, also expressed to me dissatisfaction with the fact that better players were not encouraged to get on court with lower ranked players, calling it a "handicap of our club." Emma is in her late 30s and works in the medical and business fields. She explained to me that where she had grown up, the adults forced the younger and highly skilled players to get on court with lesser skilled players, knowing that they could teach them a lot. She called it a "duty" of these better players, and noted that

particular players were targeted for their different talents to ensure that learning happened at the highest level possible. Emma made it clear to me that some of the older talented juniors were not always keen to help out and get on court, but were simply forced into doing it. This is a considerable contrast to the club where I did my research. The internalized hierarchy has consequences for the club as a whole. Not only does it hinder the development of players, but it also puts fractures into the overall community for some. Another informant also discussed this issue in detail in our interview, albeit from a different angle. The above two informants were both raised in squash clubs, having started in junior programs. This next informant, who will be known as Steve, only started playing recently.

Steve is in his early 30s, works in the energy business and has been playing for about 18 months. He remarked to me during our interview that players ranked quite highly “wouldn’t necessarily mingle or play with players of a lower ranking.” He understood why better players did not want to get on court with worse players, as it is not as much fun for them. At some point during our conversation, when we were discussing community building and what kinds of things tend to put fractures in it, Steve came up with an interesting idea. The idea was to have what we called a “peer mentoring program”, whereby higher ranked players would volunteer some of their time with a lower ranked player to help them improve. We thought this would encourage interaction between different levels, help lower ranked players improve their skills and give the higher ranked player a sense of satisfaction as well. We believed that this could potentially start a kind of shift in the culture of the club through the normalization of cross-level interaction. Steve decided to take this idea to one of the pros at the club.

Unfortunately, Steve did not get the response he was looking for. The pro expressed to Steve that they were not really interested at the moment, and turned the discussion around onto new members and the introduction and integration of them into the club. He proposed a special kind of round robin where new members would get to interact with volunteer core members. This was a laudable idea, even if it missed the point. His main reason for not wanting to support the peer mentoring system was that he thought it would put too much pressure on the mentors.

When I queried him about the idea some months later, I got another answer. He recognized the issue of a lack of cross-level interaction, but believed it had to be introduced in a casual way to normalize it. He proposed a kind of league that would bring different levels together, but said it was a massive challenge to set up. Again, I believed strongly that the peer mentoring system would help normalize it in a casual setting, so why he suggested a very difficult solution in the form of this special league when a simpler one was proposed confused me. When I asked him again about it some weeks later, he gave me a similar but more satisfying answer, one that explained his predicament but also his positivity for the original idea in theory. Overall, he thinks the idea of having a “peer mentoring” program is actually a good one. From my standpoint, I never really considered what the program would involve or mean for the pro. I was not thinking about the bottom line, what it would do for court time or what kind of effort the pro would need to put in. He fears that this program could put some volunteers off, something he certainly has to be cautious of. As he explained to me, his view of the ideal squash experience is when two people can play one another and play their hardest.

The peer-mentoring program would not work this way, so he had to be cautious with it, even though he believed that it had some merits. This experience gave me a

window into my own research. I realized that my own biases about what the club should look like affected my views on what we should be doing to achieve these goals. One part of the club pro's job is to get people involved and having fun, but they also must ensure membership stays consistent or grows and that revenue for himself and the club is coming in. This shows the difficult ground a researcher has to tread on, as understanding the context of different views is vital to providing a more nuanced and complex view of things.

It is clear that the structure of the club is built around the skill hierarchy. The hierarchy itself dictates who plays with whom, who you are likely to develop relationships with, and how members interact more generally. I also showed that most people have internalized this system, and that there is a complicated signaling system in place to ensure that members are able to re-internalize the hierarchy when former opponents move up and down the skill ladder. I also argued that this process operates at the group and community-levels. Even though most people have internalized it, there is a small group that remains dissatisfied with the current system and is working on changing the club's culture. As I evidenced, this will be a challenging goal to achieve, as the structure and hierarchy are powerfully entrenched. In the next chapter I turn my attention to how members identify with the club and how squash fits into the identities of different informants.

Chapter 6

Identity, Participation and Membership

Identity at the squash club is connected intimately with the idea of community. I discovered during the course of my research that few members identified “squash player” or squash as a core part of who they are as a person. Most used it either as a vehicle for connecting more deeply with more core identities or viewed it as kind of group identity through their participation at the club. It became clear that for most members, their identity as a squash player was not something they carried with them outside the context of the squash club. In other words, their identity as a squash player was only initiated when in a squash environment. Not only was it initiated just at the squash club, but it usually related to another more core identity, rather than squash itself. This was true for almost all the members I interacted with, although there were some exceptions. The discussion of my informants’ squash identities will also highlight the complexity of how people conceive of their core identities and why some are more important than others. Part of my discussion will focus on the comparison between inherent identities people carry with them, e.g., maleness or blackness, compared with identities that require specific environments to be initiated and become important/relevant to a person (e.g., squash). Why some people have squash as an inherent part of their identity and why most do not (the vast majority of people at the club) will be discussed at some length, as it ties together a number of different but related ideas. Key here is that for most members I spoke with, squash was not a requirement in their lives, even if it served a purpose for most.

I want to start this section by detailing how my own squash identity fits into this chapter, as it is a useful launching point for discussing my informants' ideas of identity in the context of a squash club. I only recently consciously realized that for years I have been attempting to make squash an inherent part of my identity, something on a similar level to maleness for example. I felt that squash was important enough to me and who I am that I felt a very strong need and desire to get this across to anyone and everyone who would listen (or not). This was a challenge. A core identity like maleness is easier to showcase to others, as it is more inherently an obvious and surface identity of anyone's. Squash is the opposite. My squash identity is hidden to most, as it is confined to the courts, benches and change rooms of a fitness club. Fellow members' awareness of my love for squash was not enough, since they too were squash players. How did I attempt to ensure the rest of the world also knew? I quite simply tried to bring squash everywhere I went. I lunged around malls, pretended I had a racquet and swung everywhere I went, talked to every coworker of mine while tending bar, brought up squash to anyone who was willing to listen in my graduate program and talked to my friends and family about it non-stop. This is the challenge for the person who seeks to make a hidden identity visible. Although there is clearly an element of humor in this, it does show the difficulty of trying to make something like squash a kind of "inherent" identity. I needed people to know that squash mattered to me and I made every effort to ensure this came across. My example was not the norm at the club.

Although I have made every attempt and effort to make squash an inherent and obvious part of my identity, this is not the case for the majority of people I talked to at the club. There were a variety of different ways people conceptualized their relationships and feelings towards the game and the role it has in their lives, but few people considered it

something vital they needed to take everywhere with them or a fundamentally important aspect of who they were as a person. As I have discussed previously, something that was important or at least mentioned by many people was this idea of having some kind of squash community they felt they were a part of. But this was club-specific in terms of how people conceptualized this group identity. This fits with the argument I made earlier on the connection between higher level micro-community participation and positive feelings of community. It needs to be initiated by being involved in various activities and programming at the club. To help highlight some of these ideas, I will discuss in detail a few accounts of my informant ideas of identity.

The first informant I will discuss serves as a counter-example. A pro at the club considers squash to be a core part of their identity. This person will be referred to as Nick. This is unsurprising for a number of reasons. This quote (in response to being asked how squash fits into his identity) is instructive:

Huge. It's important and it's major. Because it's my profession and because I've played it so long, I'd say the majority, if not all of my acquaintances, friends are actually through squash. I'd say it's a huge part of my identity and my community, maybe the only part (August 2012).

Nick also pointed out that since he works in the evenings when most people tend to be done work for the day, it is difficult to maintain friendships and find people who can work around that (other than fellow squash people). Nick's job necessitates a strong commitment and to bring his squash identity wherever he goes because it is practically so important to him. But Nick and myself were the exceptions. Most people do not rely on squash to make a living. Because Nick does, and given the unique requirements and timing of his work, it results in a kind of meshing and coming together of his personal and professional lives, meaning it becomes difficult to separate the two.

I will now turn to a discussion of the more common way that my informants tended to perceive and understand their relationship between squash and identity. My first informant, Martha, a woman in her late 20s who originates from a place where it is uncommon for women to play sports in general, shows the complexity of how one conceives of their identity, especially as it relates to squash in this case. When I asked Martha about feelings of community and what squash meant to her, she gave me a couple of different things to think about. She said she did not feel a part of a community at the club because it was too familiar. She knew everyone and she felt everyone was comfortable and understood already that they all enjoyed and bonded over squash. Many people would say that they do feel a part of a community because of these very reasons: familiarity, shared interests, friendships, etc.

Martha went on to say that she did feel a sense of community, but only under specific circumstances. Whenever she played Toronto and District league squash away from the club where I did my research, she felt a sense of community. Martha also compared the squash players to the members who just worked out at the club, and felt a sense of separation from them, which she saw as a way to further bond the squash players. In other words, she is describing a kind of oppositional group identity. Martha felt this sense of community or more easily identified with the club when faced with a situation that took them outside of the comfort zone of the club where community and good feeling were obvious and assumed. This feeling was also enhanced by the team aspect of the Toronto and District league play. When competing at other clubs in Toronto and District league play, this normally individual sport is transformed into a team battle, and this combined with being in a hostile and out of comfort zone environment, created a kind of oppositional group identity for Martha. This shows how identity is intimately

connected up with the idea of community and the group, and appears to be initiated when in a squash environment, rather than being something inherently important or part of Martha's core. The squash environment that initiates this feeling of group identity or community was also very specific for her, showing the complexity of how some people envision community or group identity. Martha also provided an intriguing answer to what squash means to her personally and how it might fit into her identity. It highlights the secondary and peripheral status of a squash identity for her.

Martha's relationship with the game of squash is interesting for a few reasons. She is a female player from a part of the world that has few women playing sports, and even fewer playing squash. Also, Martha has played competitively, having competed in university varsity athletics. Squash itself is not the main thing that is important to her. More important is how it affects and fits into other more core identities in her life that are more inherent (in this case being a woman and also the region of the world she is from). Martha is aware that playing squash competitively as a woman from this region is special and uncommon, and this became relevant to who she is as a person and something that remains a part of her whether she is at a squash club or not. As Martha pointed out, her friends regularly tell others that she is a squash player because it is something interesting and special about her. As you can see, the squash identity itself is superseded by inherent and more core identities like her gender and nationality. This is unsurprising because she is not a squash professional and has relationships with many friends and family members who have nothing to do with squash.

This next example helps explain how the process of identity initiation occurs through squash for one informant. Before getting into the details of this informant's connection with squash, I want to provide a quote from them:

So from my own personal perspective it's almost reverse, I have squash to help me belong to something as opposed to belonging to squash, it's a part of me that I take with me wherever I go and that's how I integrate with new squash clubs. So it's not a matter of going to a squash club and hoping I belong and feel attached, it's part of me and I merge the two (August 2012).

This informant, who will be known as "Phenom", is a woman in her mid to late 50s and works as a business professional and entrepreneur. Phenom's quote highlights the complexity of her relationship with squash. She takes squash with her wherever she goes, but it is only relevant when she becomes immersed in a squash environment. For Phenom, squash is a vehicle to belonging, not something to belong to in and of itself. Squash for her has a mobility function. Phenom's squash identity anchors her no matter where she is geographically and eases the burden of enmeshing herself socially in a new environment. Phenom uses squash to develop social connections, relationships and join social networks. This has been especially useful to Phenom, given her long history of international travel. Because of squash, she has always been able to enmesh herself in social networks despite consistently finding herself in new environments and parts of the world. Another piece of evidence that shows the practical function of squash for Phenom is the fact that she once took 17 years off from playing the game. She had this to say about her time away from the game:

Yes. 17 years. Because no squash courts in the country I lived in, then I started my own business, it was not one of my priorities. Making money/surviving was the priority so I couldn't play squash (July 2012).

Other priorities took precedence over squash, and thus it took a back seat in her life overall. This does not mean that she did not think about squash or talk to squash people, but it was not a large enough priority or convenient enough at the time to be played or participated in as she had in the past. It is clearly not a core identity because it can be set

aside and used when necessary and when the time and situation allow for it, but she does not need to play. This makes clear that squash was not an important enough part of who Phenom was to make it a part of her life during this period. Her example shows once again that most people at the club do not consider it to be a core part of who they are outside of a squash context. The fact that so few members see one another outside the club also highlights the specificity of how most people engage with the sport, club and their fellow members.

The last informant I want to discuss is someone I mentioned in chapter three, John. As John made clear, he does not feel that squash itself is an important part of who he is. He pointed out that it was little more than a conversation starter and added this as well in response to if he had to stop playing squash (as quoted earlier):

I'd probably be a little sad, it would affect my routine, it wouldn't be the end of the world; I guess I would miss seeing all the people on Monday nights and stuff like that, but it doesn't really effect who I am. I have met a lot of really good people playing squash, so from that perspective, if I couldn't play, I would be sad, it's not just routine, I've met some good folks. I think I told you indirectly as I was looking for a job this time, I was amazed at how many folks are on Linked In, people asking me how the job thing is going, good for you, good luck, great news, actually you don't expect you are going to meet friends when you play a game of squash, but you you do. I would miss that if I couldn't play, but I don't know it's the game itself I would miss...I would miss the people and the routine as opposed to the game, the game is just exercise. If we all had a running group, that would be fine too...(July 2012).

John makes it clear once again that squash is not a core part his identity. However, his words do show that the community element and group identity created through squash are important to him. The squash club for John is the site where these feelings of group identity are initiated and realized. It is not surprising then that John is also one of the biggest supporters and enthusiasts of the social events that occur outside the club. These

social events are opportunities where a kind of group identity can be initiated, even though it is outside the confines of the club. What is important to John is a space to create and initiate this group identity, and squash has been able to achieve that for him. In other words, he uses squash to accomplish another kind of identity, which is being part of a social group, making squash merely a tool to achieve this goal.

If I had done my research in an environment that had a significant amount of high-level juniors or professional players, my understanding of how identity fits into people's lives would likely have been different. That group is more likely to carry with them this idea and feeling of themselves as a squash player, as it consumes so much of their time and physical/mental energy. However, most of the members of the club are casual players and consequently do not conceive of squash as a core identity. Many members, however, do use squash as a means to accomplishing other identities and for establishing social networks in new places. For those that did claim squash as a part of who they are, it usually took the form of a more core identity being affected by squash and not vice versa. However, those people who use squash as a means of livelihood are likely to incorporate it as a core identity. Something to consider is that many of the people at the club have full-time jobs, spouses and children as well. This could partially explain why many of them did not consider squash to be a core part of their identities. It also may explain my own unique situation. I became heavily involved in squash and began to conceive of it as an important part of my identity during a period of significant change in my life. I had just finished my undergraduate studies and was unsure of what to do next. My main point here is that there exists the potential for typically less core identities to take on more importance during times of change in a person's life. This leaves open the possibility for these generally non-core identities to transform into core identities.

The examples I have used show that the relationship between identity, community and hierarchy is a complex one, and plays out in different ways for each member. The club's skill hierarchy greatly affects with whom members interact and with whom they are likely to develop relationships. Despite the divisions created by this hierarchy, it does not result in feelings of isolation and separation for most. In fact, most members I spoke with expressed the opposite. Most expressed a strong feeling of community at the club, even though it was expressed in different ways and often quite vaguely. One club event, the Calcutta tournament, was something that many informants cited as contributing heavily to these feelings of community at the club. This tournament is unique because it involves a significant amount of cross-level interaction (both on and off-court). So despite the Calcutta only happening once or twice a year, it still remains vital for many members. I will now turn to chapter seven, which will focus on the Calcutta Tournament.

Chapter 7

The Calcutta Tournament

Gambling, guts, glory, auctions, handicapping, laughter, absurdity and great fun are all a part of the biannual and popular Calcutta Tournament at the club. The club where I did my research is not the only place to hold this kind of tournament, and not the only sport either, but it does play out in a unique way. Before discussing the Calcutta Tournament in detail, I will first place it in better context through a discussion of how other tournaments at the club function, as these provide an important contrast to how the Calcutta runs.

As I mentioned previously in chapter two, tournaments at the club are considered pro-driven programming. Each tournament can be considered its own micro-community, although there is a core group of approximately 25 members who play in all of them. Non-Calcutta tournaments last five days, with championship matches at the end of the week drawing significant member interest. There are also prizes and a party after the final match, which involves tournament participants getting together for dinner and drinks. The tournaments are a great place to get involved with the club, as participants spend the week interacting with the same people, many of whom have been members for significant periods of time. As well, everyone cheers on the finalists and heads out for socializing over food and alcohol at the end of the week. This too is a good opportunity to socialize and interact with fellow members in a non-playing environment. This socializing outside the club was a factor that many members cited as important for developing strong bonds with other members, as well as creating powerful feelings of community.

These tournaments, like the house leagues, are set up based on skill level. Whether it is a draw or a tournament box where everyone plays everyone else to decide a winner,

the players are divided up into various skill levels and compete with those at their own similar skill levels. Another micro-community based on similar skill levels competing is the outside tournament group. These players see each other at tournaments throughout the city. There are not a lot of members playing in outside tournaments, so this micro-community is not a very large or relevant one. The Calcutta is also a tournament and is similar to other tournaments and leagues at the club in that it too has a social event at the end. However, I consider the Calcutta to be its own micro-community, as it is unique in its set up and game play.

The key differences between standard tournaments and the Calcutta Tournament is that the Calcutta uses a handicap system and involves an auction. The Calcutta part of the tournament name refers to a specific type of auction used. Here are the basics of how a Calcutta auction works: a Calcutta-style auction involves a group of people bidding on individual players, with the highest bid resulting in “purchasing” the player. This means that the owner will get a certain percentage of the total pot (made up of all the money that was used to buy players during the auction), should that particular player make it far enough to cash in (how far obviously depends on each individual tournament). Our tournament uses this auction, as well as other unique elements, and I will detail its structure below. Before the auction happens, everyone who is participating in the tournament is given a handicap based on their skill level and the relative skill levels of those entering the tournament. Actual matches are played to 15, with various rules in place depending on who is playing. The point of the handicapping is to ensure that any two players who meet on court should have an equal chance of winning the match. This means that if a beginner player ends up on court with a club pro, they should have an equal shot at victory. A beginner player would have a very high (+) handicap, and an

expert play would have a high (-) handicap. This translates to the beginner player needing to win very few rallies, and the expert player needing to win many rallies to get a match victory. For example, a beginner player could have a handicap of +14, and an expert player could have a handicap of -60. They would play one game to 15 to decide the winner of the match. This means the beginner player with +14 would only need to get one point/win one rally, to win the whole match. The expert, on the other hand, who is at -60, would need to win 75 rallies/points before the beginner got one, in order to win the match (because they are both attempting to reach 15 points). This is part of what makes the tournament so fun and interesting. Even though participants are theoretically handicapped at a level that gives everyone an equal chance of victory, many people believe that some players still have better chances than others. As a result, the auction can get quite intense and the final bid for a player can get very steep. I have seen some players go for close to \$200. Once everyone has been auctioned off, a random draw is set up, ensuring that any two skill levels can be matched up on court.

So what do some members think of the tournament? Here a few interesting quotes of various informants:

I always talk about the Calcutta tournament being a big fun event that all skill levels can go into, that's definitely true, and I can tell that people of different skill levels, myself included, start playing people of different skill levels, at least partly because of the Calcutta and the social aspect (August 2012).

Especially the Calcutta, there's lots of jokes, like "can you believe that crazy play that guy made." Those are really social events; you'll hear a lot of laughter and stuff and good-natured ribbing (August 2012).

I love it! Why do we love it so much? Because it's gambling, it's random. And it's a great opportunity to meet other squash players that you don't normally meet or

talk to because they are at different levels. So is it important. Yes. Because there are people playing other people they have never met before. Because it's so random. And it's very spontaneous (August 2012).

I see how much fun people were having that day. But I didn't get in because I didn't understand the rules. I want to play the next time because I went by that day and I see everyone having so much fun (August 2012).

What I really like about the club is the Calcutta tournament. That really has a lot of community support. Everybody is betting on everybody. And when you place bets on people, I think it lifts their self-esteem. People are willing to bet money on them to win, it's really great especially for new players as well, it's a great way to introduce new players to a club, because it gives them a fair chance to actually play when there's a handicap (August 2012).

The above quotes show that there are many who love the Calcutta, and some of the comments also hint at the kinds of ideas I will explore in this chapter. I do want to make clear though that I am purposely leaving out negative quotes at this juncture because of how I want the chapter to be structured. My purpose for providing these quotes is to get across the general idea that the Calcutta Tournament is loved and considered important to the club by many.

Most members of the club enjoy this tournament. They eagerly look forward to each one, and the talk after the tournament is always that more of them need to be run. I was speaking to an informant at an after-tournament (non-Calcutta) social, and they were telling me how that night they had gotten to play with two players who were much better than themselves. This person's excitement was palpable. They said they looked forward to it all day and really got psyched up for it. This is what the Calcutta offers, only on a larger scale. I want to make obvious the pleasure many members get from participation in this tournament. This should be kept in the back of the reader's mind at all times.

My main argument in in this chapter is that the Calcutta Tournament can be viewed as a kind of “ritual of reversal” and consequently is vital to the club’s overall successful functioning. Part of its purpose is to engender good feeling between members of different skill levels by providing intense cross-level interaction. As I mentioned briefly at the end of chapter six, many members expressed to me the importance of the Calcutta Tournament for creating feelings of group identity and community at the club. I will show how all of these ideas are intimately connected to one other. I will also show that the structure of the tournament itself lines up with other arguments I have made in earlier chapters regarding the skill hierarchy, social status and cross-level interactions. Ultimately I will argue that the Calcutta Tournament serves to reinforce the status quo of the club. However, I will also leave open the possibility that the Calcutta has the ability to open up a space for change at the club, even if it is unlikely and small-scale.

A ritual of reversal typically involves a temporary event in a society/group where certain important cultural norms are either reversed or removed altogether. Sexuality, gender, class and status are some of the things that can be the focus of the reversal. I will draw largely on Victor Turner’s (e.g., 1969, 1982) ideas and some of Bobby Alexander’s (1991) interpretations of them. Rituals of reversal have been a focus of anthropologists for a significant period of time. It has been studied in places like southeastern Mexico (Vogt 1976) and the northwest coast of southern Sakhalin (Ohnuki-Tierney 1981), which are just two of many examples. Carnival festivals historically had elements of status reversal whereby peasants and those generally considered lower class could act differently and treat the king and high-born poorly. This would be considered normal, even expected during this special event. Vogt (1976:202) describes several different types of reversal and parody: “men impersonate women, Indians impersonate Ladinos, people

impersonate animals and solemn ceremonies becomes the subject of mime and ridicule.” Carnival takes different forms throughout the world, but usually involves celebrations, performances, street parties and the wearing of masks. These festivals take place in Trinidad and Tobago, New Orleans (Mardi Gras) and Rio de Janeiro, to name a few (Schechner 2004:3). Victor Turner (1969:201) remarks that some rituals of reversal provide “legitimated...release, compensating for the inequities suffered as a result of occupying structurally inferior status. The end result is reinforcement of existing social norms.” Turner also remarks that “the ritual exchange of structural positions between those individuals stationed near the top and bottom of the status hierarchy is intended to make visible...social categories that are considered to be axiomatic and unchanging” (1969:176). The club does not perfectly mirror larger society and therefore does not fit this definition entirely. As a result what I will describe in the coming pages is not an entire reversal, but rather a situation that results in a leveling mechanism effect on skill level. Looking at hierarchy and status in this context (a squash club), the leveling of skill levels or at least leveling the ability to win and compete is tantamount to an equaling of social status or power in other contexts.

As I argued in chapter four, skill level divides players. During the Calcutta, the best player in the club can be matched up against someone who has only played once in their life, and both would have an equal chance of winning the match. There are two important points to mention at this juncture. First, as I have already established, it is very uncommon for members of vastly different skill levels to get on court together. Second, the element that creates this divide among players, the ability of one player to beat another one, is now no longer relevant, as each participant has an equal chance of beating everyone else involved in the tournament.

You as the reader might now be asking yourself, so what? There is a level playing field, people have some fun for a couple of days and then things go back to normal. But do they? Does the Calcutta Tournament offer a legitimate opportunity for structural change to occur, or does it reinforce the status quo and current structure of the club? In truth, the answer lies somewhere in between these two extremes. Before I attempt to answer any of these questions, I need explain in detail a number of important terms related to ritual, its potential for change and its potential to reinforce the status quo.

One of the most important features of the Calcutta as ritual is that there are few prescribed behaviours or requirements of action. There are basic rules to follow, but there are also mechanisms for creative and novel action for the members. For Turner, ritual can play a fundamental role in social life by generating new and alternative social arrangements. Turner theorizes that the fundamental motivation behind ritual is:

a desire to break free of social structure temporarily and momentarily transcend the alienation and the distance and inequality that are associated with the divisiveness and exploitation inherent in status and role differentiation (1974:260).

Alexander explains that one of Turner's key insights into ritual is that even though "ritual does make reference through symbol to everyday cultural life, ritual does not rest on the surface of nor simply mirror more fundamental social processes" (Alexander 1991:27). Therefore, ritual can transcend the limitations of social structure. Turner expands on this idea with his concept of "ritual anti-structure" which Turner defines as:

the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a multiplicity of social roles, and being acutely conscious of membership in some corporate group such as a family, lineage, clan, tribe, nation etc., or affiliation with some persuasive social category such as class, caste, sex, or age division (Turner 1982:44).

Alexander argues that for Turner, ritual is essentially anti-structure because it:

liberates participants from obligation to structural categories when it relaxes some of the requirements of everyday social structure, while making a transition from everyday life to an alternative framework (1991:30).

Two related concepts that emerge from Turner's idea of ritual as anti-structure are

"liminality" and "communitas." "Liminality" refers to a time during ritual when there is a suspension of social structural categories and the creation of structural ambiguity. Turner goes into more detail and says:

ritual's liminal phase...is, quintessentially, a time and place lodged between all times and spaces defined and governed...by the rules of law, politics, and religion, and by economic necessity. Here the cognitive schemata that give sense to everyday life no longer apply, but are, as it were, suspended...(Turner 1982:84).

It is a kind of social limbo where participants become invisible to social structure. This is a time when social structure is not eliminated, but rather, it is simplified. It is this condition that makes ritual so fascinating and potentially transformative. Turner's other term that requires some discussion is "communitas", as this is the potentially transformative state that can be reached if the conditions are right. "Communitas" is the "unmediated and, direct and egalitarian relationships that characterize ritual liminality." (Turner 1982:44). The idea here is that because the social structure and roles within it are relaxed during ritual liminality, it allows for potentially and temporarily egalitarian relationships to exist. It is during this period that the potential for change becomes possible.

Turner also points out that *communitas* is:

society experienced or perceived as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitas*, *communitas*, or even communion of equal individuals (1969:121).

Critics of Turner have argued that he was too conservative in his approach to ritual. His critics thought that his theories simplified the ritual process and the potential for change that can arise from ritual. Alexander (1991:46) explains that part of the reason Turner has been misread is because Turner himself focused his early discussions on case studies that supported the idea that ritual conserves the existing social order, rather than ritual being a form of concrete protest against the dominant social structure. Critics have argued that a reading of Turner's work sees ritual as a form of sublimation, as a socially acceptable form of opposing or subverting the social structural status quo. Because ritual is seen as a form of catharsis and deflecting of hostility toward the status quo, it serves to preserve the existing social structure (Schwartz 1972:905-906, Sutton-Smith 1972:18-19). However, a more nuanced reading of his work reveals his willingness to accept different possible outcomes and purposes of a ritual event. In reality, his interpretations leave open the possibility that rituals can be used as a form of catharsis and letting off of steam, but also have the potential to open up space for real structural change and to serve as a forum for seriously challenging the status quo and structure. I will now explore what the Calcutta as ritual means for the club. I will argue that it is likely closer to a kind of catharsis or letting off of steam, fits in neatly to the overall structure of hierarchy at the club, and ultimately helps reinforce the hierarchy but also opens up spaces for possible structural transformations.

The atmosphere during the Calcutta Tournament is markedly different than other tournaments. During a regular tournament, where competitors are divided into standard skill boxes, the atmosphere is collegial, but tends to produce mostly interaction with those around your level and in your box. During the Calcutta things are different. This different atmosphere can be felt right away with the auction. With people of all skill levels bidding and discussing other players, their handicaps and how much x player is worth, it is a very friendly and relaxed environment to be in. Perhaps someone you have never met has bid on you or is curious about what you think of your handicap and how you are feeling about your game. It leads to an extreme level of cross-level interaction, which is what the Calcutta represents at its core. After the auction, a random draw is made up and there are usually a number of matches that feature low-ranked players paired up with high-ranked ones. People ask everyone how they are doing throughout the tournament, a feature that is unique to the Calcutta. It is not that people of different levels do not interact during other tournaments. People have friends and acquaintances at different levels, but there is less interest in how members in different skill categories other than your own are doing, because there is no potential to play this person or other people not at your level, so most end up hyper-focused on their own draw or box. In other words, there are many mini-tournaments within the larger tournament, whereas the Calcutta represents one big tournament, with every member being a part of it.

The second night of the two-day tournament has a couple of important elements to it. All the final matches are played, and these draw the largest crowds I have ever witnessed at the club for a squash match (other than the professional match that took place where special extra seating was added). It is also common for people to bring in

spouses and other family to watch as well, another indicator of the popularity, fun and collegial atmosphere created by the Calcutta.

Another important element is the after party, the post-tournament portion where players and many of their significant others come out to a bar to eat, drink and socialize. There are other times when social events occur outside of the club, like at the end of leagues or other tournaments, but this outing has one key difference: seating is much more likely to be mixed between levels. In other words, there is no division based on skill level like there normally would be after other tournaments or end of leagues. It is not that there is a strict divide normally at the end of other events, but members tend to develop relationships with those near their own level, so it makes sense these people would sit together. However, since the Calcutta encourages cross-level interaction, it is an opportunity for cross-level interaction to occur outside the context of the club, something unique and a potentially important site of change. This event is what many people referenced when talking about feelings of community. They saw this as an opportunity to meet lots of new people and felt a stronger connection to people at the club more generally because of it.

I have now established that the Calcutta is considered to be one of the most enjoyable events of the year, and its unique setup and rules contribute heavily to those feelings. But does it lead to change? Before I address this question specifically, I need to explain the structure of the tournament itself in more detail. There is more than one way to run a Calcutta. The Calcutta at the club where I did my research uses a handicap points system where better players are required to win more rallies and worse players fewer. This levels the playing field for the ultimate outcome of who will win the match, but it does not equalize it in terms of individual points and rallies. For example, the best

player in the club, perhaps handicapped at -60, could play a beginner handicapped at +14. The better player could win 60-70 rallies and then make one mistake or have the other player have one mis-hit and the match is over. So although the potential to win the match is equalized in the Calcutta, the actual on-court playing is still as lopsided as ever.

I have already discussed in previous chapters the basics for how the club functions, mainly the squash program and its members. These include: how members develop relationships, who develops relationships with whom, the kinds of programming available, who is likely to play with whom, and a number of other important issues that come together to make up the structure of the club. I also examined the skill hierarchy that heavily informs the way members interact personally and on-court in chapter four. This pervasive structure that predicts members of similar skill levels will be more likely to play with one another is key to the whole discussion. Does the Calcutta, an event that I have described as “ritual anti-structure”, actually change the way members interact moving forward and does the actual set up of leagues, tournaments and other programming change as well to match the changed environment?

My research has led me to believe that large-scale change at the club does not occur following the Calcutta. Although some people did express to me that they felt some change, I believe these changes to have been limited in scale and partially a lingering effect of the Calcutta Tournament itself. I do not want to be entirely dismissive of some of the positive effects the Calcutta can and does have for some people. As one informant told me:

Right from the bidding schedule of the Calcutta, and the actual play, watching different people of different skill levels play each other, that camaraderie kind of brings into the tournament’s banquet at the end, and literally I notice people of different skill levels sitting together and chatting with each other; and then you see

them at the club, and now you know somebody you didn't really have a reason to play or talk to before (July 2012).

There are certainly more people you might say hi to, and some people might get on court with someone they would not normally have before. Unfortunately, however, this does not happen with enough regularity to conclude that the Calcutta results in real structural change. The people who told me that they did see some change also happened to be people who were already more open to playing people of different skill levels. This means that instead of creating structural or large-scale change, it only reinforces the values of those who already do things differently and enjoy playing with all levels. The informant above seems to be describing the lingering effects of the tournament. With all the excitement and cross-level interaction, it is not surprising that people of different levels would sit together at the social event. After you have socialized with people it also makes sense you would interact with them more during the coming weeks, but I did not see a significant increase in matches played between players of different skill levels. It is also not surprising that you may have a few more people to say "hi" to, but in the absence of getting on court with them to strengthen the bond, these relationships are unlikely to flourish or sustain themselves. The fact that the Calcutta is a result of pro-driven programming is also indicative of the event being more than just about fun and games. During the weeks after the Calcutta (the few that I have participated in), I recall greeting a number of people I did not normally interact with before the tournament. After these weeks though, I still greeted some people, but as it got farther away from the Calcutta itself, it became more difficult to sustain these relationships. There was no active snubbing or ignoring of people, but there was less interaction with these new people, as

you never played with them, and most people went back largely interacting with their own skill groups.

Here is an informant quote that highlights some of the reasons why I believe the Calcutta does not work to fundamentally change the club's structure: "the one thing I never liked and will never like about Canada, is that when the relationship is done, after the Calcutta's done, everybody reverts back to the same." This informant hints at some of the same things I was experiencing, but to an even stronger degree. I believe the Calcutta is in reality more reflective of a ritual of catharsis. Ideas of *communitas* and liminality are not enough to make lasting change. As Turner points out, "When ritual reinforces or legitimates an existing social structure (1974:248), its liminal and communitarian dimensions have been "circumscribed...pressed into the service of maintaining the existing order"" (1982:85). The pervasiveness of the skill hierarchy proves too strong for the Calcutta to create lasting changes without the support of other squash programming efforts by its side.

7.1 Structural Change?

Why structural change does not occur as a result of the Calcutta can be broken down into a few key reasons: a lack of support from other squash programming, the actual structure of the Calcutta tournament itself reinforcing the current playing structure, and a flawed version of "*communitas*" that does not effectively convince members that change is a positive thing. As mentioned above, there is little support for change in the form of alternative squash programming, with regular programming returning to normal after the tournament is over. This immediately reestablishes the status quo. Not only does the squash programming not support change, but the structure of the Calcutta itself reinforces

the structure to some degree as well. This point is a different one than the Calcutta itself being a specialized reversal of what is normal, as it is the set up of the tournament itself, not the idea and symbolic potential of the tournament. When two players of very different skill levels end up on court (the interaction that so rarely happens in normal life at the club and is part of what makes the Calcutta unique and exciting), the better player often ends up destroying the weaker player for much of the time. The potential outcome (which is the true element of ritual reversal) can go either way, but often the match takes the form of the better player battering the weaker player, rally after rally, until they make a mistake or the weaker player gets lucky. To me, this interaction actually reinforces the hierarchy, showing exactly why players of different skill levels should not be getting on court together. It is also important to point out that the etiquette normally practiced in these situations (when players of vastly different skill levels are on court together) does not apply in this context because everyone wants to win the tournament. This can act to further reinforce the status quo of the club. In this light it is not surprising that change does not happen, as on-court interactions like these only serve to normalize the skill hierarchy and do not ultimately encourage cross-level interaction outside the context of the Calcutta.

My last explanation for why structural change does not occur after the Calcutta relates to the idea of “communitas.” Part of the reason that Turner argues that some rituals can lead to real social change is because of “communitas.” Some members inadvertently expressed ideas of a kind of communitas when they talked about how great it was to have everyone (ie. all levels) interacting, laughing and enjoying the tournament together. Unfortunately, this is not the kind of communitas that is likely to lead to social change. To understand these ideas better, I must differentiate between two types of communitas:

“spontaneous” and “normative.” For Turner (1982:49), “spontaneous *communitas* can neither be legislated nor normalized, since it is the exception, not the law, the miracle, not the regularity, primordial freedom, not causal chain or necessity.” The Calcutta Tournament is not a spontaneous event or occurrence, and does not arise from frustrations boiling over. Rather, it is a planned and normalized activity, a form of pro-driven programming (as mentioned above). Normative *communitas* is “a perverted form of *communitas*, since it has been thoroughly domesticated, even corralled by structure” (Turner 1974:111, 254). Alexander points out that “normative *communitas* in the tribal setting is actually intended to sublimate hostility toward the social hierarchy put in place by survival needs, and thereby to preserve the existing social system, which serves those needs” (Alexander 1991:58).

The fact that the type of *communitas* that arises is normative, and not spontaneous, is one reason that it fails to create change. There is also a second reason, which reveals the fundamental reason why the club’s structure is so entrenched and difficult to change (although many would not want to change it). Turner argues that “*Communitas* unmask the arbitrary distinctions inherent to social structure” (1975:16). It is during *communitas* when members of any group or community can realize that things could be different, possibly better. It is during this time that other and potentially better possibilities of existence can be thought of and considered. As I mentioned earlier, many members expressed sentiments that could easily be identified as “*Communitas*”, even if they did not discuss that idea explicitly. A number of members, both people I interviewed and those I chatted with more informally, made a point of talking about how the Calcutta had a different feel to it, something that felt much more inclusive. There was a sense that the coming together of different levels was inherently a positive force for most members.

The main issue here is that although it may be true of social structures that status and class distinctions are arbitrary, the same cannot be said for the skill hierarchy that is so prominent at the club.

Skill is more difficult for members to view as something that is arbitrary. As I mentioned in earlier chapters, there is a high level of awe and admiration for players who are more skilled than oneself, especially those who are at the very top. In other words, they tend to view these people as having special skills and abilities that most see as unattainable or extremely challenging to attain. This is a stark contrast to the view most people tend to have of princes, kings, queens, etc. Being born into wealth and power positions is more easily viewed as arbitrary, and this is where *communitas* is likely to be more effective. Again, because of the set up of the Calcutta, when a weaker player gets on court with a stronger player, they get demolished and lose most of the rallies, showing exactly why the skill hierarchy is in place, thus actually working to accomplish the opposite of what a state of *communitas* normally has the potential to achieve. It is also important to point out that most members expressed that their most enjoyable matches (at the club in general) were when they could go all-out against another person around their level. Something to consider is that playing someone of a different skill might be more fun in the context of an activity that was more normalized. I also heard many members express both the importance and fun of playing someone who they had little chance of winning against.

It is interesting that most members do not consciously consider how these top players get to that level. So while on one level members accept that the skill hierarchy is itself not arbitrary, they rarely consider the fact that the way the vast majority of these players managed to get to that level was through getting on-court regularly with those

who were better and more skilled than they were. But just because skill level itself is not an arbitrary category, it does not completely explain why there is such a strong tendency for only players of similar skill levels wanting to get on court together. In other words, there must be a strong driving force that creates this tendency to want to play mostly with those who are around your skill level, with little interest in giving back something or putting in time with those who are less talented.

At the club, there are a few key things going on, some of which I have already discussed in earlier chapters. For the club, it is a combination of the member population itself, the club structure and its history as well. There is a category of squash players who nearly everyone is willing to play with, that of junior players. In fact, early on during my membership at a local London squash club, where they have a very strong junior program, I was encouraged to get on court with a junior player worse than myself. I was not forced, but the members were clearly testing me to see if I was willing to fit in and give back in a certain way. I think having a junior program creates a mentality of giving back and also normalizes players of different levels getting on court. Unsurprisingly, despite not having any specific programs or tournaments (that I have witnessed or am aware of) that cater to cross-level interaction, I have observed players of different skill levels getting on court on a semi-regular basis at this London club.

To conclude this chapter, I will briefly describe what the Calcutta's potential seeds of change might look like. Even though I contend that the Calcutta does not create large-scale change at the club, I do believe that it has the potential to plant seeds of potential change. Change can happen at both the structural level and at a more interpersonal level, although the two are intimately connected. An example of a structural level change would be the introduction of a new program by a pro that revolved around

the interaction and participation of all different levels. A change at the interpersonal level would be reflected in members themselves setting up more games with people of varying skill levels.

How might this happen? Members tend to socialize with those they know (who are usually around their skill level) when at the club's social events. The Calcutta Tournament creates situations where unevenly matched players end up on-court together, making it more likely for these people to interact at the after tournament party. People who are friendly off the court are more likely to end up on-court together. I have witnessed this before, and it has two predictable results: the players play once and then continue to only play those at their own level; they play once, realize they get along well and continue a friendship that is likely to produce more on court time together (although not likely to be a significant amount if they are very unevenly matched). There is also the potential for change at the structural level. I have heard talk of a potential league that involves teams containing various different levels competing against one another. The Calcutta opens up a space for this kind of discussion. Even if it is only temporary, it has the ability to normalize this cross-level interaction for some members. This could result in future leagues that cater to more interaction between levels. The Calcutta is able to inarticulately draw attention to the cracks that exist in the club's system, leaving open a space for questions and showing members a different way of acting and being at the club.

The reality of the club I belong to is that it is difficult to meet and have lengthy exchanges with other players far from your own level. The Calcutta can be this special place of change because it is the only real program that affords people of all levels this slim chance of connecting and developing a friendship, as there is also a social event that is an integral part of the tournament. This possibility of people of different skill levels

connecting on a personal level is one potential avenue for increasing cross-level interaction. Most players do not enjoy playing those at very different skill levels. However, if you create personal bonds between players, this idea of the separation between different ranked members might begin to dissolve.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

The goal of my research was to focus on the micro-level and everyday interactions of a group of squash players at a Toronto squash and fitness club. It is clear that an analysis of the everyday interactions and activities of squash players, grounded in an experiential approach, has allowed me to paint a rich picture of the inner-workings of this social world. I will now discuss some of the main themes that developed out of my research. After this discussion, I will briefly focus on what form future research like mine might take, and why it is important to do so.

The main themes that I have explored in my thesis have been skill level and club experience, the relationship between different ranked players, social status and hierarchy, club structure and community connection, and how identity is most commonly grounded in the squash experience and location itself, with some exceptions. I will now briefly remark on each of these themes, as this will allow me to more easily connect my work to future research. I will also discuss how my research fits into the discipline of anthropology overall, as well as how it fills certain voids in the literature.

It became clear to me that there were a number of different factors that affected the way a member relates to the club and its fellow members. Skill level turns out not to be directly related to positive connections to the club. This is because although there are a number of potential benefits of being a higher-ranked player, many of these are only initiated and relevant when the person is active within the club. In other words, it is not enough in and of itself to be an elite player. However, I showed earlier that there are a number of potential benefits for those elite players who do participate in the club's

activities. This means that for most members, improvement was more important than needing to be the best. Most informants had a strong desire to improve their skills, but not at the cost of having to practice, do drills and take lessons. Another important theme has been the relationships and interactions between members of different skill levels, and what this means for community overall. Typically members of different skill levels interact with those around their level, and compete against these people the majority of the time. There are many reasons for this, a lot of them sensible, but there are also a number of exceptions to this rule. The club's skill hierarchy causes members to internalize the idea that playing with someone at your own skill level is the norm. These findings speak to the ideas of fairness and how people view ideas of equality and competition. Most members I spoke with, especially those who had not been playing as long, did not want to embarrass themselves, or waste the time of a better player. The idea of fairness comes into play because some members have clearly worked harder and invested more time into their games. Not unlike other areas of life, those who put in a certain amount of time and effort into something expect a certain level of reward. In squash terms, this reward seems to be competing against those who have also put in similar efforts into their games (i.e., a more competitive match).

Playing relationships were also something I discussed as being a significant part of the club experience and structure. Keeping track of different playing relationships throughout my research allowed me to get at the structure of the club. Also, how these relationships evolve and sometimes end also helps illuminate why people are playing, who they want to play with, as well as indicating the importance of skill level and on court compatibility. The fact that there is a complicated process to end these relationships and ensure smooth transitioning for both parties is an indication of the importance

members and the community at large place on skill level and emotional health/conflict evasion. Playing relationships at the club have parallels to other kinds of personal relationships. There are myriad reasons why the dynamics of personal relationships might change. People move, change jobs, have personality shifts, grow bored, etc. As I mentioned earlier, most relationships at the club are confined to the club itself. This indicates that most of the playing relationships are based on compatibility on court. When this changes, so does the nature of the relationship. In other words, since the relationships are based centrally on playing squash, when this is no longer enjoyable for one/both parties, there is little to keep the relationship going. However, when there are other factors that are important to the relationship, it is more likely that they will remain friends in spite of the shifting playing dynamic.

The next theme I discussed in detail was that of social status and hierarchy as it relates to skill level. One of the ideas that emerged from my research was that those who were of a higher skill level tended to receive more praise, and would accrue more benefits both practical and otherwise as they advanced higher. Most of this praise was given by lower-ranked members, and much of it was done unconsciously. One key insight was that lower-ranked players tended to show deference to higher-ranked players when they were on court together. The lower-ranked player often let the better player make important calls and rarely argued for themselves. I was once on court with two players that were both better than me. Of the other two, one was better than the other. I argued with the middle skilled player about a call, and only when the best player on court supported me did they give up the fight. There are no rules about who has to defer to whom in these situations, only what people understand to be appropriate. As I have argued, most members have internalized this ranking system, and it has real consequences on and off

the court. This phenomenon is interesting in and of itself at the squash club, but also reproduces itself in other social groups and communities outside the squash club.

Whether it is an intern differing to an attending in medicine or a trainee to a manager, rank reproduces itself in many human contexts.

The last theme I want to discuss is that of individual vs. group identity. I came into my research with the notion that members would consider squash to be an important part of who they were at the core, on a similar playing field as their ethnicity, gender and other important parts of someone's identity. This was not the case for most, however. Most viewed more core parts of their identity as more relevant and important to them compared with what squash meant to them. There were exceptions, however. As I discussed earlier, some informants did consider squash to be an important part of their identity, although not always in the initial way I conceived of it. For one informant it related more to what it meant to play squash as a certain gender and ethnicity, and less because squash itself was an integral part of their identity and who they are at the core. Another informant considered squash to be a massive part of who they are at the core, but this was an exception because this informant used squash to make a living, and most of their social group was composed of other squash people and professionals. In this instance, I think it was being a "squash professional" and not simply playing squash in the social setting of a club that informed his sense of identity.

One potential research project for the future could focus on a pure squash club (PSC) through a similar micro-level approach. As I discussed in Chapter two, pure squash clubs cater mostly to playing squash. They are also often member-owned clubs, rather than being owned by large corporations. These clubs tend to have large areas to socialize, eat and drink, as the profits generated from these activities are key to club maintenance

and upkeep. Because I was able to spend some time at these types of clubs, I began to start scratching the surface of this issue. It seems that PSC's foster different kinds of community feelings. Because they tend to be member-owned and operated, there is usually more personal investment in its functioning and other members. During my time at one such club, I noticed that members of all different skill levels were interested in introducing themselves and getting to know me on a personal level. I hypothesized that this was partially because all members were there to play squash and cared about the club more personally. This stands in direct contrast to the club where I did my research, where most squash members do not spontaneously say "hi" to one another. Using a micro-level approach at one of these types of clubs should produce valuable insights. Another avenue of potential investigation would be to look at a community of players that consists of competitive juniors, high-level tournament players and professionals. The environments are different at tournaments and where juniors train seriously. How the power/status dynamics operate, given that they all play at a high level and take it very seriously, would be a fascinating study as well. Given that all these players put in significant time and effort into playing and improving at squash, I wonder if the hierarchy would be internalized differently. I also wonder if players would be more likely to view squash a core part of their identity, given the role it plays in their lives. A related study could focus on the lives of professional squash players. Given that it is challenging for many professionals to make a living purely from squash, I wonder how their identity and concept of themselves as a professional squash player would fit with the reality of struggling to make a living from it.

There exists a large body of literature on fitness, health imperatives and exercise manias. Lupton's "The Imperative of Health" (1995) focus on how public health

initiatives and viewpoints are politically and socially subjective is one such example. Sport's relationship to class has also been studied considerably (see Bourdieu 1978 for example). The use of sports clubs to contribute to the development of social capital has also been explored (see Coalter 2007). Specific groups within gyms have also been focused on in recent literature. One example is the goals and aesthetics of male gym-goers (Lim et al 2012). The physical and body culture movements have also been widely studied, with Pronger (2002) and Zweiniger-Bargielowska (2006) being two useful examples. Through looking at a particular kind of sport club participation, it should be possible to explore these broader historical and political/cultural ideas.

Play has long been treated as something separate from the rest of the things we do in our lives. The kind of "play" I am referring to is the structured and organized kind, not the ludic sense of the word. Despite our tendencies to treat it as something separate, this kind of structured play is in reality part of everything we do, as it is both sociopolitical and serves important societal functions. For example, sport language crops up regularly in public health, safety and other important societal initiatives and political arenas. Much literature has also focused on the moral and personal progress that sport participation can produce. How these seemingly mundane and everyday activities are used to socialize young people is also an important area to try to understand. Taking a broader view of these issues is certainly relevant, but a micro-analysis offers the potential to view these things as they happen "on the ground" and not "as they should/are supposed to." Sport and play strike many people as mundane and trivial, but nothing could be farther from the truth. In reality, it is revealing about a number of important things. Sport is relevant to many of the socio-structural processes we as humans are embedded in, including: community, identity, power and politics. In a way everything we do is a part of these

processes, and sport must be included. The key insight of sociocultural anthropology and my research is that it is important to focus on the everyday and quotidian stuff we do as humans, as through this lens we are able to provide insight into people's lives through everyday things like a group of people participating in a squash club.

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Ethics Approval



Use of Human Participants - Ethics Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Dr. Douglass St. Christian
Review Number: 18795S
Review Level: Full Board
Approved Local Adult Participants: 10
Approved Local Minor Participants: 0
Protocol Title: Getting to the Depths of Amateur and Professional Squash Values of Community and Identity
Department & Institution: Social Science Anthropology, University of Western Ontario
Sponsor:
Ethics Approval Date: April 05, 2012 **Expiry Date:** August 31, 2012

Documents Reviewed & Approved & Documents Received for Information:

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Western University Protocol		
Letter of Information & Consent		2012/03/15

This is to notify you that The University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects (NMREB) which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above named research study on the approval date noted above.

This approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the NMREB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information.

Members of the NMREB who are named as investigators in research studies, or declare a conflict of interest, do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on, such studies when they are presented to the NMREB.

The Chair of the NMREB is Dr. Riley Hinson. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Signature

Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information

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