

Drexel hosting squash events as tool to strengthen programs



**BREAKING
GROUND**
DON MURET

Drexel University is using the niche sport of squash as a marketing tool to compete at a higher level in athletics and academics.

Starting Thursday and continuing through Oct. 12, the 26,000-student private school in Philadelphia plays host to the Delaware Investments 2012 U.S. Open Squash Championships. The event draws 48 of the world's best men's and women's players to compete for \$185,000 in prize money. This year's tournament is the second year of a three-year deal between Drexel and U.S. Squash, the governing body for the sport in this country and whose headquarters are in New York.

The event ties to Drexel launching its own men's and women's squash programs in the fall of 2011. For the spring season in 2012, they began play in the **Kline and Spector Squash Center**, a new \$1.5 million facility that opened in February. Both teams are members of the College Squash Association, the governing body of intercollegiate squash, a sport not sanctioned by the NCAA.

The U.S. Open, meanwhile, is played at a separate facility, midcourt at the **Das-**



Fans at Drexel will have an up-close view as players compete in a portable, glass wall enclosure.

kalakis Athletic Center, the school's 2,352-seat basketball arena. In that setting, officials are building an intimate 800-seat venue that surrounds players, who compete in a portable, glass wall enclosure.

Spectators sitting in the first row are two feet from the competition, according to **Eric Zillmer**, Drexel's athletic director. For fans sitting farther from the action, video boards provide closer views and replays. U.S. Squash rents both the court and the screens for the event.

Ticket prices range from \$10 to \$95 per session for a premium-seat package covering the cost of food and drink, including beer and wine. There is also a fan fest component with retail vendors and skills competitions set up in the arena.

The cost for Drexel to produce the event runs into the six figures to pay staff for ticketing, security, ushers and food ser-

vice, Zillmer said. The school provides those services in exchange for the free marketing exposure it receives through U.S. Squash's advertising of the event. "We treat Drexel as a presenting level sponsor in all of our collateral," said **Kevin Klipstein**, CEO of U.S. Squash.

Before last year, the U.S. Open was held at a variety of smaller venues, including both **Symphony Hall** and the **Harvard Club**, where only 200 people could get in the doors, Klipstein said.

Big picture, school officials would like to see Drexel become the permanent home for the event. It would help the sport grow and bring greater attention to Drexel as it pursues student athletes who otherwise attend Ivy League schools to play squash, Zillmer said.

As was the case in 2011, this year's U.S. Open semifinals and finals, set for Oct. 11-12, will be streamed live on ESPN3.

➤ **TOPPING OUT:** Seating supplier **4Topp**s has signed a deal with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers to build tabletop seating for **Investors Group Field**, the CFL team's new \$190 million stadium opening in 2013. The 160 seats, groups of four seats distributed among 40 tables, will serve as the Blue Bombers' loge box product at the 40,000-seat stadium, said 4Topp's CEO **Joe Bellissimo**.

It is the biggest deal to date for the 21-month-old North Carolina company, and marks the first sale of its second-generation seat design. The flexibility of the new mesh seat design provides 4Topp's with a more comfortable, higher-end swivel seat to provide for arenas, Bellissimo said.

The Blue Bombers are 4Topp's 15th pro sports client. Most are minor league baseball teams, with the exception of the Cleveland Indians. The Indians bought two tables as a test this season to fill an open space in the left-field bleachers where the Tribe Social Deck once stood. Ticket prices were \$40 a seat with \$20 in stored value to use for concessions.

The Indians, without mentioning specific numbers, saw strong sales of those tables during the second half of the season, said **Vic Gregovits**, senior vice president of sales and marketing. ■

Don Muret can be reached at dmuret@sportsbusinessjournal.com. Follow him on Twitter @breakground.