

BEDFORD PARK

For a Rough-and-Tumble Sport, a Surprisingly Soft-Spoken King

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Handball, that quintessential, gritty New York street sport, has crowned an unlikely king.

Satish Jagnandan, 28, didn't learn the game playing against local legends in his Bedford Park neighborhood in the Bronx. Instead, he learned it at the prestigious Bronx High School of Science, where he starred on the varsity team that won city championships in 1991 and 1992.



Shannon Stapleton for The New York Times

Satish Jagnandan learned the angles of handball at Bronx Science.

But the version of handball played in the controlled confines of a high school is much different from the street variety. It was only after graduating that Mr. Jagnandan, a thin, soft-spoken son of Guyanese immigrants, ventured into neighborhood handball, where trash-talking, betting and sometimes outright cheating are facts of life.

"It was a disadvantage for me," he conceded in a conversation the other day in a hotel lobby near his office. "In the city game, you need to be mentally tougher."

Undeterred, Mr. Jagnandan honed his game on the courts at Bailey Avenue near his home, sometimes practicing as much as six hours a day. He grew confident enough to enter tournaments, and even won some of them, but a serious knee injury in the mid-1990's forced him to sit out several years. But he continued his studies, earning a bachelor's degree from Fordham and two master's degrees from the City University, and then taught middle-school math and science in the Bronx.

In 1999, Mr. Jagnandan eagerly returned to the sport. In 2000, he won the Peter Garcia Classic on his home court, a victory that launched his rise to the top. Last summer, Mr. Jagnandan used his devastating serve to help him win handball's two major singles titles - the Mayor's Cup at Orchard Beach and, the Super Bowl of handball, the Nationals in Coney Island.

"All the old masters are there, watching," Mr. Jagnandan said of the scene at the hallowed Coney Island courts, just off Surf Avenue near the New York Aquarium. "And they expect greatness."

Mr. Jagnandan gave it to them.

"It makes him the player of the year," said Albert Apuzzi, a legendary player himself and an official with the United States Handball Association. "Right now, he's in the top two or three players around." If Mr. Jagnandan wins the Nationals several more times, he will join the ranks of the all-time greats.

The handball season is winding down, but Mr. Jagnandan is still worried about getting enough practice time. He just started working as a textbook editor for McGraw-Hill, and he hopes to begin studying for a Ph.D. in mathematics in the hopes of becoming a college professor. His parents would like him to spend more time with his wife, Wandy Rosario. "I get gentle nudges and hints," he said.

Mr. Jagnandan's defense against all these pressures is necessity. "It's like any other sport - you need to spend hours and hours practicing," he said. Success hasn't made the job any easier. "Now these guys are hunting for me."