

Davidoff's skills recognized in Hall

By Howie Eisenberg

Ken Davidoff, acclaimed by many as the best one-wall handball player they ever saw, has been voted into the USHA Hall of Fame.

Davidoff was national one-wall champion three times in a four-year span from 1962-65. To win in that era, one had to beat many players of Hall of Fame caliber—Oscar, Ruby and Carl Obert, Steve Sandler, Marty Decatur, Al Torres, Joel Wisotsky, Lou Russo, Arty Reyer and me, all of whom were at or near our prime.

Not only did Davidoff win the national singles in three of those years, not one of those finals went three games and half the game scores were under 10. He was a national singles finalist when he was 18 and a semifinalist several more times, as well as a national one-wall doubles champion twice, runner-up five times and semifinalist three more times over a 12-year period from 1962-1973.

Early development

Introduced to handball by his dad, Max, who would hoist 2-year-old Kenny and his carriage over a tall fence to get an early start on the day's handball action, Davidoff had very early exposure to the game. He started playing when he was 8. By the time he was 13, Kenny and Max had become a team playing regularly at Lincoln Terrace Park in Brooklyn, where play would begin at 8 a.m. and continue until dark.

At first Kenny would get there on the handlebars of his father's bike, later on a bus. It was winner stays on, and if you lost you would have a two- or three-hour wait to challenge again, a scene repeated at practically every park in the city every weekend.

At Lincoln Terrace Park there was a veritable pantheon of handball greats competing against each other, with Vic Hershkowitz and Kenny's idol, Moey Orenstein, leading the way. The main court drew hundreds of spectators.

Kenny would watch and absorb as his idol controlled the flow of a volley, keeping his opponents off balance, maintaining superior court position, hitting the ball in front



Davidoff (left, with Marty Decatur) richly deserves his Hall of Fame honor.

Davidoff's record

National open championships

- 1962: AAU doubles, with Howie Eisenberg
- 1962: USHA singles, defeated Oscar Obert
- 1963: AAU singles, defeated Oscar Obert
- 1965: AAU singles, defeated Eisenberg
- 1971: AAU doubles, with Eisenberg

National runner-up finishes

- 1960: AAU singles
- 1962: USHA doubles, with Eisenberg
- 1963: AAU doubles, with Eisenberg
- 1964: AAU doubles, with Eisenberg
- 1965: AAU doubles, with Arty Reyer
- 1966: Three-wall doubles, with Eisenberg
- 1967: Three-wall doubles, with Eisenberg
- 1973: USHA doubles, with Steve Sandler

of himself or his partner (legal in one-wall) to his opponents' off hands, driving the ball at their feet, hitting sharp angles or killing the ball with either hand. Every game was like the national final, with significant money changing hands on the outcome.

When he wasn't watching, Davidoff was playing on the one court reserved for kids. He showed the same intensity of everybody else who didn't want to wait hours to play again.

He played with a pink "Spauldeen," simi-

lar to a racquetball but livelier. His first money game came when he was 11 against a bigger, older, stronger boy. Davidoff lost, making him \$2 poorer. He was beaten one more time by "Abie the Fox" but never again.

Kenny was all about winning; he hated to lose. Close matches became no contests as Kenny grew stronger, more experienced and better by the week.

To play during the winter, he was permitted to join the HES gym at 13 after convincing skeptics that he belonged by passing an "audition" in which he played against adults and held his own. The pressure matches continued at the HES and Lincoln Terrace, with Kenny supplementing his allowance with winnings from money games on a regular basis.

At 15, young Davidoff, not unlike David Chapman at the same age many years later, had the poise and smarts of a wily veteran with an unswerving drive to win as his strength and skills continued to develop.

Junior accomplishments

The annual New York Daily Mirror Parks Department junior championships were perhaps the largest entry handball tournaments ever, with about 5,000 boys 17 or younger from all New York City parks competing for borough and city championships.

In 1957, at 15, Davidoff won the Brooklyn championship by trouncing Jerry Weissman, a 17-year-old, in the final. But he had to default in the city championship playoff because of an injury. Weissman went on to win the tournament.

Undaunted, Davidoff came back the next two years to take the city championship with no serious challenges.

The other mega-event in New York handball was—and still is—the PSAL high school interscholastic handball team competition. More than 100 teams of a dozen players each competed for the five borough championships and ultimately the city title.

Playing first singles from his sophomore year on, Davidoff lost one game in three years and had his initial encounters with eventual Hall of Famers Sandler and Russo, whom he easily defeated as he led his Brooklyn Tech team to the 1959 city title.

It was at this point that I first met Kenny



Davidoff shoots against Oscar Obert in one of their memorable one-wall battles.

Davidoff. Three years his senior, I had also won the NYC junior championship and had reached the final of the national AAU doubles with wins over former national champions.

Undaunted, Davidoff played a challenge match against me in front of 2,000 people on my home court, Garber Stadium at the Brighton Beach Baths. Lacking that last burst of power that eventually would make his serve the best on the planet, as Fred Lewis would later assert, Kenny fell a little short. But the potential of this budding handball great was obvious.

Shortly after, Davidoff defeated Winfield Balance, a spectacularly athletic player, to avenge the single loss of his PSAL career and win the first USHA national junior one-wall championship in 1959.

National open competition

When he was 18, Davidoff entered his first national open tournament in 1960, reaching the AAU final with victories over Sandler, former finalist Marty “the Farmer” Cushman and Harold Hanft, 1955 and 1956 national singles champion. Battling a bone bruise so severe that he couldn’t play for the next two months, Kenny lost to Carl Obert in the final.

He followed this auspicious debut by pushing the great Oscar Obert to three

games in a 21-17 loss in the 1960 USHA nationals and then a 21-19 third-game loss in the ’61 AAUs.

At that tournament I got some very personal insight into the ferocious intensity of Davidoff’s will to win. Playing with Balance against me and Joe Danilczyk, Kenny opened a 3-inch gash above my eye on a right-hand follow-through. After I was patched up with a bandage that obscured my vision, Davidoff kept exhorting his partner: “Hit it to Howie. He can’t see.”

For certain, Ken Davidoff was all about winning, and he would use any legal advantage he could to achieve his end.

’62 AAU: 1st national open title

After my brush with blindness, I figured it was better to play with Kenny than against him, and we got to the final against Oscar and Ruby Obert, then eight-time national one-wall doubles champions.

Splitting the first two games and trailing 18-14 in the third, we ran to a 19-18 lead. In a very long rally Oscar returned a hard drive through his legs, which Davidoff countered with an unreturnable angle to the right.

The skinny 20-year-old then got in Oscar’s face and shouted, “Hit the next one through your nose.”

Oscar, who could have crushed Kenny as easily as he crushed steel cans with one

Peer acclamation

These statements from some very knowledgeable players make it clear that Ken Davidoff deserves his place with the greatest of all time.

■ **Fred Lewis**, Hall of Famer and six-time national four-wall singles champion: “Kenny Davidoff was absolutely the greatest one-wall singles player I have ever seen. He totally dominated the one-wall players of his era. Ken belongs in the Hall of Fame. He was a better player than Steve Sandler and better than every other player that has been inducted for their one-wall ability since Sandler.”

■ **Steve Sandler**, Hall of Famer and 14-time national one-wall singles champ: “My list of the best one-wall handball players that I have played against? No. 1 is Kenny Davidoff or Oscar Obert. To me it looks wrong when the player that might have been the best of all is not included. Certainly, he did more than enough to be in the Hall of Fame.”

■ **Dan Flickstein**, ranked tournament player and analyst of one-wall handball for more than 40 years: “I feel qualified to recommend Ken Davidoff for the Hall of Fame. At his best, Ken had literally no weakness. His offense was the best I ever saw. His defense was as good as his offense, if that is believable. When Sandler was playing his best, I once heard him boast to one of his cronies that he had played Davidoff the previous night and had scored 10 and 12 against him.”

■ **Ken Smolack**, ranked doubles player and longtime analyst of all phases of the game: “Kenny Davidoff was the best singles player I ever saw. I did not see Vic [Hershkovitz] or Moey [Orenstein] at their best, but I did see most everyone else from the late ’50s on, including Eisenberg, Sandler, [Al] Torres, [Marty] Decatur, all the Oberts, [Wally] Ulbrich and [Mark] Levine. I do not think any of them could have or would have beaten Kenny at his best.”

Howie Eisenberg

hand, was taken aback by the youngster's ferocity. One point later, Kenny and I were national champions for the first time.

'62 USHA: 1st national open singles title

Davidoff topped this performance six months later in the 1962 USHA national singles. He beat Decatur easily in the semis and used all of the wiles gained in his years of battling the hustlers at Lincoln Terrace and Avenue P, prevailing over the still physically superior Oscar Obert in two close games.

The match was marked by deep Obert serves to Davidoff's off hand, high lofting returns from Ken's right, and fly-kill attempts by Oscar from the long line that sometimes rolled out but more often were pounced on by Davidoff for a rekill.

With that baby whom he hoisted over the Lafayette Park fence together with his carriage now national singles champion, Max Davidoff kept exclaiming, "I'm so proud, I'm so proud."

He should have been, for his little boy was now on top of the one-wall handball world.

This was followed by another march to the doubles final, as Kenny and I ran through formidable opponents, including a 21-12, 21-3 semifinal win over Decatur/Danilczyk. Oscar got a measure of revenge as he and Ruby stopped us in the final.

'63 AAU: Total domination

The 1963 AAU nationals once more featured Davidoff vs. Oscar Obert. But this time with his fully developed body and game, Ken completely dominated with a serving and offensive barrage 21-9, 21-6.

Bored with serving unreturnable low ace after ace, Davidoff finished off the match serving barely reachable overhand angles that were nearly as effective.

However, despite a convincing semifinal win against Sandler/Reyer, Davidoff/Eisenberg were defeated by the Oberts in the doubles final.

'64 AAU: Déjà vu

Attending college in Jacksonville, Davidoff was unable to defend his USHA championship in 1963. But he returned to



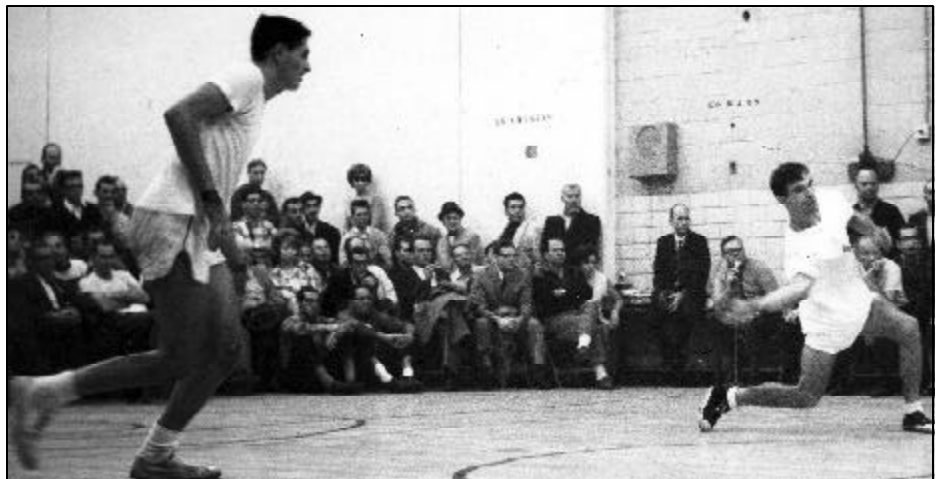
Davidoff had an outstanding 1962 in the USHA nationals, taking first in singles and second in doubles.

Brooklyn just in time to play in the '64 AAUs.

Having played no one-wall for nine months while at school, a rusty Davidoff lost in a three-game match to Carl Obert. Motivated by this loss, Ken came back with a vengeance as we breezed to another doubles final encounter with the Oberts.

It seemed like a replay of '62. We won the first, lost the second and were once again behind 18-14 in the third, whereupon we ran four to tie the score at 18.

What followed was the most horrendous succession of bad calls I have ever experienced. I hit a rolling lefty kill shot in front of myself and stood still, which is legal: Intentional block called, hand out. Kenny hit a drive past Oscar, catching the left line. A spectator—Carl Obert—screamed, "Out." The



Davidoff is ready to pounce on Obert's shot in the 1962 singles final, won by Davidoff.

linesman said, "Out; no, good." Pandemonium reigned. The officials had a 10-minute confab and ruled a "do-over." The Oberts took off their gloves and threatened to quit. Fights broke out. Play resumed. Ruby made two. We got him out. Oscar served a wet ball to Kenny. It skidded; no return, no call. Match over.

After this, Kenny and I played an exhibition winner-take-all challenge match against the Oberts in New Jersey and took home the prize money.

Thus, in five matches, according to my accounting, Oberts 2, Davidoff/Eisenberg 2, with one disputed.

These matches had tremendous intensity. The four hardest hitters in the game broke balls galore, blocked each other, killed from all parts of the court with either hand, dove for retrieves and battled as if their lives were at stake. Little love was lost between these teams, but I believe a mutual respect pervaded the battleground.

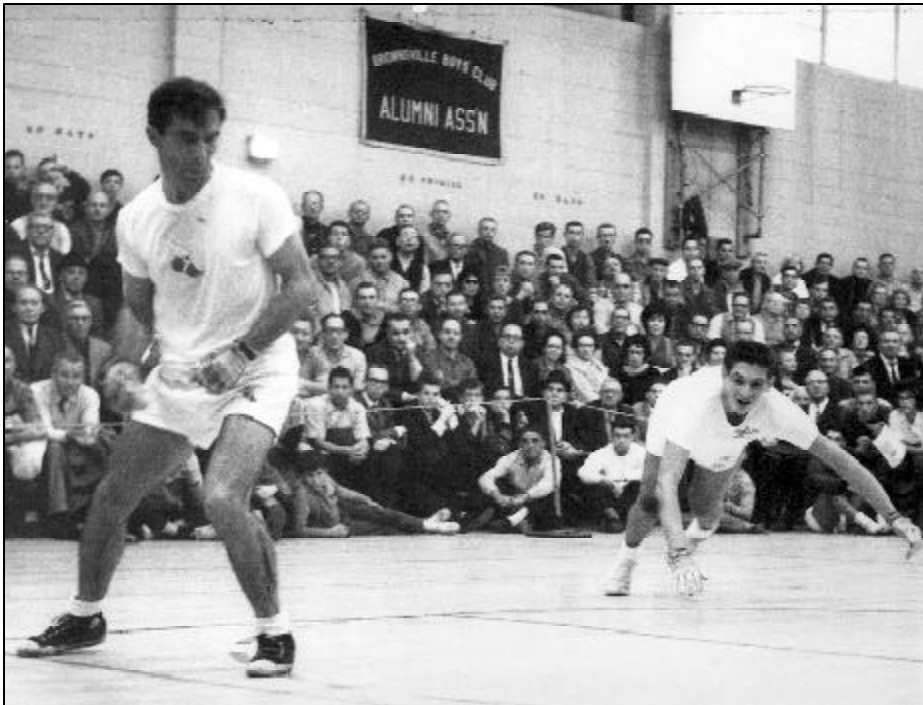
After the nationals, Davidoff once more proved his supremacy by beating everyone in sight. Of particular note was a 21-1 victory over Balance the day after Balance had shut out Sandler.

'65 AAU: Another championship and trial separation

Returning to school in Jacksonville, Davidoff again missed the USHAs in 1964 but got back in time for the national AAU championships.

He rolled over all comers, including a semifinal revenge win over '64 conqueror Carl Obert.

On the other side of the draw, I was ad-



Davidoff displays his athleticism as he dives for a shot against Obert in 1962.

vancing to the final in similar fashion, culminating in a semifinal win over Ruby Obert. I thought I had a good chance to win—that is, until I got onto the court against Davidoff.

His serve to the right hit 6 inches high with a lefty natural hook taking me 15 feet off the court. This could be reached only by anticipating it and running before it was hit. If I guessed right, the only thing to do was to try to kill the ball on the run to avoid a 50-foot cross-court trip from a Davidoff angle to the left.

His serves down the left were hit so hard that it seemed as if the ball was knocking my hand back as I tried to hit defensive lofts high on the wall.

Result: two-game victory for Davidoff 21-12, 21-15.

Changing his luck, Davidoff switched partners and played with Reyer in the '65 AAU national doubles, while I took Davy Norvid as a partner. Davidoff/Reyer rolled to the final, defeating Ruby and Carl Obert along the way. After Norvid and I squeaked by in a close semifinal win over an inferior team, it seemed as if we had two chances—slim and none.

However, I played the match of my life and capitalized on my power and a dead ball that nobody else could drive effectively to secure the championship.

Winning aside, I had no illusions. Ken

Davidoff was the superior player, singles or doubles.

'65-67: 3-wall exploits, more finals

In 1965 Davidoff played in the national three-wall tournament. Facing Carl Obert, he won the first game and was ahead 20-17 in the second. Kenny hit a deep serve that Carl was barely able to flick at as it hooked into him.

The ball hit the bottom of Kenny's sneaker on its way to the ground, but according to the rules of the day, it was a replay. Carl got Davidoff out, won the game, won the third game and went on to beat Steve August to win the championship.

Davidoff lost more than that match, however. Kenny hurt his arm, an injury that was to plague him for the rest of his handball career.

In 1966, Kenny and I again joined forces, teaming up in the three-wall doubles and getting to the final by beating Dennis Hofflander/Jack McDonald. It culminated in a second-place finish to the great three-wall team of Decatur/Lou Russo.

The next year marked one last meeting between Davidoff/Eisenberg and Oscar and Ruby Obert—and another second-place finish, with the Oberts prevailing in three games.

'65-70: University of Texas and injuries

In 1965, Davidoff took a 34-hour bus ride from Jacksonville to Austin to play in the national intercollegiate, financed by a \$60 donation from Bob Davidson.

Ken fell in love with the city, the school and the crew of players led by Pete Tyson and Dick Roberson. He transferred to UT in the fall, joined the handball team and became a creditable four-wall player under Tyson's tutelage. His most significant win was with me at the 1967 Tulsa Invitational over Bob Lindsay, then national doubles champion, and Jim Love.

School commitments and injuries at UT curtailed Davidoff's one-wall career. Although his participation in one-wall was limited thereafter, and an elbow injury reduced his dominance, Davidoff made it to the semis of the '66 national AAU singles, losing to Sandler, and beat Wally Ulbrich and Decatur in the 1970 USHAs to once again reach the semis before his arm gave out.

'71 AAU: Transcending pain

Playing one last time together in the 1971 AAU nationals, Davidoff/Eisenberg defeated Decatur/Marty Katzen in the quarters in three games, held Ruby and Carl Obert under 10 in both games of the semis and were ahead 18-6 in the second game of the final against Sandler/Don Weber after winning the first 21-6.

At that point Kenny seemed to stop hitting the ball with any velocity, just pushing it. Sandler/Weber closed the gap to 19-16. The reason Davidoff had stopped hitting the ball hard was that he had slipped a disc.

Despite excruciating pain, Davidoff came through. He hit an ace to Weber, followed by an unreturnable serve that practically rolled over the short line on the super-fast court to win the championship.

'73 USHA: Last hurrah

Davidoff didn't play in another tournament for two years and then came back to play in the '73 USHA with Sandler. They got to the final and lost a tough three-game match to Wisotsky/Russo.

Davidoff never played another match after that, but he is universally regarded as one of the all-time greats.