

Eisenberg, Reyer approved for induction

One-wall stars Howie Eisenberg and Artie Reyer will be inducted into the USHA Hall of Fame this year for their outstanding performances as players.

Eisenberg will be inducted at the USHA National Four-Wall Championships in East

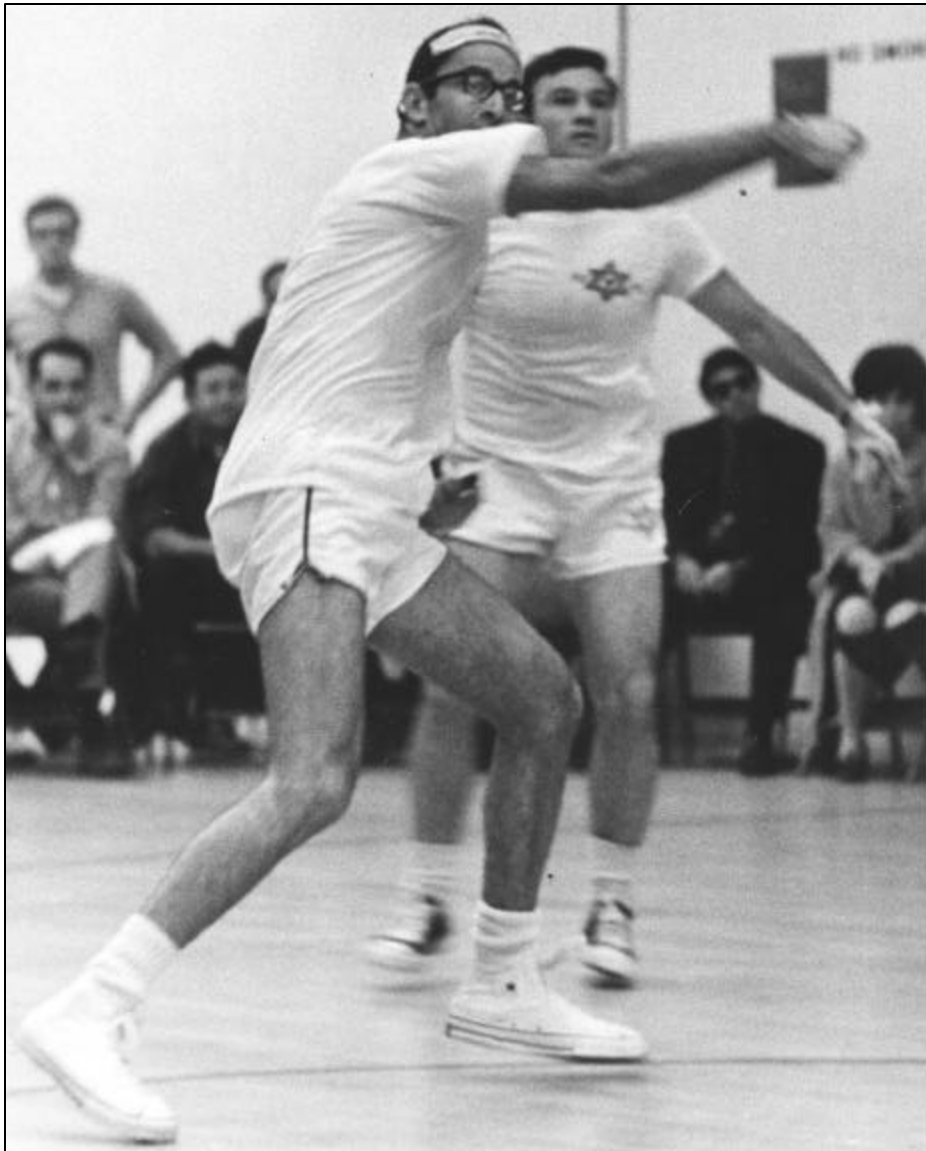
Lansing, Mich., and Reyer's induction site is still being discussed.

Eisenberg's record includes two USHA national one-wall doubles titles and four runner-up finishes in singles.

Reyer is a doubles standout in spite of a

right leg weakened by childhood polio. He won six national doubles titles with four different partners over a 16-year span.

The Hall of Fame Committee approved the inductions in June, and the USHA board has agreed with the recommendations.



Eisenberg fires away in an indoor match against Steve Sandler in the 1960s.

Coming full circle

New Hall of Famer Eisenberg traces a career that has made him a legend

By Howie Eisenberg

After playing in well over 100 national tournaments in this country, traveling round the world several times, playing different variations of handball in Australia, the Philippines, Japan, Spain, France, Ireland, England, Canada, Mexico, and Venezuela, it would appear that I am back where I started.

In 1957 in Brooklyn, at age 18 in my first national AAU tournament, Vic Hershkowitz and I lost in the final to Oscar and Carl Obert. After reasserting his supremacy in one-wall by beating Oscar in the singles final, Vic sprained an ankle but still tried valiantly to carry his erratic, wet-behind-the ears partner to victory, though he fell short.

In last summer's USHA National One-Wall Championships, again in Brooklyn 45 years later, Tom Vitale, now the premier 60-

Howie Eisenberg's 1-wall record

Championships

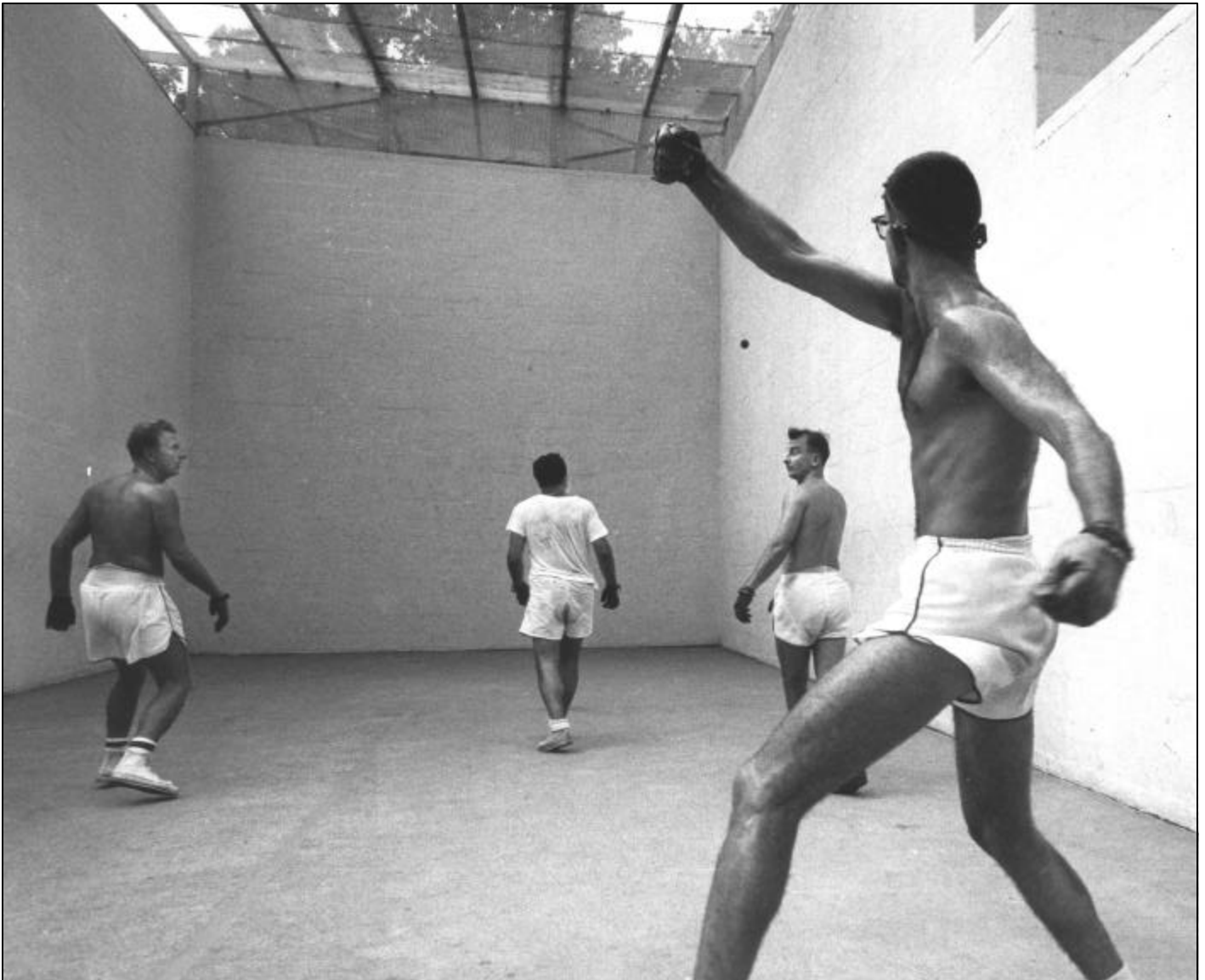
1979 USHA doubles with Joel Wisotsky
 1980 USHA doubles with Joel Wisotsky
 1962 AAU doubles with Kenny Davidoff
 1965 AAU doubles with Davy Norvid
 1971 AAU doubles with Kenny Davidoff

Runner-up finishes

USHA singles: 1960, '67, '68, '69
 USHA doubles: 1960, '62, '65, '66, '71, '72, '74
 AAU singles: 1965, '66
 AAU doubles: 1957, '63, '64, '72, '73, '76

Semifinal finishes

USHA singles: 1961, '62, '64, '65, '70, '72, '74
 USHA doubles: 1963, '69
 AAU singles: 1961, '62, '64
 AAU doubles: 1960, '61, '66, '67, '69



Though Eisenberg was at his best in one-wall, he also was a fierce competitor in three-wall, here blasting from the deep right side.

plus one-wall player but nursing a bone spur in his heel, fell one point short of carrying his over-the-hill partner (me) to a championship.

My lifetime love affair with handball began when I was 3 in 1942 at the Brighton Beach Baths in Brooklyn. There I had the privilege of watching the greatest one-wall players of the time (and in the case of Hershkowitz, the greatest all-around handball player of all time) play exhibition “sweeps” before 2,000 people every weekend.

It was an era when handball had more participation than any sport in the New York metropolitan area, with several hundred thousand boys, girls, men and women saturating the 5,000 one-wall courts in the public parks and private beach clubs. The at-

mosphere was electric, with these great athletes matching skills for pride and prize money—not to mention the gambling that was pervasive. It was no wonder that, exposed to this environment, my aspiration was to become a national AAU champion like my idol, Hershkowitz, before I could even recognize the letters of the acronym.

I was initiated into the game at 6 by my brother-in-law, Arty Niederhoffer, an erudite policeman and college professor and my mentor until his death, who played at a level just below the pros of the day.

I cannot adequately describe the thrill of playing in Garber Stadium, the exhibition court at the Brighton Beach Baths, even for the 10 minutes that I could scrounge on it by arriving when it opened and streaking through the locker area to hit a ball on that

hallowed ground before getting kicked off by the adults.

It wasn’t until I was 11 that I actually got to play a real game in Garber, when I won the club’s under-12 boys championship.

Around that time I approached Hershkowitz and asked if he would watch me play and tell me if I would ever be a champ. Vic agreed and made an immediate assessment, asserting that the 80-pound youth before him who looked more like a refugee from a World War II displaced-persons camp would never make it because I didn’t hit hard enough. My reaction to that devastating evaluation by my idol elicited some choice words from me, followed by Vic’s admonition to “Get lost, punk!”

It wasn’t until six years later, when I won the NYC Parks Department Junior Champi-

onship by beating Marty Decatur, that I was invited to play in the sweeps and that Vic would again speak to me. By that time I was hitting the ball with substantial velocity, and I would ask people if I hit harder than Davy Small, George Baskin or Hershkowitz, the hardest hitters of the day. The consensus was that I did, but someone's rejoinder to me was: Do you want to be the hardest hitter or the best player?

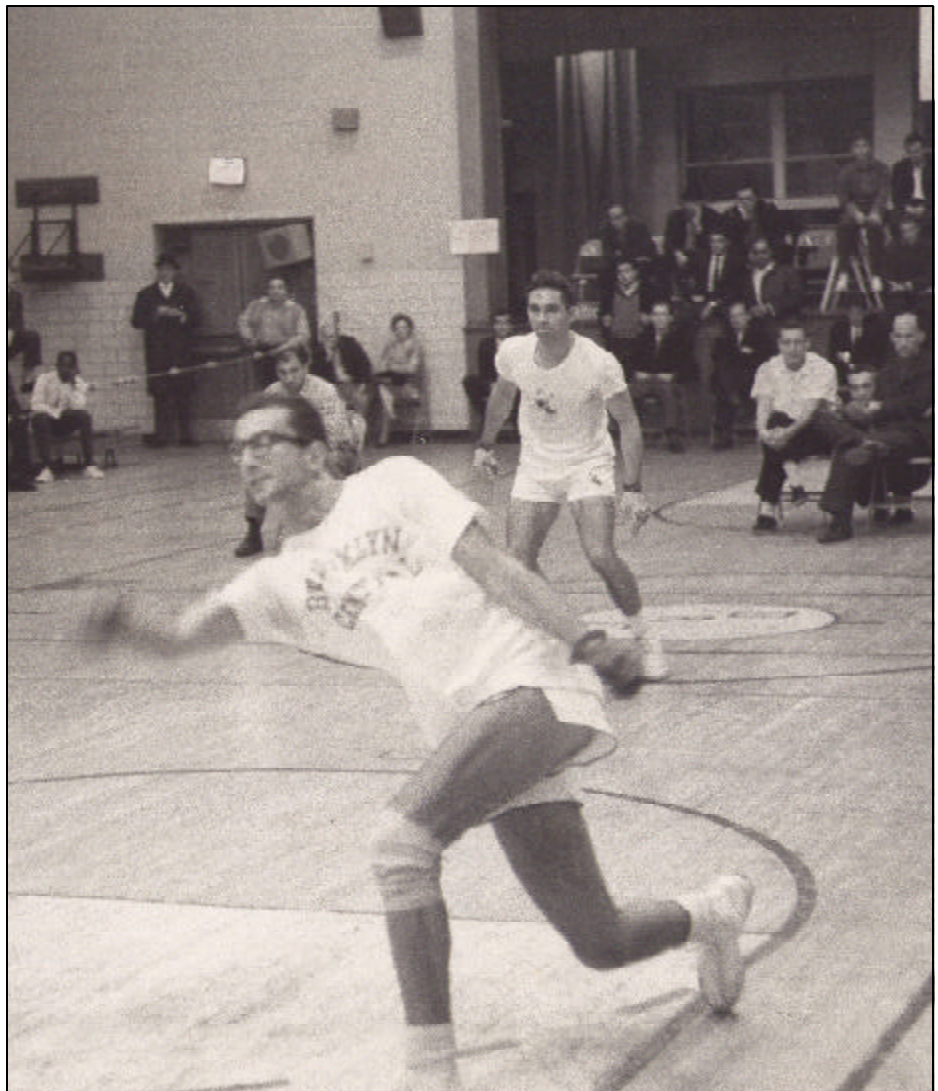
Perhaps not so amazingly in light of Hershkowitz's earlier critique, that question, which should have had an obvious answer, was never truly resolved in my mind. Hitting hard became a career-long obsession with me, and although I never quite made it to being the best one-wall player as I lost in the open singles final six times, there are many who believe that I was the hardest hitter ever.

By the time I reached 18, Vic's assessment had changed to the extent of his asking me to play with him. As if playing with my lifelong idol in my first national tournament wasn't daunting enough, I had to contend with playing indoors for the first time, which meant that I had to play with my prescription glasses, which, combined with my erratic play at that time, created a formidable challenge for Hershkowitz.

His unswerving determination and will to win were never more in evidence than when he appeared for our quarterfinal match in his full fireman's regalia after having fought and ingested the smoke of a four-hour fire, coughing his lungs out. The ice-cold shower that Vic took before the match didn't quite kick in until after we had lost the first game, whereupon, with some assistance from me, he proceeded to demonstrate once more why he was considered the greatest: He completely overwhelmed our opponents.

In the semifinals, trailing 1955 champs Irving Kirzner and "Crazy Red" Kravitz 17-9 in the third game, I scored three points and Vic ran out the game, earning me my first of 40 visits to a national final. There, against Oscar and Carl Obert, with Vic hobbling on a sprained ankle, I ran 10 points before being curtailed by the old "three-bounce rule." It was to no avail, however, as the Oberts capitalized on Vic's lack of mobility and captured the title in two games.

The intensity of play in those days could not be any more characterized than by the 1960 USHA one-wall singles and doubles



Eisenberg serves to Oscar Obert in the 1960 national one-wall final at the Brownsville Boys Club. Many of Eisenberg's most memorable matches involved the Oberts.

finals, in which I was involved in no less than a war, first with Oscar Obert and then with Oscar and Ruby.

Ahead 18-17 in the first game, I served a ball that I thought was going out but instead caught the left line for an apparent ace. Jubilant, I jumped in the air, whereupon the referee, seeing me jump, assumed I had been over the short line and called a foot fault. After vociferously but unsuccessfully pleading my case, I promptly served a second short. Instead of my serving at 19-17, Oscar got up at 17-18 and ran out the game. Although I took the second game 21-11, Oscar's superior stamina prevailed in the third.

The doubles final was a seesaw event with Joe Danilczyk, who had great power and sharp breaking hooks, and I winning the first, losing the second and being ahead

14-6 in the third. At that juncture, and to my knowledge for the only time in their career as a doubles team, Ruby switched to the left side and turned the game around, gaining a 20-17 lead. We then got the serve back and ran three points to tie 20-20. The tension was tremendous, with each of us striving to gain whatever advantage we could, blasting the ball, killing, re-killing, blocking and apprising the referees in no uncertain terms of our disagreement with their calls, as the crowd of 1,300 exhorted us.

Serving second, I was pushed by Ruby during the ensuing rally. One of the linesman yelled "Block." Joe, assuming play had stopped, hit Ruby's return softly, which Oscar then fly-killed. The main referee (yes, the same one who had called that critical foot fault on me in the singles final) ruled that "since Howie and Ruby were blocking



Eisenberg gets tangled up with Paul Williams in the 1996 one-wall doubles tournament.

each other the whole match,” this (very definite violation of the rules) was not a block and that the Oberts were to serve. Our vehement protestations to no avail, amid the pandemonium that ensued, Oscar fired the shot that ended the battle for match point.

This was not by any means the end of my wars with the Oberts. After each of us lost to Oscar in the semis of the '61 AAU and USHA singles, respectively, then 20-year-old Kenny Davidoff and I teamed up, marshaling our forces to wage war with our common enemy.

The '62 AAU one-wall championships marked the first of five national doubles finals in which we were to be pitted against Oscar and Ruby Obert. Winning the first, ahead in the second before being overtaken and behind 18-14 in the third, Kenny and I ran five points to go ahead 19-18. During the ensuing rally Oscar returned a shot through his legs, which was responded to by a tremendous, irretrievable Davidoff angle shot to the right. The battle was joined when the skinny, 150-pound Davidoff then went nose to nose with Oscar, who could have crushed him as easily as the steel beer cans he used to pulverize with one hand, and said, “Hit the next one through your nose.”

During the timeout that followed, Moey Orenstein, a former one-wall great with a bit of an unsavory background who was betting on us, suggested rather forcefully that Kenny and I switch sides for the last point. I vetoed this suggestion because such a

switch, although it would have presented something different to our opponents, was a major digression from what we were used to and would leave our off hands vulnerable. Having defied Moey’s “suggestion” and knowing that my legs, if not my life, were on the line if we didn’t win, I never played so desperately in my life, and Kenny and I went on to win our first national title.

I could go on for quite a while depicting the various battles with the Oberts in three more national one-wall doubles finals and one in three-wall. I could also expound on my jousts with Steve Sandler, not only in four national singles finals but in the hundreds of money games we played throughout the years, many straight singles matches and other more imaginative contests, such as each of us hopping on one foot or with chairs in our hands.

Forever and indelibly ingrained in my mind are:

- The matches beginning when we were 15 against, and finally with, the incomparable Marty Decatur in the '74 national one-wall final against Joel Wisotsky and Wally Ulbrich.

- The money games against women’s champ Sheila Maraschick when I was 15.

- The national doubles championship finals matches after winning semifinal matches over Oscar and Ruby, with Artie Reyer in '65 and then again with Sandler in '66.

- Finals losses with Neil Bocian in '71, Ruby Obert in '72 and Decatur in '74, and then a '74 quarterfinal three-wall win with

Bocian over Dennis Hofflander and Gordie Pfeiffer.

- Playing the best I ever played in the win with Davy Norvid in the '65 AAU doubles over Davidoff and Artie Reyer.

- The win with Davidoff in the '71 AAU over Carl and Ruby Obert, and Sandler-Donny Weber.

- The four-wall wins with Joel Wisotsky at the NYAC in '72 and '73, and the national one-wall wins with Joel in '79 and '80, beating Joe Durso and Albert Apuzzi.

- The AAU finals losses with Ruby Obert in '73 and with Marty Katzen in '76.

- A 21-20 quarterfinal loss at age 57 with Tati Silveyra to two-time defending open champs Ed Maisonet and Paul Williams.

Also indelibly etched into my psyche are the various age-group events, including:

- The '80 and '82 national one-wall masters singles wins, including a three-hour contest with Sandler in 100-degree heat.

- The '85 senior national one-wall championship with Bocian over Mike Dikman/Graham Palmore and Danny Maroney/Freddy Feit.

- The '89 national four-wall masters invitational golden masters wins with Tom Natale over Joe McDonald/Mike Dunne and Jim Economides/Bob Harris.

- The 2000 national three-wall supers win with Don Ardito over George Miller/Ed Grossenbacher.

All of these matches are memorable to me, as are the individuals who may have been the enemy at various times but many of whom I regard as more than friends, something akin to blood brothers.

Suffice it to say that playing handball has been a consuming passion for me for 57 years. The excitement of the competition, the feelings of abject failure upon defeat, the emotions ranging from vindication to satisfaction to joy of victory are surpassed only by the sense of common purpose and camaraderie with my partners—and even with my fiercest opponents.

Now the cycle has come full, and after circumnavigating the handball globe, I am very much of the opinion that reaching the destination is of little consequence in comparison with making the journey. This journey, interwoven with family and career, has meshed to form the fabric of my life. Let my epitaph say (but not too soon) that Howie was a handball player.