



Wisotsky collected awards no matter the number of walls. Left, Ray Dubois congratulates Fred Munsch and Wisotsky after a NYAC doubles victory. Right, George Miller with Steve Lott, Marty Decatur, Wisotsky and Wally Ulbrich at the three-wall nationals.

This doctor needs no cure

All-around standout Joel Wisotsky gains entry to Hall of Fame

By Howie Eisenberg

Dr. Joel Wisotsky will be inducted into the USHA Hall of Fame in May at the New York Athletic Club.

To put this into context, one should note that membership in the Hall of Fame is reserved for:

- Contributors who have made major contributions to handball.
- Open or pro players judged to be the greatest players of all time in one-, three- or four-wall.

To assess an individual for inclusion, the Hall of Fame Committee and the USHA executive board use objective criteria, including all national open and pro tournaments in which the nominee has reached the semifinals or better compared with the semifinalists in each of those events, in addition to significant wins in other open events.

To date, in 84 years of organized handball play dating back to the 1919 AAU nationals, Wisotsky is the 35th open or pro player deemed of sufficient stature to be voted into the Hall of Fame.

In this regard, over a 16-year period, Wisotsky won 13 national open doubles championships with six different partners, including eight in one-wall, four in three-wall and a Canadian national four-wall championship. He also has come in second in the country seven times.



Wisotsky shoots left-handed in a one-wall match with Albert Apuzzi playing defense.

That means he has reached the finals 20 times, prevailing 65 percent of the time in the championship round.

Considering his four semifinal finishes, he has been among the top four in national doubles competition 24 times. Most impressively, Wisotsky has prevailed in his semifinal match 83 percent of the time.

Unquestionably, Joel Wisotsky is most deserving of Hall of Fame status.

Early development

Wisotsky was a product of the Castle Hill Beach Club, the renowned handball hotbed in the Bronx, N.Y., where Hall of Fam-

Jury of his peers' unanimous verdict: He's great

While his record irrefutably attests to his greatness, the magnitude of Joel Wisotsky's ability can perhaps best be appreciated by personal observations and impressions of his contemporaries.

Ken Smolack (comparing Wisotsky to Marty Decatur, whom many regard as the best all-around doubles player ever): "Joel was the strong-side player in three-wall and four-wall and often in one-wall, at which he was better than Marty. In three-wall he might have also been better, as I think his partners were not as good as Louie Russo (Decatur's partner for six doubles championships). It is too bad that he did not go to the four-wall with someone like Marty or Louie, as I think he would have beaten most of the teams that won during the 1970s. We (Easterners) were able to see his great ability in four-wall, which most of the country never saw. I think if he played with someone like Lou or Gordy (Pfeiffer), he would have given Jimmy (Jacobs) and Marty a real run for their money."

Vern Roberts (Hall of Fame opponent in three- and four-wall): "I can tell you that Joel is the toughest left-side player I ever played against. He was able to hit with great power without much windup, which made him terribly treacherous to defend. He always had my utmost respect, and I made sure I gave him plenty of room."

Wally Ulbrich (national one- and three-wall championship partner): "It certainly was great playing with Joel. He was a great player and great under pressure. Joel always came mentally ready to play, whether it was the first round or the final. Because of his great power and ability to finish the point, it took a lot of the pressure off me and made it much easier to relax. He was also a very positive player who never got down on me if I missed a few shots and was always encouraging, nor did he get down on himself. Quitting wasn't part of his makeup. Regardless of the score or whether he was tired, he continued to compete. All of these things made Joel a fantastic partner and possibly the toughest opponent I ever played against."

Lou Russo (Hall of Fame national one-wall championship partner): "I have played against every national three-wall and one-wall doubles player of his generation, and there was no one that could compete with Joel in those games. He was the best doubles player I ever played against in 20 years of national competition."

Arty Reyer (Hall of Fame national one-wall championship partner): "Joel was a solid ballplayer, great shooter and driver and always gave 150 percent during the match. Joel and I always played well together. The best match we ever played was the 1983 USHA national indoor open doubles against Joe Durso and Albert Apuzzi. Joel had a bad bone bruise and still played his heart out, proving that when you are good, (despite adversity) there is no stopping you. I was proud to be his partner and even prouder to be his friend throughout the years."

Ruby Obert (Hall of Fame national three-wall championship partner): "Joel was a player with both power and smarts. He had the ability to blend with my style in winning the national three-wall doubles in consecutive years. Oscar, Carl and I always had a high regard for his superb talent and commend him for his Hall of Fame honor."

Howie Eisenberg (Hall of Fame national one-wall championship partner and four-wall partner): "Joel's all-out attacking style of play accentuated by unrelenting power and a great fly kill never gave opponents a chance to breathe. Joel was the greatest closer since Kevorkian. When he got to 16, it was all downhill from there for his opponents. He was like a shark who smelled blood. Take no prisoners was his credo, as he powered to victory time after time."

Mike Dau (chairman of the USHA Hall of Fame Committee, on Wisotsky's induction): "The vote was unanimous, indicating clearly that his record spoke for itself. I might add that Paul Haber once told me, 'Joel Wisotsky was the best left-court three-wall player I ever competed against.'"

ers Sam and Paul Haber, Marty Decatur, Lou Russo and Fred Lewis first honed their skills. He was inspired by these giants of the game and aspired to one day compete at that level.

Afflicted with bronchial asthma as a child, Wisotsky was often sick, but to his parents' dismay he started to play handball when he was 11. Playing first singles, he became captain of his high school team while fighting the respiratory debilitation of asthma as his prowess developed.

Wisotsky continued playing handball on the club level through college. While attend-

ing dental school, he focused on doubles, in which less running was required. He thrived on the teamwork and camaraderie.

To conserve his limited stamina, Wisotsky concentrated on developing a kill shot from anywhere on the court so he could end rallies quickly and catch his breath. Exploiting his great power, derived from a natural lefty whip swing, Wisotsky developed a very heavy deep serve and hard drives that elicited opportunities to end the point with fly kills as he attacked the wall.

To his good fortune, the asthma was arrested when he reached his mid-20s, and

his breathing problems ended.

One-wall highlights

Continuing to nurture his game at Castle Hill, Wisotsky spread his wings by entering his first USHA one-wall national tournament in 1966 with 41-year-old club player Steve Gallo.

It was at that tournament that I became aware of Wisotsky, as he fought valiantly to overcome the disadvantage of a weaker partner but lost to Steve Sandler and me in our primes in the quarterfinals. In 1967,

Wisotsky made it to the final, once again playing with Gallo and this time losing to Arty Reyer and Joe Danilczyk. He had arrived!

Lou Russo took notice, teaming with Wisotsky the next year and finishing second to Ruby and Carl Obert. In 1969 they took the championship, defeating Reyer and Wally Ulbrich.

Wisotsky credits Gallo with getting him launched, after which he was able to regularly obtain strong partners.

Wisotsky and Russo repeated in 1973 by beating Sandler and Ken Davidoff. When Russo elected to concentrate on singles, Wisotsky teamed with Ulbrich to take the 1974 USHA doubles over Marty Decatur and me in three games and the 1975 AAU doubles in a grueling match over Reuben Gonzales and Alan Serafino.

Two years later, Wisotsky and Ken Ginty beat Mike Dickman and John Reicher in a 21-20 third game to win the national YMCA one-wall tournament. After winning the first game 21-6 and taking a 20-7 lead in the second, Wisotsky/Ginty lost 21-20 and trailed 19-7 in the third game. After fighting back to 20-11, Wisotsky ended the match with a 10-point run featuring his trademark fly kills and devastating drives.

Teaming with an old partner in 1979, Wisotsky played with me and won the USHA doubles over Mark Levine and Morty Katz. In 1980, Wisotsky and I defended the championship, first defeating 25-year-olds Joe Durso and Albert Apuzzi and then Katz and Neil Bocian in the final. This was the fourth time Wisotsky had won back-to-back national doubles championships—



Wisotsky uses his powerful left with Joe Durso and Howie Eisenberg in a one-wall match.

with three different partners.

At 40, Wisotsky teamed with the 50-year-old Reyer in 1983 in the first USHA national indoor one-wall tournament. They split the first two games of the final with Durso/Apuzzi and led 19-6 in Game 3 before their opponents tied the score. Durso/Apuzzi seemed to be proving that youth would be served, but the experience of Wisotsky and Reyer prevailed as they attained the serve. With one handout Wisotsky made the 20th point and, after a long rally, dove parallel to the short line, stretched fully and hit a flat fly kill to take the championship in a classic storybook ending.

Three-wall highlights

Wisotsky employed his formidable one-

wall talents playing three-wall for the first time in 1971 as he and Fred Lewis lost to Paul Haber and Andy Upatnieks in the semi-finals. With a severe bone bruise, Lewis couldn't even put a glove on his right hand, but Wisotsky carried them to three games, with Lewis using only his off hand.

In 1972, playing with Ruby Obert, Wisotsky defeated Vern Roberts/Mike Driscoll and Ginty/Fred Munsch 21-20 in the third game of the final. The very next year, Wisotsky/Obert established their three-wall doubles supremacy by beating Terry Muck/Gordy Pfeiffer in the semis and then Ginty/Munsch again, this time holding them to five points each game.

In an epic 1974 match, Wisotsky, once again playing with a now 40-year-old Ruby Obert, narrowly lost to the great team of Decatur and Haber. After scoring the last point, Haber collapsed in a hypoglycemic spasm.

Playing against Wisotsky's unrelenting power was akin to the weakening barrage suffered by defensive linemen when battered time and time again by 230-pound fullbacks. After losing to Wisotsky, a former top pro known for his strength and stamina said: "I never thought doubles could be so hard. I'm exhausted."

In 1975, Wisotsky teamed with Ulbrich to regain the three-wall doubles title by defeating national four-wall champions Decatur and Steve Lott. They repeated in 1976, beating Vern and Jack Roberts. This reign came to an end in 1977, as Wisotsky/Ulbrich lost in the semifinals to Roberts and Dave Dohman.



Wisotsky patrols the left side at the three-wall nationals in Toledo with Dave Dohman, partner Wally Ulbrich and Vern Roberts on the court.



Wisotsky's record

Joel Wisotsky (left, with Wally Ulbrich) was a rare player who could stand out in any discipline of handball. Here is a look at the 13 national doubles championships and seven second-place finishes that helped boost him into the USHA Hall of Fame.

Nationals victories

- 1969: USHA 1-wall with Russo
- 1973: USHA 1-wall with Russo
- 1974: USHA 1-wall with Ulbrich
- 1975: AAU 1-wall with Ulbrich
- 1977: YMCA 1-wall with Ginty
- 1979: USHA 1-wall with Eisenberg
- 1980: USHA 1-wall with Eisenberg
- 1983: USHA indoor 1-wall with Reyer
- 1972: USHA 3-wall with R. Obert
- 1973: USHA 3-wall with R. Obert

- 1975: USHA 3-wall with Ulbrich
- 1976: USHA 3-wall with Ulbrich
- 1974: Canadian 4-wall with Ginty

Runner-up finishes

- 1967: USHA 1-wall with Gallo
- 1968: USHA 1-wall with Russo
- 1970: USHA 1-wall with Russo
- 1970: AAU 1-wall with Russo
- 1974: USHA 3-wall with R. Obert
- 1974: AAU 1-wall with R. Obert
- 1977: USHA 1-wall with Ulbrich

Four-wall highlights

Starting four-wall when he was 28, Wisotsky initially continued to employ his one-wall talents within the four-wall court as he adapted to the game. In 1972, he teamed with me at the NYAC Invitational, where we faced newly crowned national doubles champions Kent Fusselman and Al Drews. With our partisan supporters exhorting, "Play 'em one-wall," we served, pounded, killed and fly-killed every shot we could, leaving the champs with a total of 14 points in two games.

This scenario was repeated the next year as we once again faced the reigning four-wall national champs, this time Ray Neveau and Simie Fein. With an additional year of four-wall experience, Wisotsky augmented his one-wall talents with an assortment of

newly acquired niceties, like back-wall kills and drives, in a 21-14, 21-8 triumph.

Wisotsky went on to win the 1974 Canadian national four-wall doubles in Quebec with Ginty over Lewis and Frenchy Fortier.

Though he played in only two USHA four-wall nationals, Wisotsky firmly established himself as a great four-wall doubles player. Teaming with Munsch, he won close to 100 four-wall tournaments over a 15-year period, including the NYAC Invitational six times, the Northeast Regional seven times and the San Francisco Olympic Club twice in two tries. The many victories included a number of wins over Russo and Ken Smolack, Sabo and John Marra, Lott and me, Eric Klarman/David Feinstein, John Brinn/Gerard Pagello, John Abate/Jay Garsman, Don Konz/Jay Rowe as well as

every other top Eastern team.

Many matches were memorable. Once, trailing 14-3 to the Capell brothers in the second game of the final of the NYAC Invitational after losing the first, Wisotsky/Munsch came back to win the match with a tremendous run by Wisotsky.

In 1977, Wisotsky/Munsch faced Decatur/Lott in the NYAC final. In what literally couldn't have been any closer, these great teams split the first two games at 21-20 and were tied at 20 in the third game. Wisotsky then hit a left wall-front wall kill that flattened out and was questionably called a skip. Decatur then went in and scored the 21st point. While Decatur and Lott came away with the hardware, Wisotsky had proven once again that he could more than hold his own against national four-wall champions.

In the twilight of his career at 42, playing with Munsch against Sabo and Roberts, then the Nos. 2 and 3 pro singles players, Wisotsky dominated the match with his still irrepressible power and indomitable intensity. He hit more than 30 kill shots, winning the first game easily and pushing through to take the second, although visibly fatigued.

Particularly poignant was the unceasing rooting of Deena Wisotsky for her husband's team throughout the match. The only sound that could be heard through the ceiling-to-floor glass back wall was through the referee's microphone, with one exception. All the players could hear Deena encouraging her husband and Munsch.

Wisotsky credits Deena's unflinching support throughout his handball career as a large factor in his success.



Wisotsky in '74 one-wall semis with Ruby Obert against Goldfarb and Levine.