

# Ultimate honor for Reyer

By Dan Flickstein

As a career one-wall player, I felt both pride and gratitude while reading Howie Eisenberg's autobiographical account of being accepted to the USHA Hall of Fame.

Eisenberg may be the most naturally gifted of all one-wallers, and he did indeed hit harder than any player I've ever seen.

But this year, joining him in that same Hall of Fame, is a man who in every way as a player is Eisenberg's antithesis:

- Whereas Eisenberg was tall, sinewy and graceful, Arty Reyer was short, awkward and without obvious evidence of muscle.

- Eisenberg looked like he could knock out an elephant with one of his power drives, while Reyer appeared as though his hardest shot couldn't bruise a mouse.

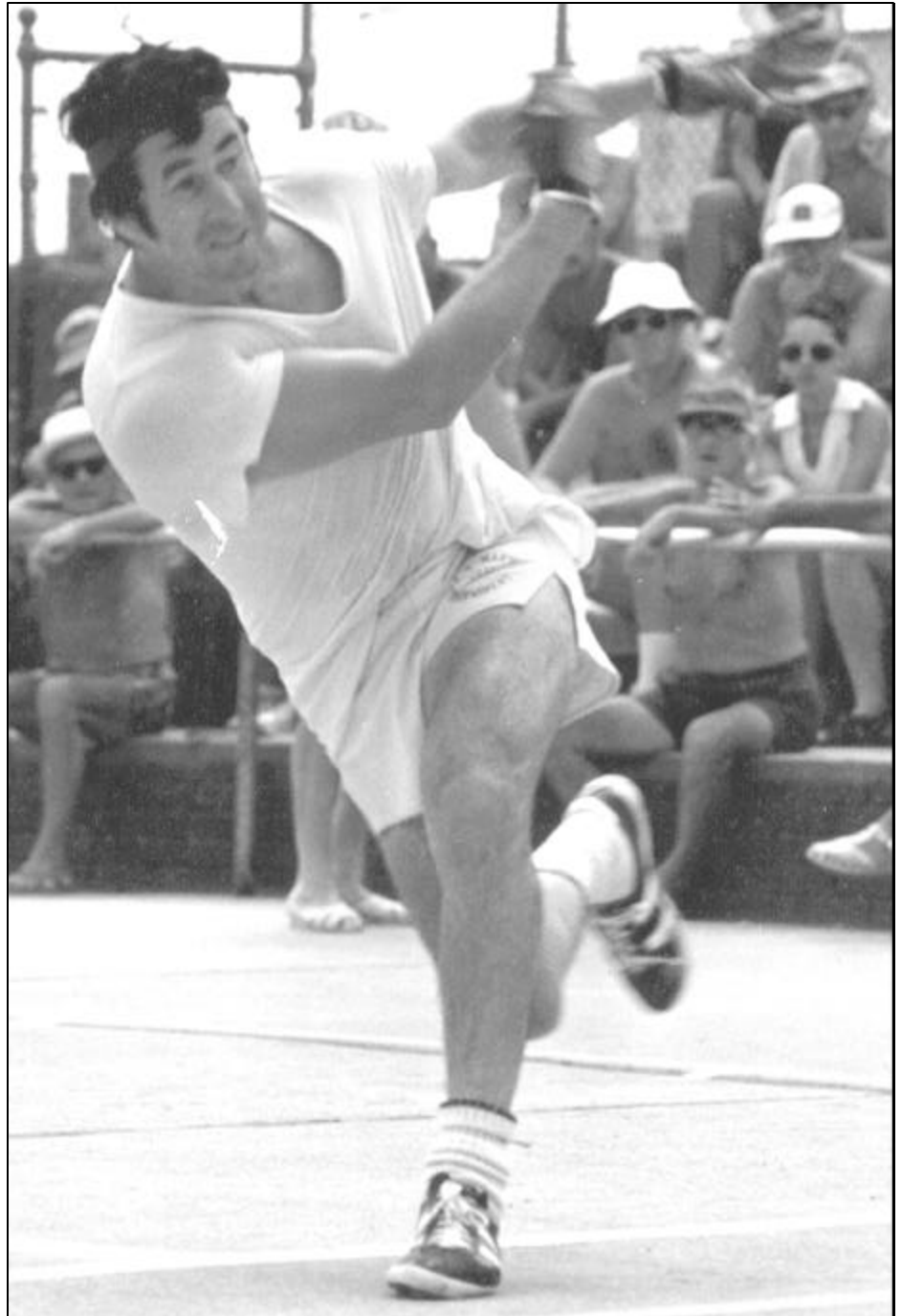
- Eisenberg's long legs enabled him to glide over great spans of court to unleash kill shots, but Reyer's disabled leg limited his backward movement to some extent.

- Eisenberg looked like the athlete who modeled for the figurine atop the champion's trophy, but Reyer's shape could not have led anyone to suspect he would excel at the top level of a sport that demands the skill and power of an Eisenberg.

Nevertheless, Arty Reyer brought a flair to the game. Through quick movement, incredible reflexes and the sharpest of handball minds, he amassed 40 one-wall national doubles championships.

I observed him make the ungettable gettable. I saw him tap-kill the drives of the strongest hitters of his era, including the three Oberts, Ken Davidoff, Wally Ulbrich, Joel Wisotsky and Eisenberg himself. In fact, if Eisenberg was one-wall's irresistible force, surely Reyer was its immovable object.

The greatest doubles match I ever saw was in 1966 at the Brownsville Boys Club. Eisenberg and Steve Sandler were pitted against Reyer and Joe Danilczyk. While Eisenberg and Danilczyk slugged and sliced enough to annihilate nearly anyone, Sandler kept the ball in play for his partner, as Reyer did for his. From a 19-14 third-game deficit, it was Reyer who carried his team to a 21-19 triumph over a magnificent tandem.



Reyer, a true one-wall legend, is the latest inductee into the USHA Hall of Fame.

The volleys were consistently intense, with 20 or more returns common before a point was tallied, more often than not as a result of a seemingly accidental "dink" from one of Reyer's small hands.

Reyer's reputation grew among one-wallers so no matter whom he played with,

the opposition's strategy involved hitting the ball to that person. It simply didn't pay to drive or kill at Reyer. The results of such mistaken effort would be premature self-exhaustion or setting up a kill for Reyer.

In 1977 Reyer had perhaps his greatest personal victory. The combination of Ul-

Ulbrich/Wisotsky was the proven invincible monster of the era. Paired that year with Al Torres, who had yet to peak in doubles, Reyer advanced to the final, where he was, in all the pundits' figuring, assured of second place. And once Ulbrich/Wisotsky held Reyer/Torres to 12 in Game 1, predictions seemed all too apparent. Yet Handball magazine records the following summary of the rest of the contest:

"Pressure is Arty Reyer's middle name: how well he handles it and how well he can dish it out! One might have thought that if Ulbrich/Wisotsky could be beaten, it would be at the mercy of an Al Torres with devastating kills and serves jumping like kangaroos. And certainly Al contributed his share.

"But it was little Arty Reyer, a man of no power of which to speak, a man who cannot, because of a physical handicap, run great spreads of the court, a man who does not even remotely resemble the typical athlete, who mesmerized and stifled the seemingly limitless cannon offerings of Ulbrich/Wisotsky. Drive after drive, kill after kill were returned until Arty would select one for a tap shot that would barely touch the wall and roll. Consistency during the match revealed Arty was not miscuing, but rather utilizing every ounce of skill he had developed through years of competition.

"With this sensational victory, 12-21, 21-16, 21-18...Arty Reyer [is] tabbed as one of the greatest doubles men of all time—a man of whom it has been said, 'He plays only as hard as he has to.'"

Reyer has won 10 open one-wall national doubles events with seven different players. In 1966 and '67 he won with Danilczyk, in '70 with Marty Decatur, in '71 and '73 with Ulbrich, in '74 with Mike Dikman, in '76 and '77 with Torres, in '81 with Mark Levine, and in '83 with Wisotsky.

Furthermore, Reyer was a finalist in the national one-wall doubles on seven other occasions, partnering with Davidoff in '63, Joe Rispoli in '64, Charlie Danilczyk in '65 and '66, Eisenberg in '65 and Joe Danilczyk in '67 and '69 (some are USHA titles, some are AAU crowns).

Reyer shared his talents with other fine one-wallers as well, always advancing at least to the quarterfinals. For example, Ken Gamble, Pete Stefano and Neal Bocian benefited from having played on Reyer's team. Reyer's greatest cheerleader, wife Sheila, teased me recently that the reason I never

### Reyer's record

A summary of all Arty Reyer's records boasts the following accolades:

- Most one-wall national seniors and masters doubles titles: 25.
- Most one-wall national open doubles titles: 10.
- Won national open doubles titles with seven different partners.
- Most one-wall national masters doubles titles: 18.
- Won national masters doubles with seven different partners.
- Won 10 consecutive national one-wall masters doubles titles, breaking Vic Hershkowitz's long-standing record of nine straight national three-wall open titles.
- Won one-wall national masters and one-wall national open in the same year four times ('74, '77, '81, '83).
- Won a national championship 12 consecutive years.
- Won a national championship 17 consecutive years in which he entered, from 1973-90 (did not enter in '85).
- First player ever to win national open doubles and national masters doubles in the same year and in the same tournament (1974).
- Only player ever to win three different divisions in one year: seniors, masters and golden (1989).
- Only masters doubles team (with Joel Wisotsky) ever to defeat an open doubles team (Albert Apuzzi/Joe Durso) in the final (1983).
- Only golden player to ever win a national open doubles title (1983).

won a national doubles title is that I never asked her husband to be my partner.

Although Reyer continued winning national open doubles events well beyond 40—he even won one at 50!—once he began his fourth decade, he became the ultimate masters player. No one is close to approaching his record 25 national one-wall seniors and masters doubles championships.

Similar to his open titles, Reyer propelled no fewer than six men to the highest prize, including Charlie Danilczyk, Joe Danilczyk four times, Rispoli, John Fazio twice, Roy Myers and Torres 15 times, including indoor and outdoor tournaments.

In 1995, having missed several years of sanctioned handball, Reyer returned at 62. Teaming with Jim Tomasulo, he attained a golden masters championship. Then, in 2000 and 2001, he vanquished all competition with Tom Vitale, adding two super masters titles to his endless collection. Moreover, he had helped create champions of two more players.

Reyer's incomparable achievements as a one-wall doubles star by far overshadow any recognition of his singles ability. Nevertheless, despite the challenges he faced because of his leg, which had been severely disabled early in his boyhood, he was better than merely respectable in singles. Often he advanced to the round of 16 or the quarters, which before the '70s meant defeating at least three entrants. In fact, he loved the singles tournaments at Brownsville because he felt it prepared him for the contests to come in doubles.

But Reyer experienced his best singles outing in '67, battling to the national final, where he earned 13 and 14 against the fantastic Sandler, the first pure one-waller inducted into the Hall of Fame. In Reyer's quarterfinal, he eliminated none other than the brilliant Eisenberg. Undaunted as always despite having been trounced in the first game, Reyer managed to squeak out a win in the second. This likely evened the odds because Eisenberg's Achilles' heel was known to be poor stamina. Needless to say, Reyer took complete advantage.

Once miraculously past Eisenberg, Reyer needed still another blessing from heaven, for he had to face the fabulous Ruby Obert, deservedly inducted into the Hall of Fame in '87. Unlike Eisenberg, Obert had no discernible weakness. On paper, he appeared much better than Reyer in singles. He hit much harder, and with either hand. He ran much faster, served much better and planned at least as well. Moreover, Obert's endurance was already legendary.

The entire match took less than an hour. Reyer left Obert with four in Game 1 and six plus bewilderment in Game 2. One-wall's greatest doubles retriever had converted himself, for that brief time span, to the game's greatest singles shotmaker. Serving softly (what else could he do?) to the long line, Reyer "hopped" quickly to the wall on Obert's returns. Whether lazy spinning lofts or steaming drives, Reyer deftly overhanded angles to the left or underhanded tap kills

to all sectors of the court, all out of the frustrated Obert's reach. It was truly a phenomenal display by a man who had never appeared capable of playing singles at all.

But watching Reyer on the court was clearly not the same as playing against him. Small though he was, it was difficult to outmaneuver him for front-court position. The late Marc Goldberg, always a rough-and-tumble competitor, would say during and after every match we played against Reyer: "I bump him, step on his feet, elbow him, kick him. I can't get him away from the wall. And he never says a word about it!"

When an opponent did gain position on Reyer, he could stiff-arm lofts or pat seeming accidental kills. Attempting to drive through him was nearly futile.

It seems most obvious that Reyer's greatest assets were his catlike reflexes and court strategy.

"I play defensively," said Reyer. "I plan it so that they don't score points. I watch my opponents, how they stand, how their faces look. I learned to read hooks. It all helps me know how to handle an opponent."

Only a few are aware of another of Reyer's weapons: his immeasurable determination. Unlike the verbal, ever-cheering Oberts, the diving, ever-running Sandler, or the vituperative Joe Durso, Reyer's indomitable will to compete was always calm and controlled—but ever present.

On several occasions his fierce desire compelled him to return to handball against doctor's orders. In '72 he flagrantly disobeyed his physician, who'd ordered him to avoid playing on the torn Achilles' tendon (on his good leg) for a minimum of two years. Yet Reyer was playing only four months later, defending one championship after another. In October '96, he underwent replacement of his left hip (the good one). Told to play "lightly" and never in tournaments, Reyer, by the new millennium, had won his first of two tournaments with Vitale.

As Reyer's handball accomplishments grew, recognition for him began—and far before his acceptance to the Hall of Fame. On May 9, 1974, the Metropolitan Association of the AAU presented him with the title of Most Outstanding Handball Player of the Metropolitan Area.

By 1980, Sorrel Feldman awarded Reyer a plaque at the New York State Championships reading "Greatest Player of the Quarter Century."



**Reyer fires in the '95 national golden doubles final against Flickstein and Graham Palmore. Not pictured is Jim Tomasulo.**

On Oct. 17, 1992, the Elks Club #878 of Queens hosted a testimonial for him. During the festivities he spoke with great sensitivity to more than 100 friends who'd come to honor a man who had given them some of their finest handball days.

Such tributes for a handball player indicate that the man did more than merely hit a ball to a wall better than almost anyone else. And, of course, it did. Beyond being perhaps the greatest of all one-wall doubles champions, Reyer arranged and directed numerous tournaments and exhibitions. Often he devoted private time to tour the high schools of New York to give instruction and demonstrations.

As a member of the Elks Club, for which handball is a popular activity, Reyer promoted the game by recruiting novices and directing an annual tournament for people with handicaps and disabilities. If anyone can be said to be a carrier of goodwill from the world of one-wall handball, Arty Reyer, a man of great modesty, is a natural qualifier.

In 1983, Handball magazine published my observations of Reyer's record and character, which said in part:

"Arty Reyer is surely a glowing tribute to one-wall handball. Always a gentleman, both on and off the court, he is admired and respected by everyone in the game—even those he has defeated time and again. ... All handballers should echo that sentiment for Arty Reyer—a superlative one-waller, perhaps the best—and a superb human being."

In 1991, Father James Tighe of Our Lady of Grace Church in Brooklyn echoed that sentiment when he recommended Arty to the Hall of Fame selection committee:

"I have had the privilege of knowing Arty for about 25 years and count him among my closest friends. We met on a handball court, our common interest. It didn't take long before we found many other things in common. ... Living a life with solid values is not necessarily a claim to the handball Hall of Fame, but teaching them to young people within the context of coaching handball, coupled with his extraordinary record as a player, is worth consideration. ... Thank God there are people like Arty Reyer."

Nearly 20 years before Father Tighe's recommendation, many others were also noticing Reyer's class act as a player and as a man. Ken Smolack, a former Handball magazine columnist, wrote in June 1974:

"He is a real champion who has overcome physical handicaps to attain his championship level. I have never seen Arty complain about or use his handicap as an excuse for any setbacks. Besides being a great handball player, Arty is a super guy."

After Reyer accepted the AAU award as best metropolitan handball player, Joe Iannola succinctly summed up his distinction: "They couldn't have given the award to a nicer guy."

On Nov. 13, 2001, an evening when Reyer normally would have played handball, he suffered a stroke. Sheila said his conditioning and determination helped keep him alive. Like the unyielding athlete he is, Reyer planned and worked at rehabilitation. First he read everything he could get his hands on to keep his mind alert. By April 2002, he increased his independence by reviving his ability to drive. Soon thereafter he resumed playing handball, his best therapy, in the hope that it would again become more than a social activity.

"I play for enjoyment," Reyer has said, "but tournaments give you incentive."

Arty, Sheila and daughter Heidi had always made handball an occasion for family togetherness.

"They take pride in Arty's accomplishments and always welcome his handball cronies in their comfortable downstairs playroom," said good friend Paula Rodenas.

Anyone who has ever played with Reyer has enjoyed the shrill shrieks of joyous encouragement from Sheila, who attended all of her husband's matches. Now she may offer still another shout of happiness. The handball world has given her husband its highest honor—for now and forever!