

Torres: A torrid love of handball

Longtime 1-wall champ enters Hall on strength of his talent, character

By Dan Flickstein

Ask one-wallers about Al Torres, and one word before any others seems to bound from their lips: “Gentleman.” That’s always followed by “on and off the court.”

“Al Torres is the classiest player I’ve ever seen, never complaining about a call or an opponent,” said one-waller Gary Dueno.

But neither Torres nor any other athlete has been selected for a Hall of Fame for being polite. And for Torres, this year’s inductee into the USHA Hall of Fame, his stunning record speaks for itself: 41 national championships, comprising 11 in open divisions and 30 in age-group events. This does not include his seemingly endless runner-up and semifinal finishes in national tournaments or his invitational titles.

Torres, who was inducted Nov. 14 in New York, has won four one-wall open singles championships and seven doubles titles.

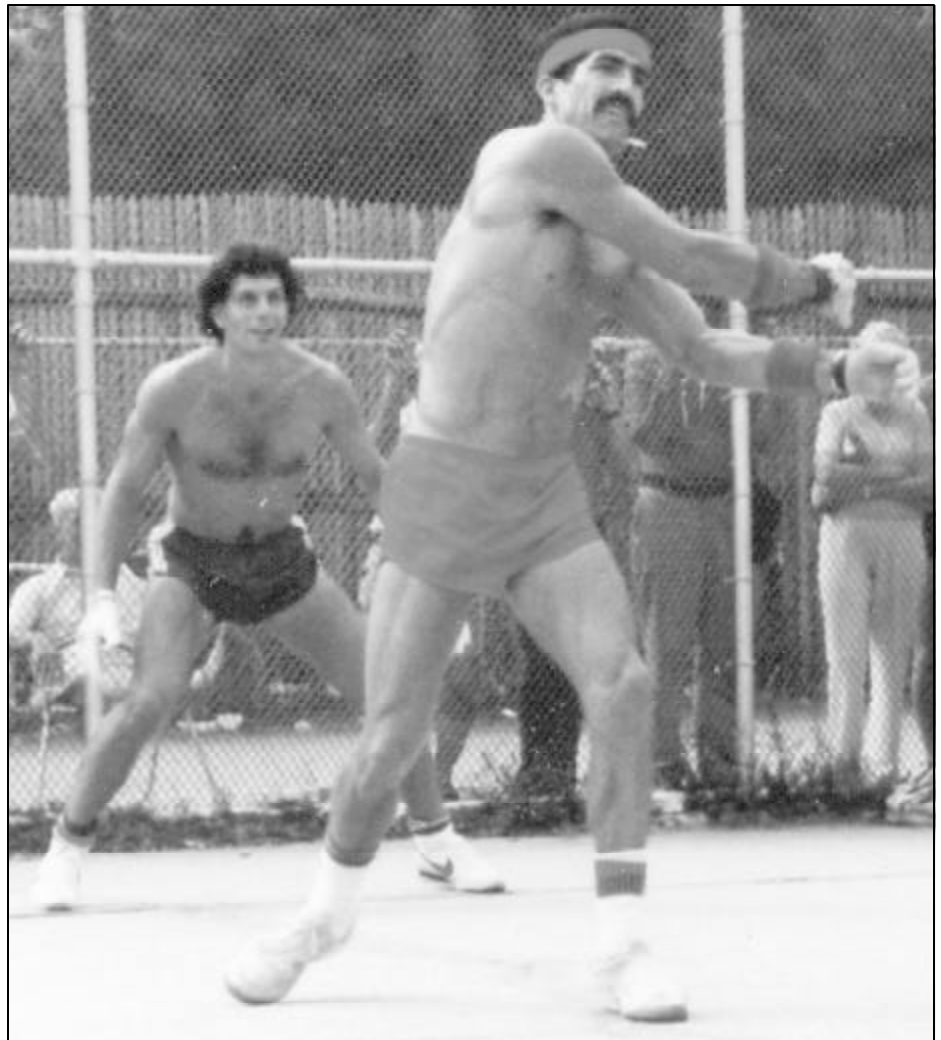
He also has won the 35-plus singles five times: in 1987, when he was nearly 45, as well as ’88, ’89, ’90 and 2000—when he was 56!

In 40-plus singles his record is even more remarkable, having won seven straight years from 1983-89 and then in 2000—again at 56!

Torres has won the 35-plus doubles eight times, seven of them with Arty Reyer: the 1986-88 indoor and outdoor titles and the ’89 outdoor crown. He added his eighth in 2000, once again at 56, when he teamed with Eric Klarman.

As a 40-plus doubles competitor, Torres holds eight championships, all with Reyer. They won indoors and outdoors in 1984, ’87 and ’88 and took one title in ’86 and ’89.

And in 2003, at nearly 60, Torres joined Glen Hall to win the national 50-plus doubles.



Torres’ conditioning and competitiveness have become legendary among one-wallers.

But boldly declaring Torres the “classiest” player and enumerating his many championships in no way represents what he has meant to one-wall handball.

By 1989, Torres began to be recognized as an extraordinary phenomenon. Despite having turned 45, there seemed to be no deterioration in his body or his ability to compete at a very high level.

Five years later, he had retained his incredible conditioning. At 50 he was the same

as he had been at 45, which was the same as he had been at 35, even 25. Maybe, in fact, at 50 he was actually better than he had been at 25, when he had a smashing but erratic opposite hand.

Throughout Torres’ illustrious career in handball, he has played against the game’s best. His efforts began with the long-defunct Spalding pink ball at McKarren Park in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. There he beat all of the local players. He attended East New

Torres’ national open singles championships

- 1974: d. Wally Ulbrich.
- 1977: d. Ruben Gonzalez.
- 1980: d. Joe Durso.
- 1983: d. Joe Durso.

Torres’ national open doubles championships

- 1976: with Arty Reyer d. Howie Eisenberg/Marty Katzen (AAU).
- 1977: with Arty Reyer d. Wally Ulbrich/Joel Wisotsky.
- 1985: with Albert Apuzzi d. Ed Golden/Eric Vidal.
- 1987: with Paul Lonergan (indoors).*
- 1988: with Paul Lonergan (indoors).*
- 1993: with Robert Sostre d. Howie Kadish/Fred Sylvia.
- 1996: with Robert Sostre d. Ed Maisonet/Paul Williams. *(complete records unavailable)

Torres competes against Durso at the one-wall nationals. Torres beat Durso in the final twice.



York Vocational High School, where he was training to try out for the track team.

“I loved to run,” Torres says, “but one day I was playing handball while the handball coach was watching. He asked me to try out for the handball team. I played the first singles player and beat him easily. From then on I beat all the No. 1 guys in my division except one—Winfield Ballance. But my coach told me I did great to score 14 because no one around could come close to beating him.”

During this time Torres met Tony Quintero, who was already a strong contender on the national scene. They played one another in a park in Brooklyn. When Torres beat Quintero, the latter brought a “serving specialist” to play him. But Torres recalls that after a while, he beat him too.

Quintero, in a manner of speaking, took Torres under his wing, bringing him to Avenue P to challenge Steve Sandler, the reigning one-wall champion. By that time Torres had already won two local tournaments at West Fourth Street in Manhattan, each time defeating a most respectable Al Tomba.

But Sandler was another story.

“I got a seven-point spot,” Torres remembers, “but I couldn’t beat him.”

Through Quintero’s encouragement, Torres began to enter national tournaments in Brownsville, Brooklyn. There he played Marty “the Farmer” Cushman.

“He gave me a real schooling back then,” says Torres, “especially because I had a weak right in those days.”

Soon after, though, Torres began to at-

tract spectator attention to his explosive potential. During the era when Ken Davidoff was clearly the best one-wall singles player, he bested Torres by a single point 25-24.

On another occasion at Brownsville in the mid-’60s, Torres was trouncing Sandler in a one-game match. Sandler was doing everything he knew how to win, including threatening to quit over faulty refereeing.

But Sandler eventually struck the final tally while Torres was left with 24—and probably not just a bit of internal frustration from Sandler’s antics. In his typical fashion, however, Torres had been quiet and professional despite Sandler’s histrionics.

Torres also remembers his first great moment in doubles while playing with his brother, Angelo, whom Torres describes as a “good B player.”

“We played Kenny Holmes and Wally Ulbrich,” he says, “and I had never seen any guys hit so hard. But my brother and I played great, though we got beat 25-24.”

Torres also recollects having played with Quintero against Vic Hershkowitz and Ruby Obert, but Torres felt his partner had “too much respect” for these revered players.

“After we lost,” Torres recalls, “I felt back then that I needed a stronger partner, even though I admired Tony.”

In the early ’70s, Torres and his brother faced Reyer and Mike Dikman. Torres recounts the end of the third game with the score very close:

“I sliced two shots to the left, which should have been points. When Arty punch-killed the first one, I said, ‘What the ...?’

But when he punch-killed the second, I was completely shocked. It was after that match that Arty came over to me and asked me to team up with him.”

Together Torres and Reyer amassed a remarkable record, including the 1977 doubles title against a team everybody believed to be invincible—Ulbrich and Joel Wisotsky, the latter of whom was inducted into the Hall of Fame last year. It was truly one of Torres’ greatest handball moments.

“My first great singles moment,” Torres reflects, “came in the mid-’60s at Coney Island against a kid everyone was saying was so great, Mark Levine. But I put it all together that day and beat him.”

By the time the ’70s rolled around and the AAU nationals had changed venues to Brighton Beach Baths, Torres was regarded as one of the most formidable singles players in one-wall. In ’71 and ’72 he reached the semifinals in huge, impressive draws.

In ’73 the tournament moved back to Coney Island, but that year Brighton Beach Baths invited eight of the top singles players to compete in a round-robin invitational event. The winner was to be decided not merely by won-lost record but by total points earned against total points allowed. This was to ensure that every man would play his best during every point.

On the last day of the tournament, Sandler, who had won all his games, faced Torres, who had lost twice. But on this day Torres wouldn’t have lost to anybody. Instead of serving to the left, as he did to almost all his opponents, Torres moved to the center of the court to serve perhaps a dozen or more aces past Sandler’s right—no small task. And when the ball was meagerly returned, Torres simply killed it.

Sandler was held to a single point, probably the worst trouncing he had ever taken, and he dropped in the tournament rankings from No. 1 all the way to No. 4. It was one of Torres’ greatest games and greatest memories.

Still another notable singles triumph came in ’74, when Torres won his first open championship against Ulbrich. In the first game Ulbrich was superb, doing what he always did best, pounding and blasting with ferocious power. But when he reached 20, somehow Torres also had that total. They must have put each other out at least five times until Torres scored the last point.

In the second game it was all Torres, with

Ulbrich unable to cope with the baffling array of hooks and power. At 17-0, Torres smashed Ulbrich's serve into his opponent's eye—before eye protection had become mandatory—and the match abruptly concluded. Once concern for Ulbrich was relieved, those in attendance began expressing amazement for what Torres had done in defeating so powerful a champion.

Torres claims Ulbrich was one of his toughest foes, along with Sandler, Dikman, Al Apuzzi, Danny Maroney and, of course, Joe Durso.

It was against Durso in the final of another invitational, this time at Shore Haven Beach Club in the Bronx in 1982, when Torres experienced yet one more of his most memorable wins. In the final in front of a huge crowd, Durso was far ahead 30-18 when Torres began an astounding comeback.

Against Durso this was far more than simply difficult. Durso had skills superior even to Torres. He could run faster, hit harder and had what seemed an endless variety of shots. This was all in addition to Durso's fabulous defense.

But the Torres heart did not beat in Durso's chest. When the game finished, it was Torres who struck the 31st point, while Durso still clung to 30.

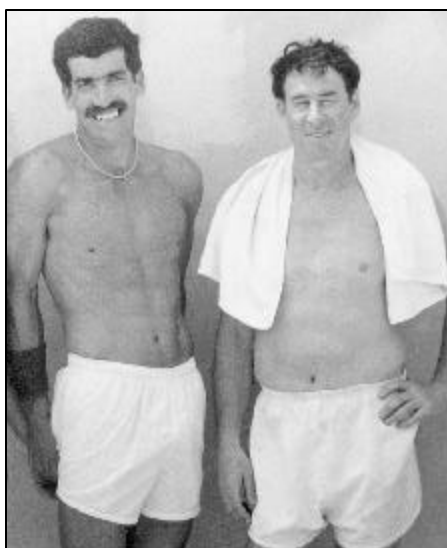
For 35 years Torres has been at or near the top of the open divisions of one-wall singles and doubles. He enjoyed playing doubles, especially with Reyer and, later, Klarman.

"What I enjoyed most about playing with Al was his ability to always bring out the best in me," Klarman said. "Our style as partners was complementary, but what I found most beneficial was the mental toughness he forced me to have on each and every point. This came out of sheer respect I had for him as a champion. Without saying a word, he was always able to inspire me and provide the confidence through encouragement that is so vital for a doubles team."

Torres also experienced moments of glory with Robert Sostre, Paul Lonergan, Paul Williams and Apuzzi, but he admits he prefers singles.

"Doubles is a little confining," Torres says. "Besides, I'd rather not have to depend on someone else."

One person he has come to depend on is his wife of more than 20 years, Cheryl. Her view of handball and her maintenance of Torres' spectacular health has been instru-



Torres with longtime partner Arty Reyer.

mental in his athletic achievements. In 1994, Torres said of Cheryl: "My wife's really changed me a lot. She cooks a lot of stuff with vegetables, pastas, and rice and beans. At first I had a hard time with it. But now I really like it. The portions I eat are not as big as I used to eat in order to fill me up."

Today Cheryl says she is still careful about what they eat.

"We tend to eat mostly vegetables, a lot of chick peas and lentils, salads with spinach and raddichio," she says. "Once in a while, we'll have some meat."

His diet combined with the demands of his job—carrying a 35- to 40-pound bag up and down stairs for 3 to 4 miles a day as an elevator repairman—keep Torres in shape.

"I'm 6 feet and 175 now," he said. "I get up early and do a lot of crunches to keep from getting hurt on my job."

He and his wife have one son, Al Jr., now 38, from Torres' previous marriage and one daughter, Liza, 31, from his wife's former marriage. Liza has given them two grand-



Torres and his real doubles partner, Cheryl.

daughters, Madison, 4, and Emma, 1. All have gotten along well through the relationship, which began in a most unusual way.

Cheryl had been a paddleball player and spectator at Coney Island in the early 1980s. Quiet and reserved, she became used to enjoying the sun and watching some of the better players compete while waiting for her daughter to return from school. Among the players was Durso, who asked her, in his inimitable way, to attend a match with him.

"Tomorrow I'm going to play a broken-down old man in the Bronx. Do you want to go?" Durso asked.

After numerous stipulations were agreed to, including bringing her daughter and Morris Levitsky, one-wall's greatest referee, Cheryl did indeed go with Durso to Castle Hill Beach Club—where the broken-down old man, Al Torres, won the championship by beating Durso 21-19 in the third game.

Only moments after the game, Torres, who apparently had seen Cheryl before, approached her. He spoke with her for some time, then proceeded to play ball with both Cheryl and Liza. Cheryl recalls her departure with her daughter and Levitsky from the Bronx that day.

"Joe was behind a fence, with Albert trying to calm him down," she says. "He was screaming at Al, 'Not only did you beat me. You also stole my girl.'"

"A few days later, Al called me. I had no idea where he got my number. Then I remembered I had given it to Sheila Reyer, who pushed for us to get together."

Cheryl says she's extremely happy with Torres and the fact that he loves handball. Torres says the game is therapeutic for him, and Cheryl agrees.

"He's never angry at home because he releases his tension playing ball," she says.

On the court Torres apparently unwinds from stress only by pounding that hard little ball. He surely doesn't do it in any other way because on the court he is as quiet as Cheryl says he is at home. His deportment, gentle and agreeable, and his handball abilities, awesome and varied, have elevated him to the highest status a player can achieve—the Hall of Fame.

"It should have happened 10 years ago," a devoted Cheryl says.

But it has happened now. And no one in one-wall disputes the authenticity of the recognition for Torres from the entire handball world. He is exceptionally worthy of the honor.