

'Poetry in motion' on court

Vern Roberts inducted into USHA Hall of Fame

By Carl Porter

Ever since that day 33 years ago when, at the age of 15, he whipped his pop for the Cincinnati city singles title, Vern Roberts has been piling up handball championships—most of them USHA national three- and four-wall crowns.

Right after an outstanding collegiate career at Lake Forest, at the 1976 nationals in Las Vegas, Vern blazed through a field of 141 entries to win the national amateur division. That was the same year he joined the pro tour, losing in the first round in his debut at Wilmington, N.C., but then shocking the handball world with a second-round upset of the brilliant young Naty Alvarado in St. Paul.

Vern played in every pro stop for the next 15 years, winning stops over John Sabo in Austin in 1980 and over Alvarado in Chicago in 1985 and 1986.

His game peaked from 1985 through 1987, as he finished all three years ranked second on the pro circuit and played brilliantly in both doubles and singles in the three- and four-wall nationals. In '85 Vern lost to Alvarado in the four-wall final but turned around to beat Naty for the three-wall title. In '86 he again lost to Naty in the four-wall final but won his second straight three-wall singles over Jon Kendler—in addition to going to Canada to defeat Ireland's Duxie Walsh for the world singles title. Finally, in 1987, before an on-court collision and back injury brought an abrupt end to his open championships, Vern took Naty to three games in a rousing four-wall finale before losing, then collected his third straight three-wall crown over Kendler.

In all, Vern reached the four-wall national



Family is paramount to Roberts, joined at the induction ceremony by (above) daughter Samantha, wife Gina and son Adam and (below) by his extended family.



Painter Alvis Grant presents Roberts with his Hall of Fame induction portrait.

semifinals eight times, meeting Naty in the final three times. In three-wall, he finished first three times and second once.

And that's just singles. His record in three- and four-wall doubles places him among the two or three most successful doubles players ever. Vern and brother Jack

were three-wall runners-up in 1976 before he teamed with Dave Dohman to win the three-wall doubles in 1977 and '78. Then, in 1980, Vern and Naty formed one of the most invincible doubles teams in handball history. From '80 through '85 they won six straight three-wall championships, never losing outdoors. Meanwhile, indoors, Roberts and Dohman finished second in both '79 and '80 before Roberts and Alvarado went on a four-year streak of four-wall titles from 1982 through '85, plus winning the pro tour doubles stop held in 1986. Also, Vern and Kendler were the four-wall runners-up in 1986.

In all, Vern racked up 12 USHA three- and four-wall doubles championships (13 if you count the doubles pro stop) and four second-place finishes.

Despite two major back surgeries and a pair of elbow operations that included two metal plates and a dozen screws in a left arm that still won't straighten out, Vern



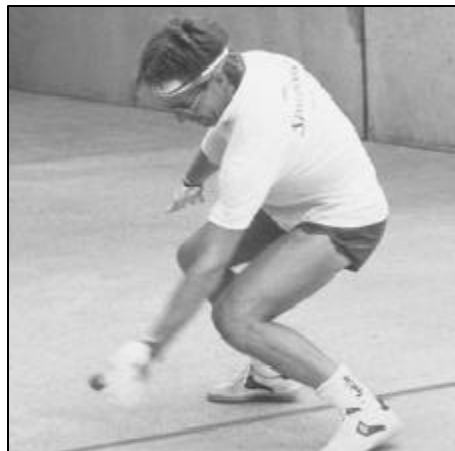
The handball-playing Roberts brothers—Terry, Vern, Jack and Chris—share a domestic moment several years ago.



As a young player in Cincinnati, Roberts learned the game from his dad, Vern Sr.

hasn't slowed down since his days of open competition came to an end. He's already a USHA Grand Master, with 14 age-group championships—and counting.

Vern, of course, was weaned on handball. He grew up in a handball family with a father, Vern Sr., brothers Jack and Chris and sisters Allison and Jennifer—all of whom have been champions. Not blessed with raw power or an unreturnable serve, he painstakingly worked over the years on developing a patient precision game that capitalized on his quickness and ambidexterity.

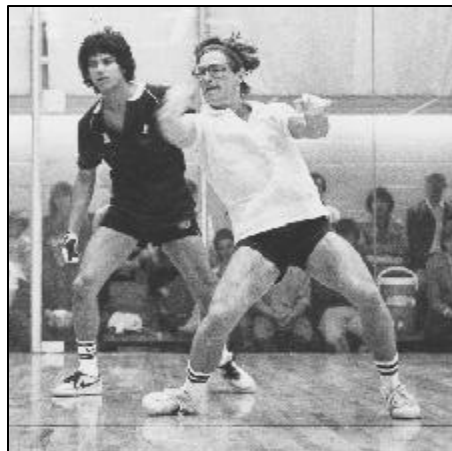


His mother and one brother are left-handed. His father and another brother are right-handed. Vern fell somewhere in between. He writes, eats and wields a racket left-handed but throws and serves a handball right-handed. To compensate for a lack of innate power during his early years on the outdoor courts, Vern developed his favorite shot, a laserlike left-handed fist that he could fire with pinpoint accuracy.

Just ask Naty Alvarado and Fred Lewis—two of the giants of handball history, both Hall of Famers themselves, and the dominant players of the era in which Vern played in open competition.

"I always knew I would have a difficult match when I played Vern because of his quickness and control with both hands," says Naty. "I knew everything was going to be down the walls—actually *on* the walls—in both three-wall and four-wall.

"That's why I loved playing doubles with him. He would play the left and the other team could not keep up with his ceiling and pass shots. They would get frustrated and make mistakes and leave me a lot of setups. He made me look good. Without him, I don't think I could have won as many



doubles or singles titles."

Lewis, who rates Vern as one of the five best defensive players ever, says: "Vern Roberts was one of the best all-around players—both three-wall and four-wall, both doubles and singles—of all time. Vern never left anything outside the court. He was one of the most colorful players ... quick, agile and smart."

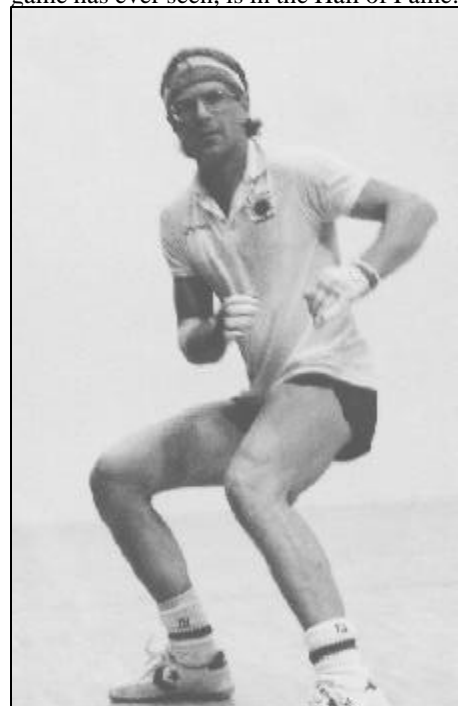
Pete Tyson, a former doubles champion himself and one of the foremost students and teachers of the game, coached against Vern in college, taught handball camps with him in later years and has watched him closely throughout his playing days.

"Vern was—and still is—the smoothest player I ever saw," says Pete. "If it weren't for some unfortunate injuries, he definitely would have won his share of USHA four-wall singles titles. His defensive off hand was as good as Paul Haber's, and his court coverage was as good as Terry Muck's.

"Vern bleeds handball blue. It's extremely rare that a person could be inducted into the USHA Hall of Fame as either a player or a contributor, but Vern is that rare person."

Pete's right. Smooth was the word for Vern's handball game. He never ran after the ball; he glided and flowed. He was the personification of poetry in motion on the court.

And now Vern Roberts the player, possessor of one of the sweetest swings the game has ever seen, is in the Hall of Fame.



Vintage Roberts: the trademark left-hand fist, the catlike reflexes and the ultimate combination of balance and ambidexterity.