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*FROM USHA PRESIDENT MIKE STEELE*

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*2 OCTOBER 2009*

# 1 tragic loss ... but a chance for big gains

When writing this column, I am usually pretty excited about sharing good news or ideas about how the USHA seeks to promote handball.

The column you're reading today is not one I am excited about.

As someone who cares about handball deeply, you are probably aware by now that the handball community lost Dr. John Aronen in late July. All such losses are solemn occasions, no doubt. But Dr. John was truly a special man in the handball universe. I never played handball with him. But I know very well many who did, and from listening to them, I know of Dr. John's more than 40 years of devotion to the game.

Obviously, as a physician with a specialty in sports injuries, Dr. John blessed handball and its players with his keen insights, helpful suggestions and tireless dedication. I know of no one else who would take phone calls at home from anyone, anywhere in the country, to help strangers heal from their injuries.

Dr. John was recently inducted into the USHA Hall of Fame as a contributor. His illness did not permit him to be there, but the honor was graciously accepted by his son Chad. This was one of the most poignant Hall of Fame moments I've seen — the physician unable to be there due to illness but his spirit embracing all who attended.

Dr. John accumulated a huge body of knowledge about handball and its many contributions to human well-being. I can only hope that we will somehow be able to retain this body of knowledge and use it to help advance our game. His is one of the most lasting contributions that could possibly be made. I never took leave of him without expressing my sincere thanks for all he did on behalf of the game.

Go with our prayers and thanks, once again, Dr. John.

## *Clearing the air on the WPH*

Another factor that makes this column difficult is that it is past time for me to speak much more directly of various issues that have beset the USHA for quite some time.

As you probably know, in recent years other handball organizations have emerged, with varying degrees of success. A few years ago, the PHA promoted pro handball, but this did not work out very well. Today, the WPH has emerged as another organization that also seeks to be involved in handball.

The USHA and the WPH have worked together on several important projects.

Nevertheless, one of the things I have had to learn as USHA president, frankly, is that in this position you get terribly beaten up on a regular basis — usually by people who don't know a thing about the issues. They have viewpoints, to be sure, opinions aplenty, but actual and direct knowledge, facts, data — not much.

The claims made by such people are amazing, ridiculous, hurtful and destructive. This is very frustrating. What should one do?

We chose to take the high road, remain professional, stay committed to the highest ethical principles and tough it out.

It has not been easy.

The USHA is the governing body of the game. It is entrusted



**Dr. John, working his magic at the nationals several years ago, represented part of what is good about handball and the USHA.**

by its members — and non-members, whether they realize it or not — with preserving the history of the game's developments, its most famous players and developers and a large number of artifacts and archives, but also recognizing all of its champions, from pre-teens to octogenarians.

The USHA is also the prime source of most of the game's necessary equipment, such as balls, gloves and eyeguards. The association establishes, communicates and implements the rules of the game. Its revenues support junior, collegiate, age-group and open/pro tournaments.

Its First Ace program, which evolved from the Development Fund program that contributed to the game for more than 20 years, brings clinics to schools and supports junior development, new collegiate programs and the collegiate championships.

The USHA is *not* limited or restricted to preserving the past. We are keenly aware of bringing the game to future generations and have planned accordingly to have the resource base available for precisely that purpose with the Endowed Legacy Fund.

In combination with annual fundraising, First Ace and the legacy fund, we make available to the handball world irreplaceable support.

## *In search of action*

The USHA is also keenly aware that only 4 percent of America's youth desire primarily to watch a sport on TV or the Internet, according to a recent Sports Illustrated survey. More to the point, 51 percent of young people instead want the action of playing, not the passive watching that leads to the national epidemics of obesity and juvenile diabetes.

We thus seek to identify the best ways to bring the game to the widest possible audience. We also must operate with a clear sense of reality. One of our current task forces identified the cost for a single ad in Sports Illustrated: \$771,000. That's the price of a one-time, one-day or one-week entry to the world of major sports. And this is cheap compared to television's costs.

Nike is deeply involved in that world of major sports. Its im-



Though it's crucial to be professional and diligent as the USHA's president, Steele also knows how to have fun — as evidenced by his donning a toga during entertainment on the river cruise at the 2003 collegiates held in Portland, Ore.

pressive international headquarters is 11 miles from my home in the Portland metropolitan area. I know some of its senior staff members personally, interact and play with them regularly and have made direct appeals to both the corporation and its foundation over the last 15 years.

The response in every case is negative. The reason? Nike tells me, “You’re not a revenue-producing sport.”

Direct quote. I am not the only person in the handball world to have heard this message.

### *The power of persuasion*

So the USHA has to be on its toes to find the best way, given the nature of our game, to bring the prospective players — “the persuadables,” as one marketer recently called them — that we seek into the game.

In some ways, handball sells itself, at least at the personal level. Its appeal, historically, has not been broad, although it certainly could be. In that regard, we are making steady progress in bringing handball’s considerable benefits to the educational and health-awareness communities.

When reaching out, we do not make claims about the game or about our organization that we cannot verify, prove or demonstrate.

In addition, in spite of unsubstantiated claims to the contrary, the USHA takes its fiduciary responsibilities to its donors and supporters very, very seriously.

We have the highest possible rating for ethics in keeping our books. We are audited annually, and the results are made public

shortly thereafter.

We do not limit the USHA to one group or organization, such as the WPH, in our search for partners in the difficult work of raising public awareness. We want to professionalize our outreach as much as possible and are actively investigating various technologies as well as marketing experts with impressive connections to various major sports to support and facilitate the promotion of handball.

### *The goal: Working together*

I want to thank those who have been offering suggestions for ways to help handball’s supporters work together. To that end, the USHA board recently voted to hold formal discussions with the WPH. By the time you read this, that process will have started.

I cannot predict what will come of this. Hopefully, we’ll be able to find mutually beneficial areas in which close teamwork can be productive.

The board also worked for weeks on crafting a “white paper” that deals very specifically with some of the issues that have been bandied about. You may access this via the USHA Web site. Please give this document a careful, thoughtful reading.

But much more than these efforts must be going on at any one time. Please be aware of this. Promoting handball, as your president, is a bit like being a juggler who keeps track of a variety of different objects. Sometimes those objects cannot be on the public radar screen.

This is standard operating procedure in the world of fundraising and non-profit program development. By the time an item has become news, you may be assured that months and months of work have gone into the finished news product.

I have used in the past the clichéd image of a duck moving on the surface of a lake — placid, it would seem — but check out its webbed feet paddling like mad below the water’s surface.

I have been involved administratively in the non-profit world since 1983, and, as a professor at a private college, since 1975. Such institutions do the vast amount of their work quietly, without fanfare, without publicity (until the right moment) and without ego. It’s deeply personal work, especially friend-raising before the fundraising.

And friend-raising is not a highly public endeavor. It happens at a working lunch, or in someone’s office, or at a conference, or on a court, or playing golf. You don’t go blasting into the office of a program officer at a major foundation. You work quietly and diligently to build trust, confidence and credibility.

The Latin root for the word “credibility” is the word “credo,” meaning “I believe.” The USHA is deeply aware that credibility is a prime value. We are constantly monitoring in this regard.

And we want you to both believe us and believe in us when we have columns like this. You will not find me washing dirty laundry in public. I will not engage in name-calling, demonizing or misrepresenting the facts. I will not be impolite, abrasive or disrespectful.

Our work is far too important to fall to those depths. As the president of the governing body of the sport, there is far too much at stake for that kind of behavior.

My fond hope is that my next column will have some *really* good news.