

Handball Odyssey by Walter Block¹

I was born in 1941. I'll soon be 68 years old.

I first started playing handball in 1954, when I was 13 years old. I played on a one wall court in Brooklyn with the pink ball (predecessor to today's big blue ball). I did this until about 1960, when I was 19 years old. Then, I met Kenny Gamble, a very, very good handball player, and a gentle and kind man. He wanted me to play him with the black ball (There were no small blue balls then). I told him that I could beat him with the pink ball. He beat me 21-1 and 21-2, and I was very lucky to get that many points from him. (He must have been charitable.) In any case, he converted me to the blackball game.

Some of my notable one wall games were with Ruby Obert and Dan Flickstein. I played them almost evenly. Of course, they used only their left or off hands, which ought to give you some idea of my abilities. I actually did beat Carl Obert's right hand, but his off hand was not a strong point of his game. I once came within, oh, 5 points of beating Marty Cushman, the "Farmer" (He was thus dubbed to indicate he could dig balls out of the earth.). Usually, he would keep me below double digits. But, aha!, he had to use two hands against me to do so. Once, Mark Levine and I played doubles against Bernie Hayden and Morty Katz. Mark could have beaten both of them together, but, with me as a partner, we of course lost. The point I'm trying to make is that while I really loved this game, I was not very good at it. Other people I remember from my one wall handball playing days in Brooklyn are Bill Shooman, Sheldon Epstein, Joe Durso, Albert Apuzzi, Freddie Feit, Herbie (Seltzer) Rothstein, Gilbert Hendler, Teddy Russell, Herbie Deyboch, Opposite handed Bernie (he had, seemingly, two off-hands), Stevie (Schnoppsie) Schnapps, Stanley (the Beard) Valenstein, Harvy Gaskowitz and Marc Goldberg. These were guys I actually got on the court with. There are many others I remember fondly just from watching them at tournaments.

In 1979, when I was 38 years old, I moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Amazingly, they had *no* one wall handball there. All they had was this weird game called four wall. Let me tell you, it was strange. The ball would bounce *all over* the place, seemingly without rhyme or reason. And, instead of in the great outdoors, it was played in this little *room*. I guess I had some claustrophobic problems, because, at least initially, it seemed that I was always closed in when I stepped into, not onto, the court.

However, I soon discovered that I was a *much* better four wall player than I was a one wall player (As I see things, four wall is to one wall as chess is to checkers.). In my view, while pure power is at a premium in one wall, and I never had much of that, accuracy was relatively more important in four wall, and I could more often than not place the ball where I wanted to. Of course, in my early days, I had no idea whatsoever of where it was best to hit it. The weakest part of my game could be observed when the ball bounced straight off the back wall, a set up for most four wall players. I just wasn't used to that sort of thing. My warm ups consisted then, and now too, merely of bouncing the ball off the back wall, and trying, somehow, to get it to the front wall.

¹ I would like to thank Dan Flickstein for splendid editing services on this article.

I soon (in late 1979) won a D tournament, and became a C player. I don't like to brag, but I performed this amazing feat in my very first four wall tournament! Ha! Then, in 1981, after coming in second in several tournaments in the C category, I finally won one, and became a B player. Then, my troubles began. The B category was much tougher. My typical tournament was a 21-5, 21-5 loss in the opening round, and then a 21-10, 21-10 loss in the consolation bracket. Then, too, I became very tired when playing against this much better opposition. I carefully researched how much time I could take between points: when it was my turn to serve, I could take a full 10 seconds before entering the server's box, and then could lollygag for another 10 seconds, for a total of 20 before actually serving. When it was my turn to receive, I could wait for 10 seconds to get into position, and the referee could not call out the score, indicating that the server could put the ball in play, until then. I ticked off a lot of opponents and referees by insisting upon every second of rest I could get; all's fair in love, war, and handball.

Four wall is a far more intense, physically invasive sport, at least for me, than one wall. In the latter, half the time when the round ended, someone would have to walk, oh, 50 feet, to retrieve the ball. This sometimes took a full minute or even two. Not so in four wall; there, after the point the ball is never more than 5 feet away from one of the players. Then, too, the rallies lasted a lot longer in four wall than in one wall singles. Typically, there would be an ace serve, and then a one minute break to chase down the ball. Or, if the ball was returned, then the server would put it away for a point. Remember, in one wall, the receiver has to cover not only the court, but, oh, 5-10 feet on either side of it, and more space behind the back line, depending on the angle and placement of the serve. In four wall, the area that must be covered is far less, maybe 100 square feet in total. That is because you can't go outside the court for a return, or you will run into a wall; also, if you allow it to, the ball will come bouncing back into the middle of the court if it hits a (especially the back) wall. I have been in rallies where each singles opponent hits the ball, 20-30 times before a put out. Grind, grind, grind; exhausting! I have lost up to 6 pounds in an hour of handball, and gone through three tee shirts. A masochist's heaven. I *love* it.

Despite all of my time out shenanigans between points, I was really getting my butt kicked in B level competition. I never made it out of the first round. In 1983 I attended an intensive week of handball instruction at Steamboat Springs, Colorado. That was the best decision I ever made as far as improvement of my game is concerned. I cannot tell you how important this was for me in terms of learning what to do on the handball court. The most significant person for me at that event was Vern Roberts. Among many other things, he taught me the V pass. When he first introduced it to me, I just couldn't do it. If you tried anything even remotely resembling a V pass on a one wall court, it was a sure point out for you. (Another difficult shot for ex one wallers is the kill on the front right court that hits the side wall first; this is an automatic out on a one wall court; ditto for a low shot to the front left corner, that hits the side wall first.) I think I must have practiced hitting V passes tens of thousands of times. An amazing shot. When I perfected it (well, "perfected" it in the context of my being at the time a very poor B player), it *really* improved my game. No longer was I racing around with my tongue hanging out down to

the floor. Now, it was the other guy who was exhausted, and trying to come up with ways to take long rests between points.

Then came a very interesting time in my handball “career.” Instead of ignominiously losing every opening round, and then being quickly booted out of the consolation bracket, I became *very* competitive in this category. So much so that during the years 1983-1986 I took no fewer than 21 *second* place prizes in B tournament competition. (This is *not* a misprint.) My problem was that old bugaboo of mine, exhaustion. Remember, too, that it was during this period of time between 42 and 46 years of age that I was competing with players in their early 20s. (Roberto Meneses was one of the players who ran right through me like a hot knife through butter in a B final in Canada; Jeff Wilson’s brother, I forget his name, was another; there are in total 21 pretty good players in the Vancouver-Seattle-Portland area who can say they became A players, in B finals, at my expense.)

Finally, in 1986 I won a B tournament, and became an A player, one of the happiest days in my life (I know, I know, I’m a weirdo; I just can’t help it). It was at a Ski to Sea Singles tournament in Bellingham MAC; I’ll never forget it as long as I live. My new strategy was to be absolutely *vicious* in the earlier rounds, so that I would have enough “jelly” in me for the finals. No more Mr. Nice Guy in the earlier rounds. “Kick butt and zero points for these guys” was my motto. At this particular tournament, I must have given away a total of 15 points in my first four matches. The guy who I was to face played a *very* debilitating semi final round. He eked out something like a 21-20, 20-21, 11-10 victory. When he got onto the court with me for the finals (I wish I could remember his name.), his legs were actually trembling. Aha, good sign, thought I. This was because he had beaten me in several previous tournaments. But, thanks to the very different routes we took to the final, I was able to prevail over him, although he took me to a tie breaker. Had it not been for his weakness at the outset, he probably would have beaten me yet again, and I would still be a B player, losing lots more finals matches.

Now for my career as an A player. One highlight is that I actually took a game from Myron Schmidt, one of the best senior players in the Pacific Northwest. This guy fisted almost everything, so it was like playing a guy holding two paddles. I wasn’t anywhere in his league, but I think he took me too lightly. I won the first game 21-20. Then, reality set in, and I lost the next two, to my recollection 21-2 and 11-1. Another highlight is that I actually won an A tournament. Ok, ok, it was in the consolation bracket, but, hey, a win’s a win. I’d say this is pretty good for a reconstituted one wall player, who used to be totally baffled by every turn of the ball on the four wall handball court. It is strange, I hardly remember this tournament. Yet, it was by far my best showing. I actually beat some (other!) A players! It was clearly a better performance than winning that B tournament. I suppose the reason for my selective memory is that I struggled for so long and so hard to win a B competition, whereas this one came relatively easily.

I used to play regularly with Keith Gracey, one of the top players in Vancouver. Needless to say, I couldn’t give him any kind of game. That is, until I came up with a handicap to impose upon him. If he killed the ball, or even hit it below knee level on the front wall, he would lose the point. This forced him to hit only V passes, three wall wrap arounds, and

ceiling shots, the weakest parts of his game (when set up, he could flatten the ball with either hand.). So, I would stand in the back, and wait for the ball to come to me. With this handicap, I could actually be competitive against him. I urge this sort of thing whenever there are two players with very different skills who nevertheless want to get a workout with each other. (Hey, it beats hitting the ball on the court all by yourself.)

I have a 1-0 record against Jeff Wilson, another top player from Vancouver. True, I beat him in that one match when he was about 13 years old, still in diapers as I remember it. But, hey, a win's a win. Years later I got on the court with Jeff, in a two against one game. My partner was quite a bit better than I and stayed on the left side. I couldn't even return any of Jeff's serves. Meeting that ball, I tried both stroking and punching it, was like hitting the wall, or a rock, with my open hand or a fist. We lost, 21-0. But, I can still brag that I'm 1-0 against him -- in singles.

Another memory from my Canadian handball days: at a tournament in Calgary, David Chapman, aged about 9-10, beat a boy from Ireland in the finals of that age category. Afterward, I saw them walking around, holding hands. It was the *cutest* thing. (I mean this seriously.) I recently reminded David of this episode from his early childhood; he didn't seem to appreciate this memory.

In 1991 I moved to Worcester, Massachusetts, and began playing there. I was now 50 years old. I have had, oh, maybe, 15 operations, mainly on my shoulders and knees, but, also, elbows, ankles, starting in Vancouver, and continuing into Worcester. (I *told* you that I love our perfect game!) When I was young, and handball players gathered to talk, we would discuss, of course, women. Nowadays, when players of my age reminisce, the discussion turns to healthy body parts. Who has any? How many of us would it take, if we all contributed some, to constitute one completely healthy body? Well, I can offer my left calf, one might say. Another might offer a totally healthy pinkie. You get the drift.

For a long time in my Worcester period, 1991-1997 (and also in the late 1980s in Vancouver), I couldn't play with my right arm at all. So, I would look for weaker players, and use only my left. I developed something of a leftie back hand. But this, of course, totally screwed up my off hand. Ah, well, at least I was (sort of) playing handball, but I was really a shadow of my former self, when I had actually won a B tournament, and even a consolation A. I really wasn't playing A ball anymore, or even at a good B level. Yet, it was a matter of pride to enter tournaments in the A category, when I didn't play at the master's level.

One of my favorite Worcester opponents was a local mathematics professor. He was way better than I. We evened up the score, somewhat, by agreeing that he would serve one entire game to my right, another to my left, so that my return of service (still, one of the weakest parts of my game) could be somewhat strengthened. During this period, at my encouragement, he switched to prescription eyeglasses. So competitive was he that he really didn't want to do this, because I would actually beat him, until he got used to them. I said to him, "Don't be silly. Does it really matter to you that I beat you, when you can hardly see?" That seemed to ameliorate matters. I remember losing to a guy named

Erichetti in the semi finals in a tournament in Boston. I also played in Connecticut at tournaments put on by John Bike (when he was living there) and his dad. But, with all of my injuries (if you can't win anymore, at least become good at offering excuses), I wasn't really competitive during this time.

I spent the years 1997-2001 in Conway, Arkansas, located about 40 miles northwest of Little Rock. Here, the handball pickings were very slim. I would go into Little Rock 2-3 times a month for some good doubles games. I found two guys in Conway who could play, but I was way better than they. Still, it was fun, winning all the time. I didn't enter any tournaments during this period.

In 2001 I moved to New Orleans (I am an economics professor; I taught at Rutgers and Baruch in New Jersey and New York City, I was at the Fraser Institute in Vancouver, Holy Cross in Worcester, the University of Central Arkansas in Conway, and now teach at Loyola University New Orleans) where I still reside. Yes, the courts here are finally dry. My pattern of injuries has continued apace, so I haven't been very competitive, except at making excuses. (My latest injury is a real doozy. I now have very weak knees; so a few months ago I put on some knee braces. It turned out that I was allergic to them, since my entire body broke out into this horrendous rash as a result. But, at least my handball buddies here got a great kick out of this plight of mine. Funny, funny. Well, if I can't beat my opponents at handball, at least I can scare them). It is very nice being in a large city again, where there are lots of fellow players (I wish there more younger ones, though; I'd hate to think that our game would ever end). Just recently, I have been injury free (well, relatively so), and I'm going to enter my first tournament in a very long time: the Mardi Gras Open Tournament, March 27-29, 2009. I was always way better at singles than doubles, although I'm now pretty pathetic at both. So, I'm going to enter masters, or golden masters singles, if they get enough of us old duffers for that draw. Wish me luck.

I still love the game as much as I ever did. Running, swimming, *any* other exercises, are totally boring in comparison. But, I find the game frustrating nowadays. I know what I want to do on the court, and I *used* to be able to do it, but I no longer can. For example, I have great difficulty hitting ceiling shots, even when I am totally set up for them; this used to be a big part of my game, second, of course, to the V pass. I used to drop to the floor for pickups. Now, I dare not do anything of the kind. Of course there is no way I can measure how pathetic my game is now, compared to yesteryear. I play people of around my own age in New Orleans, and we have all lost a step or two or three or four or five. But there is one objective way I can measure my personal physical prowess. When I was in high school (1955-1959) my best time for the quarter mile was 55 seconds. Not great, but I was on the Madison High School track team, and once took a fifth place in a major track meet (I broke my novice status in my senior year, but that was only because the coach took pity on me, and put me on a pretty good relay; we would have lost anyway, but, I managed to knock the baton out of the hand of a runner who was passing me). Today, my best time for the 400 meters is 1:59. Madison High School, by the way, has placed Ruth Bader Ginsburg on the Supreme Court, and boasts of three U.S. senators: Chuck Schumer (New York), Norm Coleman (Minnesota), and Bernie Sanders

(Vermont). Bernie was on the track team with me; he was always in the front of the pack, I was always at the back. Ah, well, one can only do one's best.

In college (1959-1963), I was on the swimming team. My best time for the 100 meter backstroke, my specialty, was 1:06; nothing to write home about, but I did win a few races on the Brooklyn College team, given our low level of competition. (I remember Freddie Munch from those days, who was an excellent swimmer (Fordham University), a breast-stroker, and also a magnificent handball player.). They would *crush* us in dual meets. My best time in the 100 meter backstroke is now 1:50 (I still do masters competitive swimming; well, I've got to do *something* when I can't get on the court due to injuries.) Extrapolating from these times, I suppose I'm "half" as good a handball player as I was a long time ago, because my times have about doubled.

A few concluding remarks.

Here are some of my pet peeves about the perfect game. Once, I saw one player, call him A, throw the ball at B, hard. A was a big, strong, heavy fellow; B was a proverbial 90 pound weakling. But B was the better player, and was winning. After this horrific act of non sportsmanship, A beat B. I *hate* it when people use that sort of physical intimidation on the court. Were I the referee, I would have halted the match, and declared B the winner, even if he were behind at that point, which he was not.

Another peeve: from time to time, I have hit other people with the ball, and knocked them to the floor (I am nothing if not powerful; just kidding.). I did this, of course, not by purposefully throwing it at them, but just in the course of the game. One guy told me if I did that again, he'd come up swinging. Now, as far as I'm concerned, when I'm hitting the ball, I have my eyes in one place, and in one place only: *on the ball*. When I hit someone with the ball, it is a total *accident*. And, truth to be told, it is just as much the fault of the guy who is hit, as the hitter's. I also dislike it when my opponent is talking while I'm getting into position or hitting the ball. Yet, refs rarely call an avoidable hinder for this.

Hinders are *very* different in one wall and four wall. In the former case, it is licit to "stand your ground," to *not* get out of the way of the hitter. In the latter, you *must* get out of his path, so that he has an open shot at the ball. Remember, I was brought up on one wall. I still retain some of the instincts developed in that context. To this day, I still have a lot of trouble with hinders. I don't really care if I win or lose in non tournament play. So, I just try as best to get out of other people's way, and not to call hinders on them, which, typically, creates arguments. I don't always succeed, but that's the best way I know how to deal with this issue. As for tournament play, there is always a referee who takes care of this sort of thing.

For a while, I would get bone bruises on my hands. I know, I know, you are supposed to cup your hands. And I do, for easy shots. But for desperate heaves, all thought of cupped hands escapes me. So, I don't like to brag, but, I'll bet you that I wear more levels of gloves and rubber and leather inserts than anyone else in our game. Five in all; two

gloves, and three layers of inserts. So, take that! (We leather fetishists don't take kindly to criticism.)

One of my most frequent injuries is to my calves. So, I do *thousands* of heel raises, to strengthen that part of my body, and stretches, seemingly, during every waking moment. My weakest hand is my left, or off hand. So, I try to "convince" myself that I am really a leftie. In addition to playing lots of 'all lefty' games with weaker players, or, *as* a lefty with them (taking all balls in the middle of the court with my off hand), I also try to "fool" myself into "leftyness." For example, I always wear my watch on my right hand.

I have *never* run into a wall. But, several times, the walls have attacked *me*. Once they even broke my collar bone when I was going for a shot; I had to go around with a pin inside my shoulder for a few months. Lucky, I wasn't traveling then by airplane. Cannot something be done about this problem? Can't the walls be made to stay in one place?

To conclude. I am *blessed* that I have found handball. I am a very lucky man. And yet it is strange. Here I am, an adult, with at least a few significant accomplishments in my career as a professor. Yet, for the life of me, I can't get handball out of my system, even in competition with my intellectual pursuits. I am as proud of winning that B tournament and becoming an A player as I am of just about anything I have done in my career as an economist, public speaker, writer, etc. When I go to sleep at night, weirdo that I am, I replay games, or, just throw the ball to the back wall and hit it to the front, in a V pass of course, in my mind's eye. I don't as much think of economics, or liberty, or property rights, or law, my professional concerns, at these times. What is there about hitting a little blue ball in a small white room that so engages me? Maybe it is an atavistic throwback to my ancestor's cave man days? It beats me. But, whatever the cause, handball has lit up my life. I've endured more operations than you can shake a stick at in order to keep playing. Handball is never too far from my thinking, my day dreams. I've really got the bug, and I wouldn't have it any other way.