



McInnis competes at the 2003 Three-Wall Nationals in Toledo.

A tenacious competitor tells his story

By Marc Penick

Most players who compete at the USHA three-wall and four-wall national events know Vance McInnis; the tall, lanky age-group champion has been competing for decades. Vance has won his share of events, appeared in even more finals and faced his share of tough customers in what has become the largest demographic competing (65+), and now in the 70+ age group. He is a handball analyst, employing multiple game strategies with consistency, and he has the tournament results to prove it.

Vance recently stopped playing handball, plagued by onset pulmonary fibrosis in both lungs. He last played in the final of the 65+ doubles division at the 2018 USHA Three-Wall Nationals in Toledo, Ohio, a match I happened to referee. He and teammate Gary Eisenbooth were stopped in a grueling tiebreaker by Chicago's Joe Ivy and Sean Connely.

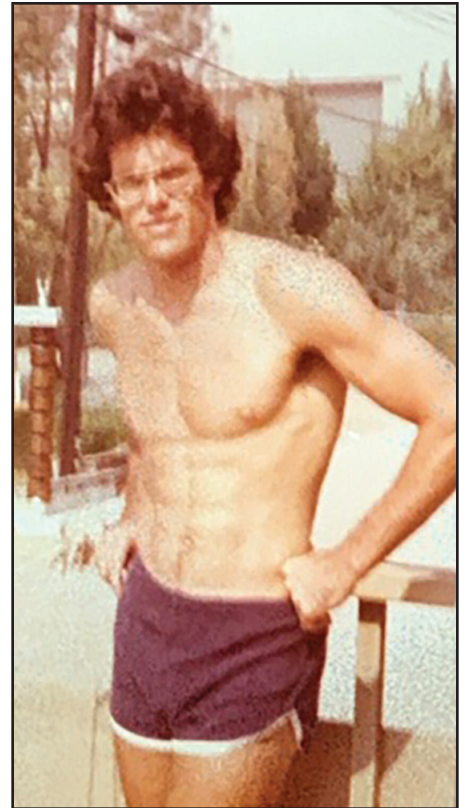
In 2019, Vance attended the Three-Wall

Nationals again, this time to mingle with friends and take in the action, toting his oxygen tank alongside. We spent some time talking at Lucas County Fairgrounds in Maumee, Ohio, between the rainstorms, and he agreed to share his story with Handball magazine.

Born in Michigan on June 1, 1949, along with his twin sister, Vance is one of four children. His father was a U.S. Marine stationed at the LTA (Blimp Hangars) in Southern California. After his parents divorced, the family moved back to Flint, Mich., for his high school years.

Vance played tennis, baseball and basketball as a youngster and took up swimming in high school. Though small as a kid, he grew over 6 inches in the 10th grade, topping out at 6-foot-2 by age 20. A varsity swimmer, Vance regrets not working harder at the sport. Later in life, he started playing handball. The game afforded him a second competitive chance (and much success).

After high school, Vance and a basketball



Vance was the big ball champ at Santa Ana College in 1977.



McInnis today with his ever present oxygen tank.

teammate went freighthopping around the country. They rode up and down the California coast, into Mexico and ended in Orange County, where they met a frequent rider who knew many of the routes. The old hand convinced Vance to take the Super Chief from Los Angeles to Chicago instead of hitchhiking the whole way home to Michigan.

The other two rode with Vance to the Arizona border before turning back while he went on to Chicago, landing in the huge railyard there at midnight. He hitchhiked the remainder to Flint for a family visit. The ride out went well, so, two weeks later,



Vance volunteering at the local school working with kids.

he hitchhiked back to Chicago and rode the Super Chief west to Los Angeles.

Shortly thereafter, Vance joined the Army. He was out of money for college and liked the idea of public service and the challenge of special military airborne training. But not all went to plan.

During a training jump in North Carolina, his parachute failed to open properly, resulting in a “partial chute” condition and an “LOFD” (last out, first down) outcome. He hit the ground traveling 30 mph, bounced four feet off the drop zone runway, shattered his right elbow, tore his abdominals, and sustained a hip pointer and severely bruised feet.

After a month in the hospital and a month of rest, he went back out and jumped to avoid losing his airborne status. The elbow pins were removed a year later. For those who have played handball with Vance, this account might help explain his level of tenacity on the court.

After leaving the Army, Vance attended Santa Ana College, UC Riverside and then graduate school at the University of Oregon. He met his wife, Connie, on a blind date with a friend who was dating her sister. The relationship worked, and they married a year later in 1976. Vance and Connie have three children, Erin, Grant and Clair; and three grandchildren, Madeline, 11, Kyla,

8, and Evan, 3. Most of the family lives in the Peoria area save for Clair, who resides in Portland. Vance and Connie see the grandkids often.

Tell us a little about your family.

My wife Connie and I have been married for 44 years. Connie was always a good athlete. We played tennis and basketball together. She is a proud stay-at-home mom who raised our children and enjoys caring for our grandchildren.

Erin, our oldest daughter, is a nurse. She is also athletic and competes in triathlons. Granddaughter, Mad, loves volleyball. Her sister, Kyla, plays soccer. Our son, Grant, is an accountant. His son, Evan, likes to join him for anything outdoors. Grant enjoys playing basketball, weight training, running and biking. Our youngest daughter, Clair, lives in Portland. She’s in the Portland school system working as a librarian. She loves to hike in the local mountains. Clair ran track and played golf in her high school days.

You worked as a sales engineer for Caterpillar Inc. (CAT)?

Yes, I started at CAT in Peoria right out of graduate school. There I was trained in sales and marketing for the engine side of the business. CAT manufactures and services a broad range of engines for electric power, marine and industrial use

as well as for trucks and heavy equipment. I was transferred to Phoenix from 1982 through 1991 and then back to Peoria until I retired in 2015. I traveled around the world and America supporting clients and our products.

How did you get started playing and where?

I started playing at the outdoor courts at Santa Ana College (SAC) in 1969. The football coach there encouraged us to play in the offseason. After a Santa Ana fireman whipped my buddy and me, one versus two, I was hooked! After an Army tour, I returned to SAC and started playing again. We played outdoors with a number of SoCal guys, including David Steinberg, Pete Bidegain, Tom Fitzwater, Guy Hoover and Larry Morefield. I was a runner and worked to run my opponents. In 1977, I placed second in singles there, playing five matches on a hot August day against the best players. My first handball trophy!

When was your first national tournament?

I attended the 1984 Masters Singles in Las Vegas. I won my first match and then faced off with top seed Dave Morones. He was awesome in the first game. I got him running a bit more and won the second. He won the third game and also the tournament.

You have won 23 USHA titles, 13 outdoor, 10 indoor, 10 singles and 13 doubles titles. That is a pretty balanced record. Name some favorite tournament wins over your career.

My first was a big one for me, winning 50+ singles versus Alan Sherrill in '99 at Toledo. In 2005 I won my 10th, in the 55+ singles versus Greg Raya. One time I scored a win over Terry Muck in a local tournament in Peoria. Not sure he was trying very hard! One year I beat a young, hard-hitting kid named John Bike in a tournament. I never asked for a rematch!

Your favorite game is three-wall although you have a fine record in four-wall as well and more than 20 titles between the two. How are the games different?

Yes, three-wall is my game even though there are not any three-wall courts in Peoria. But my indoor game utilized outdoor tactics: cutoffs, high off-hand ceiling shots and drives, being in shape to run and hammer shots. I learned a lot in my early years in



The McInnis family: (front row, from left) Evan (Grant and Whitney's son) held by his Aunt Clair, Erin and her two daughters Kyle and Madeline; (back row, from left) Grant, wife Whitney, Connie and Vance.



Vance with Alan Sherrill.

Toledo playing Don Revenaugh, Danny Saenz, Roger Berry, Alan Sherrill and even Ken Ginty. One year I beat Phil Kirk in the 40+ division but lost to Dave Dohman the next round. Of course, I am a few years older than they are. Those guys are pure outdoor players: deep drives with both hands, cut off shots, high hammers into the corners.

You played doubles with Alan Sherrill and Ed Campbell as well as other partners. Tell us about them.

I enjoyed teaming up with Alan in our early years. He could play all day. One year in Toledo we played in the 50+ singles final and then we teamed to win the 50+ doubles. We were in shape! Playing with Ed was also enjoyable. Ed can take many shots and score points with cuts, serves, re-kills and long balls as good as anyone in our age group. I also enjoyed teaming with Bob Lohmueller

in the four-wall Masters Doubles 65+ in Houston in 2018. Bob played great! That may be my last USHA title.

Name some important folks who influenced your handball career.

Darryl Jones ("The Dancing Bear") is the handball leader in Peoria and a great friend. Darryl is a big, burly Marine vet who never shied away from hospitality, food or drink. Darryl would organize the weekly league matches in our area. Peoria had a great open tournament for many years in the past. Terry Muck would come up and grace us with his presence. In Arizona, Carl Porter invited me to be a member at his Arizona Athletic Club in Tempe. He introduced me to Dave Graybill.

Name some of your handball rivals.

I have enjoyed playing ball over the years with Roger Berry, Greg Raya and Merv Deckert. They are my friends as much as my rivals. Danny Saenz was another. "Smokey" was a true three-wall player and all our matches were very tough. Danny Carrillo is a great player who serves as well as any age-group player. Danny and Tom Fitzwater beat me and several different partners in doubles, usually in tiebreakers. I did beat him in singles a couple of times, which made me feel better. Alan Sherrill, Dan Price, Ken Ayube and Ernie Virgili were very tough matches for me as well. Dave Dohman was not my rival because he always won when we played. He is a great talent.

What do you do for fun nowadays?

I spend time with the family, enjoying the grandkids' events. We ride bikes and take walks. I still do the yard work and just carry my oxygen bottle around with me as



McInnis was known for being a tough competitor.

Vance's 23 National Titles:

Year	TYPE	CITY	DIVISION	DOUBLES PARTNER
1999	THREE-WALL	MAUMEE	50 SINGLES	
2000	THREE-WALL	MAUMEE	50 SINGLES	
2000	THREE-WALL	MAUMEE	50 DOUBLES	ALAN SHERRILL
2001	THREE-WALL	MAUMEE	50 DOUBLES	ALAN SHERRILL
2002	THREE-WALL	MAUMEE	50 SINGLES	
2002	THREE-WALL	MAUMEE	50 DOUBLES	ALAN SHERRILL
2004	THREE-WALL	MAUMEE	50 SINGLES	
2004	MASTERS SINGLES	SAN DIEGO	55-PLUS	
2005	MASTERS SINGLES	CINCINNATI	55-PLUS	
2009	MASTERS SINGLES	CHATTANOOGA	60-PLUS	
2009	THREE-WALL	MAUMEE	60 SINGLES	
2009	MASTERS DOUBLES	LAS VEGAS	60-PLUS	ED CAMPBELL
2009	THREE-WALL	MAUMEE	60 DOUBLES	ALAN SHERRILL
2010	THREE-WALL	MAUMEE	60 DOUBLES	ALAN SHERRILL
2011	THREE-WALL	MAUMEE	60 SINGLES	
2012	MASTERS SINGLES	PORTLAND, OR	60-PLUS	VANCE MCINNIS
2015	FOUR-WALL	ORANGE COUNTY	65 DOUBLES	EDWARD CAMPBELL
2015	MASTERS DOUBLES	LOMBARD, IL	65-PLUS	EDWARD CAMPBELL
2015	THREE-WALL	MAUMEE	65 DOUBLES	EDWARD CAMPBELL
2016	FOUR-WALL	FRIDLEY, MN	65 DOUBLES	EDWARD CAMPBELL
2016	THREE-WALL	MAUMEE	65 DOUBLES	EDWARD CAMPBELL
2017	MASTERS DOUBLES	CINCINNATI	65-PLUS	EDWARD CAMPBELL
2018	MASTERS DOUBLES	HOUSTON	65-PLUS	BOB LOHMUELLER

I rake the leaves.

You have been a handball supporter and a regular competitor in tournaments over the years. Why do you support handball?

Why not? I love the game, love the players, love the camaraderie and love the competition!

Your thoughts about the USHA and the WPH?

The WPH is promoting the game for sure, and televising it is really great. But the game needs the regular players to keep things going. I am glad that the USHA expanded its events to include age-group B brackets at the national events. It really helps with turnout when more players can compete at their level. I guess today it is the WPH for the pros, and the USHA is for everybody else.

What do you see as the most important thing going forward for the continuation of the sport?

I can think of only one thing that may push this game into the future, and that's to engage the young. We've got the college teams, which can expand as intramural sports are happening, but not much handball overall. There are plenty of athletes, especially former baseball players, who could pick up the sport, but it is tough to get started. The other part is the massive player group playing wall ball. This is true street ball today. If we can recruit some of this group, we would be golden. It is challenging as big ball players are like I was at SAC, always outside playing in the parks. They cannot afford or do not care about clubs. If we ever figure out how to get some of these people inside, handball will live on.

What advice do you have for young up and coming players who want to compete in national tournaments?

Have fun, meet people and enjoy the mojo. Watch others and learn how they handle their opponents. Put in the practice and training time as well. Don't just play.

Anything else you would like to add?

Yes. I have had to deal with my pulmonary fibrosis and the treatments since 2013, which led me to retire from playing handball. I still love watching the game and my friends out there competing. Life is a great thing, and my advice to you all is enjoy every day, value your health and care for your family and friends.