

The Magazine of Professional Racquetball

KILLSHOT

Instructional Special

Vol. VI No. 4



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Crash
Course

Jason Mannino:
looking for some
respect

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Instructional Special
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Clockwise from top right:
Cartoon Sudsy; Real
Sudsy and Andy Roberts;
Ektelon NFS shoes; Jason
Mannino



The Official Publication of
the International Racquetball
Tour

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It's Official!

Well, it's official. It's the official beginning of the IRT pro season this month. It's also the official "unofficial" opening of the playing season for many players around the world. Sure the courts won't completely fill up until further into Fall, but all those golfer, boater, softball, backyard barbecuer types are tiring of all the fair-weather frenzy and coming back onto the courts. So for those of you who have been gone, welcome back. For you, and for everybody else who have been dedicated and played, practiced and worked out all summer, it is indeed time for another **KILLSHOT**.

Some Changes

First of all, what's up with the timing thing? We've decided to make things simple. In fact, we've finally found a way to make it easier for readers to figure out when the next issue is coming. In the process, it just happens to simplify things for newsstands as well. It also just happens to be the very thing that has been requested of us by nearly every manufacturer. **KILLSHOT** is now officially a quarterly publication. Issues will come out four times per year, instead of the more confusing five times. And we are still the official publication of the IRT and WIRT.

Something else you might notice is our new emphasis on instruction. We figure it like this: the more instruction, the more you win; the more you win, the happier you are; the happier you are, the more you like us; everybody's happy.

When all else fails, read the instructions. Most of us tend to live by those words in the nineties. But the key concept here is if you don't want to fail read the instructions first.

We've tried something new with this *Instructional Special* issue (yeah, new and improved). We've put the entire section together on a different paper and designed it in such a way that it can be clipped and pulled out.

You'll also notice the IRT Certified instruction seal in this special section. Instructionals that fit in with the concepts and training methods of the International Racquetball Tour qualify for this special

designation. These are methods and tips tested by fire on the hardwood courts of pro competition. You won't find IRT Certified instruction anywhere else. The reason for the certification is the necessity to insure accurate and usable information for instructional material.

There should be something here for most every racquetball player, from the beginner to the most advanced; information to jump start a lethargic game or to tweak a high performance game.

Try out the tips and suggestions included in this special section and then customize them to fit your game. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised at how your game can benefit from even the most basic of fundamental reminders. In fact, many advanced techniques evolve naturally from really mastering the very basic fundamentals. In a theoretical world all instruction is pure and true. But pure and true concepts are sometimes distorted in real game conditions. Basic instruction becomes even more important as the game moves to the next level with the longer racquets from all the frame manufacturers.

Read about how to improve your game, visit all the web sites that seem to be popping up all over the internet these days. But most of all take the information on the court. The instructions mean very little if they are not put to use.

Bigger is Better?

This also represents the unveiling of the amazing new and officially "OK to use in competition" extra long racquet frames. Let me be the first to say these are amazing weapons. With plenty of time to tool up for production for the start of this season, each manufacturer has had plenty of opportunity to hone the new frames to perfection. A far cry from a simply longer version of existing technology, the longer frames are so perfectly weighted, balanced and finished that each manufacturer has presented a line that truly increases both power and accuracy. There is always plenty of techno-hype going around, but this is one time when the product far outshines the hype. The new frames are better. Lots better. ...

--SQ

KILLSHOT

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International Racquetball Tour



Battling viciously for the all-important season-end number one ranking, Sudsy Monchik edged out Cliff Swain to take command of the tour for 1996-97. Swain isn't through yet, though. Always a tough competitor the scrappy Bostonian isn't content to settle into the pack lower than the top notch. Jason Mannino proved to be for real ending the season with the number four spot behind Andy Roberts who couldn't quite build enough steam to close in on Swain or Monchik.

Mannino was the only new face finishing the season in the top eight and the remainder of the upper level looked like a who's who of pro racquetball of the past five years. Familiar names John Ellis, Mike Guidry, Mike Ray, and Drew Kachtik will be back in the thick of things again for '97-98 and if all can stay healthy and motivated neither Swain nor Monchik is a shoe-in for the top spot.



Many of the familiar tournament sponsors from last season will be back providing the unlimited action that has become the expected from the IRT. Many of last season's locations will again provide the battleground for the pros.

The Tournament House in Riverside, California, In Shape Sports Club at Westlane in Stockton, California and the Woodfield Racquet Club in Schaumburg, Illinois, have each supplied a venue for men's professional racquetball for enough years to become legendary in their own rights. And each of those locations traditionally serves up a "take no prisoners" form of racquetball that could witness almost any of the top players taking home the big check.

In short, the 1997-98 season should prove to be a season of surprises as well as a season of hard fought skirmishes between some battle tested veterans and young guns who are hungry for IRT prize money. Hang on, it should be a wild ride.

1996-97 Season End ProPenn Bonus Pool

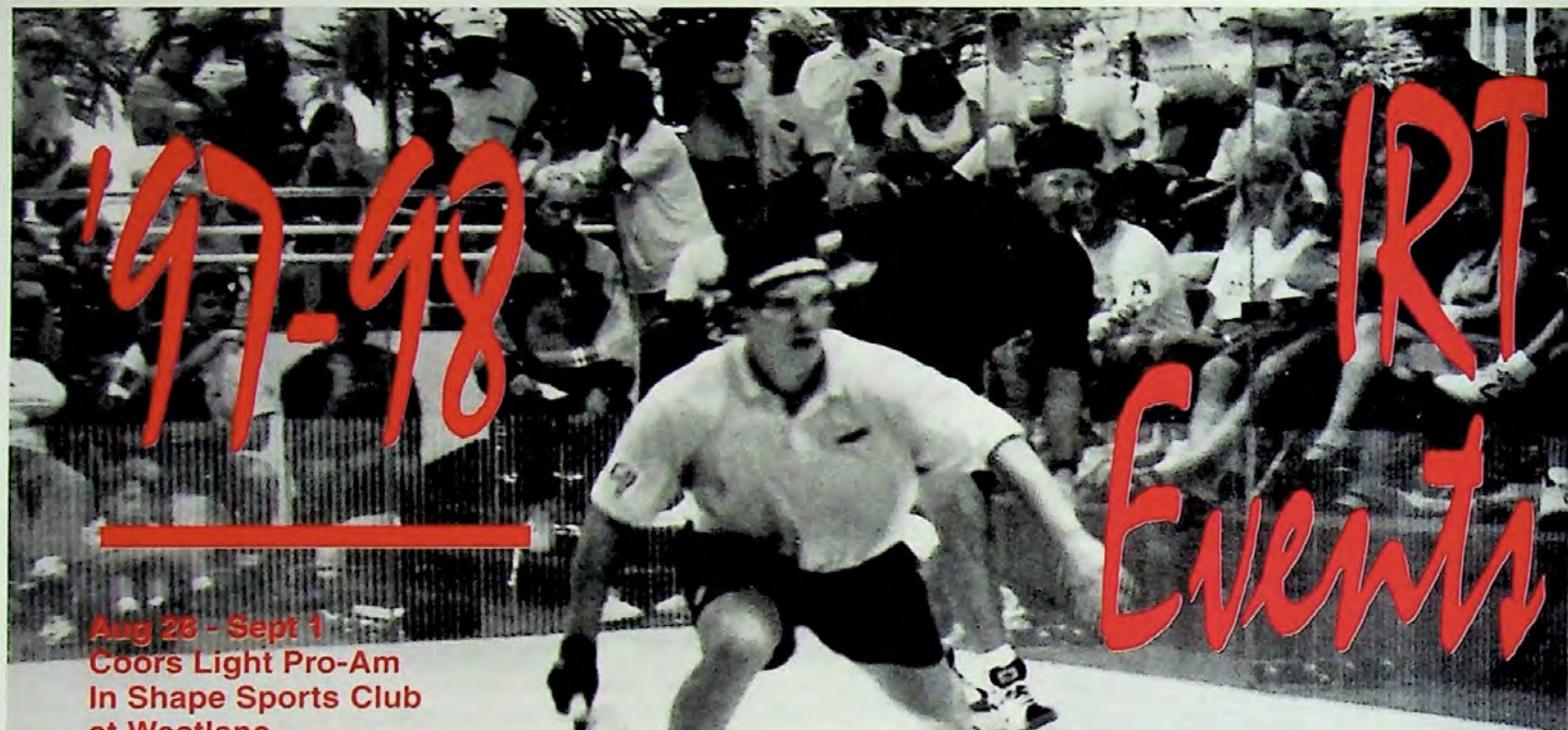
Jason Mannino
Mike Ray
Woody Clouse
Adam Karp
Louis Vogel

1996-97 Season End Tacki Mac Pro Bonus Pool

Jason Mannino
Woody Clouse
Adam Karp
Louis Vogel
Tony Jelso

Top: Andy Roberts sets to blast a backhand for a spectacular shot that wouldn't be quite enough in his five game loss to Cliff Swain at the Future Cellular SBBS event in Columbus last season.

Bottom: Swain prepares to rip a backhand while Sudsy Monchik holds center court in the Ralph Shomp Automotive event in Denver. Their only head to head encounter in that segment of last season, Monchik prevailed in the four game final.



Aug 28 - Sept 1
Coors Light Pro-Am
In Shape Sports Club
at Westlane
Stockton, California

Sept 24-28
Ralph's Food 4 Less Pro-Am
The Tournament House
Riverside, California

Oct 1-5
Mid-South Pro-Am
Sportime Racquet & Health
Greensboro, North Carolina

Oct 29 - Nov 2
Woodfield Halloween Classic
Woodfield Racquet Club
Schaumburg, Illinois

Nov 12-16
Promus Hotels US Open
Racquet Club of Memphis
Memphis, Tennessee

Nov 19-23
Foxwoods Pro-Am
Club TBA
Boston, Massachusetts

Dec 10-14
APH Service Company
Holiday Pro-Am Classic
Lakewood Athletic Club
Denver, Colorado

Jan 14-18
Ralph Schomp Automotive
Pro-Am
Denver Athletic Club
Denver, Colorado

Jan 21-25
Future Cellular • SBBS
Pro-Am
Continental Athletic Club
Columbus, Ohio

Feb 4-8
VCI Pro-Am
Southern Athletic Club
Atlanta, Georgia

Feb 18-22
Foxwoods Pro-Am
Club TBA
Long Island, New York

Feb 25 - March 1
Piehler Pro-Am
Penfield Racquet & Fitness
Club
Rochester, New York

March 13-15
VCI Doubles Championships
Schoeber's Athletic Club
Pleasanton, California

April 22-26
Foxwoods IRT Pro Nationals
Las Vegas Sporting House
Las Vegas, Nevada

April 29 - May 3
Tony Filippini Real Estate
Pro-Am
Club TBA
San Diego, California

May 6-9
Phoenix Pro-Am
Arizona Athletic Club
Phoenix, Arizona

May 13-17
Bay 101 IRT World Champi-
onships
Bayhill Athletic Club
San Jose, California

June 3-7
Spalding Tournament of
Champions
Multnomah Athletic Club
Portland, Oregon



Above Left: Swain concentrates for a forehand setup against John Ellis in the final in Columbus.

Above Right: Adam Karp takes advantage of a set up off the back wall in the quarters of the VCI Atlanta event against Swain.

Left: Ellis with an amazing diving get in the Columbus final.

'97-98 IRT Year-End Rankings

1. Sudsy Monchik
2. Cliff Swain
3. Andy Roberts
4. Jason Mannino
5. John Ellis
6. Mike Guidry
7. Mike Ray
8. Drew Kachtik
9. Woody Clouse
10. Dan Fowler
11. Adam Karp
12. Louis Vogel
13. Tony Jelso
14. Kelly Gelhaus
15. James Mulcock
16. Michael Bronfeld
17. Rafael Filippini
18. Scott Reiff
19. Darrin Schenck
20. Mike Green

Womens International Racquetball Tour

With Michelle Gould's complete domination of every game of every round of every WIRT event in modern history, her wins are no longer news. Make no mistake, her play is spectacular. Her opponents are no slouches. Still, no matter how much progress her fellow pros make, Gould manages to stay two full strides ahead. Her wins are exciting, but no surprise to anyone who follows professional racquetball.

The story of the new season then, will be whether or not Gould can stay motivated with no real threat to her existence at number one.

While much attention has been given to the industry as a whole for forming truces where there had been trenches and banding together to repair a sagging bottom line for the sport, a similar banding together has occurred within the women's pro

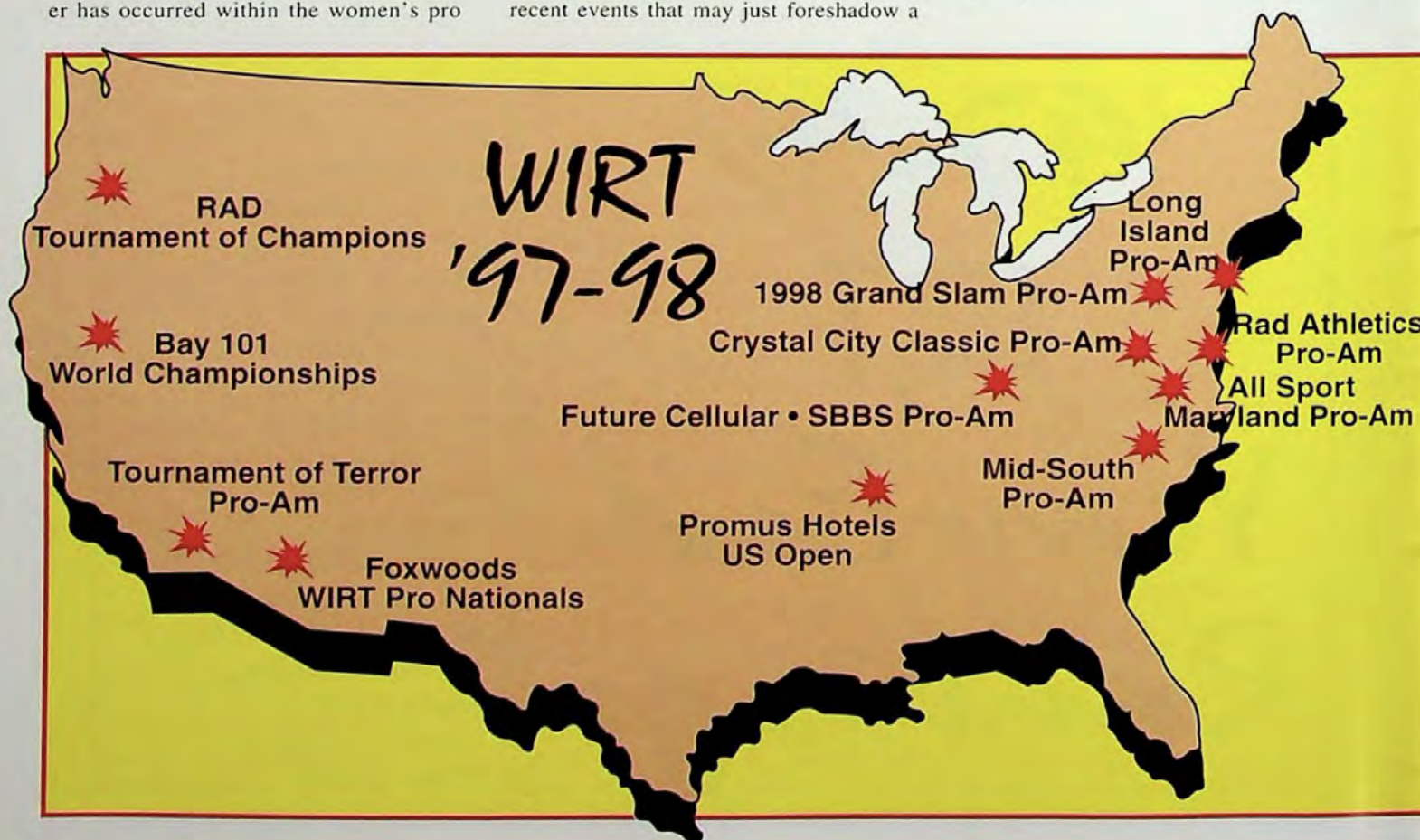
tour. Admittedly aligning with the IRT and commissioner Hank Marcus was the jump start for blossoming transformation. Still, a snowball effect has occurred making the WIRT a more appreciated and more marketable commodity. Much of the credit goes to the players themselves.

It seems that now that the IRT and WIRT have shared several venues, larger groups of spectators have been given the opportunity to see first hand the talents of the women's pros. The players have taken full advantage of the opportunity by dishing out outstanding play that captures maximum attention in the limelight they are afforded.

While Gould still holds a complete lock on the tour, some young lionesses have delivered noteworthy performances at recent events that may just foreshadow a

coming day when life and wins are not so easy for Gould. Cheryl Gudinas has asserted herself as the closest thing to a rival for her doubles partner. Still, good performances by Laura Fenton and Jackie Paraiso bode well for each lady's future. Veterans Marcy Lynch and Molly O'Brien are closer in age and experience to Ruben Gonzalez than to Gould, and still come up with big wins into the quarters.

All in all, what the public and companies like Foxwoods, Future Cellular, and All Sport have realized is what WIRT tour sponsors Spalding, Ektelon, Penn, and Rad have already discovered. That is that the WIRT is an ever improving professional racquetball modality that delivers tremendous bang for the buck and a good showing on any court.





The unstoppable Michelle Gould lunges for a backhand while would-be rival Cheryl Gudinas holds good position to anticipate the return.

WIRT 1996-97 Season End Rankings

1. Michelle Gould
2. Cheryl Gudinas
3. Jackie Paraiso
4. Laura Fenton
5. Molly O'Brien
6. Lynne Coburn
7. Marcy Lynch
8. Janet Myers
9. Lydia Hammock
10. Randy Friedman
11. Doreen Fowler
12. Kersten Hallander
13. Dina Moreland
14. Lorraine Galloway
15. Robin Levine
16. Marci Drexler
17. Amy Kilbane
18. Kim Machiran
19. Anita Maldonado
20. Shigemi Yasuda

WIRT '97-98 Events

Sept 5-7

RAD Athletics Pro-Am
Merritt Athletic Club
Annapolis, Maryland

Oct 3-5

Mid-South Pro-Am
Sportime Racquet Club
Greensboro, North Carolina

Oct 24-26

Tournament of Terror Pro-Am
Racquetball World
Canoga Park, California

Oct 31 - Nov 2

All-Sport Maryland Pro-Am
Merritt Athletic Club
Baltimore, Maryland

Nov 12-16

Promus Hotels US Open
Racquet Club of Memphis
Memphis, Tennessee

Jan 9-11

1998 Grand Slam Pro-Am
Highpoint Athletic Club
Chalfont, Pennsylvania

Feb 27 - March 1

Future Cellular • SBBS Pro-Am
Continental Athletic Club
Columbus, Ohio

March 6-8

Long Island Pro-Am
Amritraj Racquet & Health Club
Bayshore, New York

April 23-27

Foxwoods Pro Nationals
Las Vegas Sporting House
Las Vegas, Nevada

May 2-4

Crystal City Classic Pro-Am
The Skyline Club at Crystal
Gateway
Arlington, Virginia

May 14-18

Bay 101 World Championships
Bayhill Athletic Club
San Jose, California

June 5-8

RAD Tournament of
Champions
Multnomah Athletic Club
Portland, Oregon

Learn From the #1 Player
in the World

The Sudsy Crash Course



INSTRUCTIONAL: SUDSY MONCHIK
ARTWORK: NATHAN BOWDEN



CONVENTIONAL WISDOM SAYS, "IF THE BALL IS UP HIGH - OUT OF YOUR 'POWER ZONE' GO TO THE CEILING."

YOU HAVE TO BREAK DOWN YOUR OPPONENTS BY KEEPING CONSISTENT PRESSURE ON THEM. HITTING A CEILING BALL LETS THEM RELAX.



I SAY, "FORGET CONVENTIONAL WISDOM! IF YOU HAVE TIME TO SET YOUR FEET, TURN & BURN!"



REMEMBER, WHEN YOU ATTACK FROM UP HIGH, DON'T GO FOR AN ALL OUT WINNER. TRY TO FORCE A WEAK RETURN AND THEN FOLLOW IT UP WITH A KILLSHOT!

INSTRUCTIONAL SPECIAL



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Marvin Quertermous

When we set out to gather instruction from the best players in the game for this year's Instructional Special **KILLSHOT**, it came as perfect timing that the International Racquetball Tour would begin certifying instructional pieces. The idea is that there are many schools of thought as to how to play racquetball from very conservatively to very radically and everything in between. The IRT certification simply means that the material in that instructional piece is viable for use in professional play as the game is played today at its highest level. While information may conflict based on the desired goal, nothing in a certified instructional contradicts the prevalent techniques of the pro tours, and that the overall tone and thinking of the article as presented is in sync with the aggressive and highly competitive style of the top players in the world.

There is one area of agreement among teachers from all schools of thought. That is that instructional material must be digested and assimilated into any player's game style. Nobody reads an instructional piece then goes directly to the court to perform perfectly. More likely, you will read an instructional piece, then if you concentrate on incorporating it into your own game, you will lose the next few matches you play while you pay enough attention to your new knowledge to knock yourself right out of the point and out of the game. Racquetball moves far too quickly at any level to make abrupt changes effectively the next time on the court.

Instead of instant improvement or a quick fix, racquetball instruction effects play subtly and imperceptibly at first. Understanding the concept, then constantly and consistently playing with the concept in mind will gradually infuse that concept into your natural play. Very often, it becomes very frustrating when after learning a new effective technique, you become painfully aware when you are not executing it.

For this issue, we went to the players at the top of the game that seem most willing and able to translate what they do well to the rest of us mere mortals. We wanted to concentrate on the skills that define the professional game. We checked with the best players to see what they do best. In the case of the "Why We Lose" article that I compiled for this issue, it represents a concise summation of the thought processes during matches of several IRT and WIRT greats.

The biggest surprise that came out of gathering this data is that advanced techniques are often only the natural evolution of play that comes from complete perfection of basic concepts. Most of the things we identified as advanced techniques cannot be taught. In reality, all that can be taught is mastery of obvious and not-so-obvious fundamentals which give rise to the more specialized and flamboyant techniques we see among the pros.

If I am right that racquetball players share a high level of competitiveness and love for winning, then the concepts we have gathered here will be quite valuable. I believe any player will benefit from these articles, since a number of the pros who compiled them claimed to have reinforced a concept that had been weak in their own games as a result of reading this data.

Read, learn, play, then pass it along. Share your secrets, never give up your edge!

--- MQ





Advanced Techniques MYSTERIES OF THE PROS

By Aaron Katz

Power, speed, diving, photon, rip city, all of these accurately describe the skills possessed by the IRT pros. But the essential elements involved in a fast and furious professional match may seem a mystery to the casual observer. Maybe the IRT pros do hit the ball harder, get to the ball faster, and prey on an opponent's weakness better than anyone else in the world. But they have also perfected the most basic elements of the game. It's easy to see what certain pro players do best, it's far more difficult to see exactly what techniques they employ to get the job done. Although the pros are tremendous athletes, they have also spent many years mastering the techniques and subtleties of their craft. The secret to many of their advanced techniques is their ability to perfect basic skills so well that a special weapon develops as a natural evolution from their practice. Instead of going to the court to create a weapon, most often the stars of the game develop such a command of the basics that a deadly weapon emerges.

Sudsy's Secret for Consistent Kills

I have never seen anybody hit a backhand like Sudsy Monchik. He can shoot the ball from any height. He can rip it down the line, cross court and splat with all the fury of a raging storm. Was Sudsy born with a better natural shot than the rest of us? I began to watch his stroke to find the key. I found that Sudsy's stroke is very simple and efficient. He uses nothing fancy. There is very little wrist curl or excess movement. But there is one thing Sudsy does better than anybody. Racquet prep is the key! Sudsy gets his racquet back very early - much earlier than anybody else. This makes timing the swing and the ball much easier. Racquet prep is a very basic concept, but perfecting it has created Sudsy's advanced shooting ability.

Most players use what I call a "one-piece-stroke", that is, they take the racquet back, then reverse direction to swing, all in one motion. The one-piece-stroke makes consistency much more difficult because there are more variables (and so opportunities for mistakes) from the time the stroke starts until the time the ball is struck.

Sudsy uses a "two-piece-stroke". There

is a definitive pause when his racquet is in its prepped position. This pause allows Sudsy to hit cleanly through the ball and remain level on the follow through in a very efficient manner. The illusion is that Sudsy can shoot well even when he has little time to prepare. The reality is, even in an ultra fast-paced rally, Sudsy is always prepared. The result is a deadly kill.

Try getting your racquet back earlier. At first the movement may feel awkward, but you will be amazed how much more consistent your shots will become. You will also gain more time to set up on the ball. If your kills are good now in practice, but skip or hop up or off the side wall in a match, proper racquet prep is probably the missing element. You must perfect this vital skill and Sudsy secret to play consistently at a higher level.

Mike Ray's Mysterious Gets

We all remember the story of the tortoise and the hare. I have seen many a "hare" who not only tires himself out, but really doesn't cover the court all that well. I am not saying that Mike Ray is a tortoise. He is in tremendous physical shape, but if you took him and most of the other IRT pros out onto a track, Mike would be getting some mud kicked on him pretty fast. I can't remember the last time I saw Mike dive to make a get. Still, nobody gets more balls than Mike Ray.

How does he do it? What is Mike up to that makes him out-get the fastest players in the world? Mike has perfect efficiency of movement! Mike holds his position in center court longer than any other player. His domination of center court keeps him in the thick of the action and keeps his footwork perfect. This results in his very seldom losing points when his opponent hits anything but a great shot. The result is tremendous pressure on Mike's opponents to kill every shot.

This pressure wears down opponents as the match progresses and causes them to go for a little too much on the crucial points. Further, holding his position keeps him on balance for the re-kill and set up for the left up ball.

It amazes me how often players hit defensive shots from the center of the court because they jumped too soon and had to redirect in order to get to the ball that was right in the center zone. Avoid this and take command of center court by "breaking-down"



into what I refer to as a "comfortable-crouched" position. Knees bent and body crouched but flexible, come up on your toes and use the "half-turn" to keep track of your opponent's position at all times. (Don't get down so low that you are off balance.) Make sure your shots stay off the side walls so that you don't have to surrender your center court position. Stay no closer to the front wall when you breakdown than the five foot line unless you know your opponent is going to splat or pinch.

At first, wait until your opponent strikes the ball before you react. Later, as you improve your timing, you can make your move as soon as he starts his swing motion. Given time, you will realize how many balls come back through center court.

John Ellis' Hidden Key to Total Control

Some players look so hyper when they are playing, it makes me nervous just watching. Not only does this use up a tremendous amount of energy but it makes it very difficult to think clearly, to execute and to make good spontaneous decisions, which are all critical elements to playing high level racquetball.

When watching John Ellis play, it always amazes me that someone who plays with his incredible power and intensity looks so relaxed and smooth on the court. John did not always have this trait. When he first came on the tour, he looked more like a Tasmanian Devil. John ran, ripped and dived like a bat out of hell. His play was furious, but his movement was inefficient and his energy expenditure was tremendous. Obviously John has worked hard to play under control without sacrificing the power

and explosiveness that are the hallmarks of his game.

John is clearly thinking about relaxing and concentrating on the process, rather than the end result. By doing so, John is able to vary his game not only from point to point but within the rally itself. I have seen him end a monster power rally with a delicate little pinch in the corner. This skill can only come from concentration and patience. John consciously immerses himself in the flow of the rally. You too must teach yourself to do this.

The key is to walk a fine line between over-thinking and overacting on the court. Forcing a rally by imposing a pre-designed strategy will nearly always end in disaster. Flying around the court under the control of your opponent is even worse. Like John, you must perfect the ability to use your talents to their fullest by focusing your concentration on the flow of the rally. The weapon this affords is the calm intensity to control the rallies and therefore the match.

All of the IRT pros have characteristics which we all can emulate. Since all of the pros are very accessible and willing to share their knowledge, the best advice I have is go to an IRT event and ask the players for their advice. I know as a young player coming up, I picked the brains of Hogan, Yellen and the Pecks whenever I had the opportunity. In nearly every situation, you'll find that the weapons they use most effectively were not natural abilities or intentionally developed. They were simply the end result of perfecting the skills to overcome a weakness. If you practice skills, you can overcome a weakness. If you perfect those skills, you naturally develop the amazing weapons that are the advanced techniques used on the IRT.

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"I feel the need...the need for speed!"

Tom Cruise and Anthony Edwards
in Top Gun

Impossible Gets

By Jason Mannino

"If I get one more ball
than my
opponent...who
wins?"
Jason Mannino



To me, speed is the most important part of the game. OK, maybe not just quickness, but the ability to do what's necessary for every get. It involves timing, court awareness and the relentless pursuit of a little green ball. The goal is to get every ball. Maybe nobody gets 'em all, but that doesn't give me any reason not to go all out for every one.

Many teachers and coaches will tell you that you're wasting your time working for more gets. They'll tell you to work on shots and dictating the pace. They'll tell you that a dive is useless since it takes you out of the next shot. I say %&@(#&... baloney. I'm standing neck and neck with the best players in the world and the only aspect of my game that every critic appreciates is my relentless getting ability. Sure, I have to play offensively and use my gets to my advantage, but I will get one more ball than you every time on the court - guaranteed! Here's the sweetest part: when you can't get anything by me, the pressure increases. You'll try for tougher and tougher shots. Maybe this will make you choke. Maybe I'll just out play you. Either way, I'll make the gets, turn up the heat, and I'll win.

Deon Sanders would be slow in my sport. Racquetball is the fastest sport in the world. You can be born with the genetics of an Olympic athlete. You can even train to become

quicker. You still won't get the balls I get. For great gets, you'll need all the speed you can develop. You'll need court position. You'll need anticipation. You'll need preparation. Most of all, you'll need uncanny timing.

At advanced levels, you'll need to hit an offensive shot on every get. Anybody think that's easy? But at the beginning and intermediate levels, you should just try to make the get, and keep the ball as far away from your opponent as possible, while moving him as far from the front wall as you can. As you improve your getting ability, work on shooting more and more offensively from tough gets.

Your work is wasted if you make a spectacular get only to leave a plum because your ball hops up, kicks off the side wall, or stays in play off the back wall. It's also wasted if you make the get, then neglect to move into a ready position in center court.

Stay in the point, every point. If that means diving for the ball, then dive. Get up, and be ready to dive again. Serve notice that it's going to take serious work to shoot a ball past you or out of your reach. Make the gets. Shoot offensively, then get back into a ready position for the next one. Turn up the heat. Let the pressure build to kill your opponent's mental game. Let your play counter his physical abilities. Crush him with amazing gets. Shrug it off like a walk in the park.



The Essential Elements For Impossible Gets

Speed

It is physically possible to significantly increase your speed. You can accomplish this with specific training techniques. Since racquetball employs explosive movements when demand for speed is intense and instantaneous, a well structured program of plyometric exercise will actually make you much faster on the court. Find out more about the science of plyometrics from a personal trainer or a good bookstore.

Court Position

Set up at the center of the (broken) five foot line. (All of your opponent's shots are easily covered from this position except his best offensive shots. Even of his kill attempts, about 70% will come up enough to be readily playable from this position.) Exceptions: 1) If your opponent rarely hits effective pinches or kills, you may safely drift even deeper in the court. 2) After serving, you may position yourself slightly in front of this position.

Anticipation

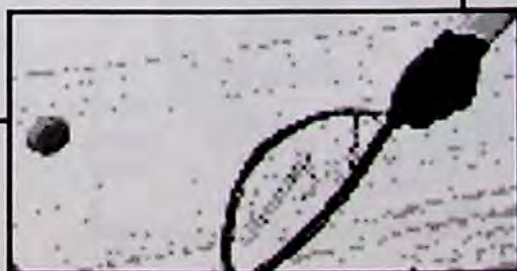
Think in terms of covering the pass or the pinch. Once you have gotten back to center court, be prepared to move up to cover your opponent's pinch, or over to cover his pass. Your job during the rally is to watch from center court to see whether he is going for the pinch or the pass, then move into position as soon as possible.

Preparation

You must be prepared to shoot at all times. In practice, work on keeping your racquet up and prepped, and on moving your feet in a way that allows you the best base from which to swing. Getting to a tough ball is useless to you if you get there with your racquet sticking out to poke rather than swing.

Timing

Improving timing requires two things: practice and concentration. Your timing will only improve when you train your mind and body to work together more efficiently. This requires practice on the court to develop the necessary physical timing, as well as improving your focus to bring your mind and body together.



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DOUBLES JEOPARDY

By Todd O'Neil

As in tennis or a multitude of other sports, adding the team aspect significantly changes the game. Play is different. Strategy is different. The skills required to win are different. That's why many times, the players who excel at doubles differ from those who are the best at singles. Remember, the game is doubles, not singles with four people on the court. Your mentality has to shift from your natural tendencies as a singles player (such as moving to center court or trying to get every ball yourself, even if it takes you out of position).

General Doubles Tips

You can go nuts trying to play against a good doubles team. Or, you can adopt some general concepts that may just save your sanity.

1) A good doubles team should be able to cover almost anything short of a flat roll. That is, they can as long as the coverage is organized and understood and communication on the court is good. With that in mind, shoot everything offensively (aggressive passes and pinches) to keep the pressure on.

2) Even though every shot should be offensive, stay away from trying to kill everything. Even more than in singles, skips are your worst enemy.

3) Like singles, the serve and return of serve are vitally important, and should always be used offensively.

4) Jockeying for position is crucial, so use it to your advantage. Use your opponents' positions to help determine who takes a ball that is left up in center court and could legitimately go to

either you or your partner. With no advantage either way, the forehand usually takes the shot.

5) Z's, jams, and angles are more effective in doubles than singles.

6) Be careful on the cutoff. Cutting-off balls in doubles may not be as effective as singles and may take a would-be set up away from your partner. The serve is an exception since effectively short hopping a serve can be a deadly weapon in doubles.

7) Discuss serve selection before and during the match. Allow your partner to serve as he feels comfortable - if it works. If not, there is no better remedy than a confident partner with a strong suggestion.

8) Serve a variety of Z's, jams, and lobs that stick to or just nick the side wall. Don't give your opponent anything he can cut off.

9) Make sure your serves give your partner ample time to get out of the box and into position.



continued on page 18

Instructional Special

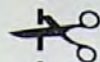
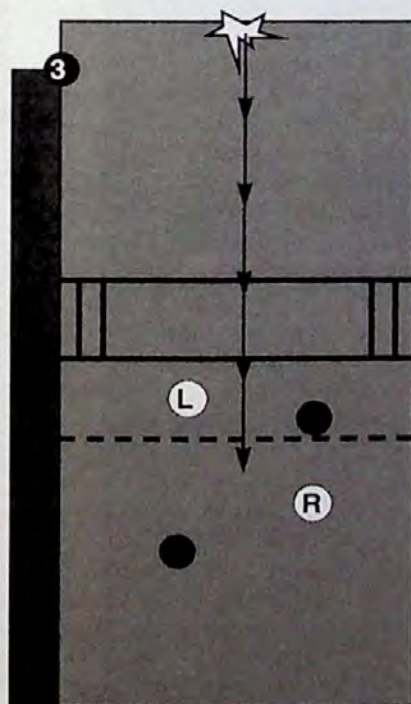
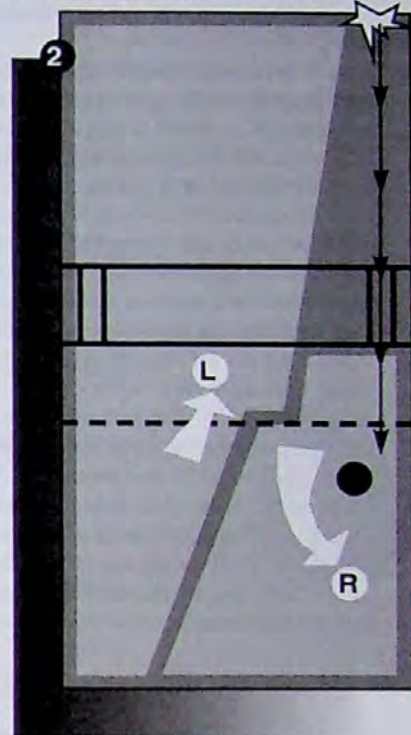
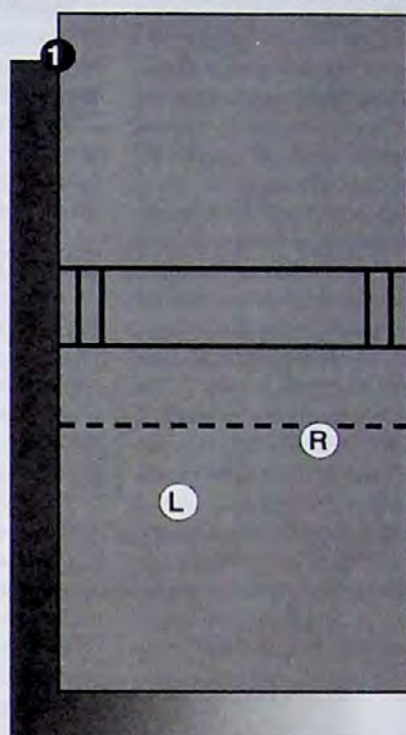


Diagram 1 shows a typical ready position for a slightly staggered side by side position.

Diagram 2 shows movement that results in high percentage coverage by adjusting to cover both the pass and the pinch when your opponent sets up on a ball coming down-the-line to the right side of the court. Your team's player on the left (L) moves up to cover the pinch, but takes responsibility for little deep court. Your player on the right (R) must step back to give the opponent (dark circle) his shot, and to move into position to cover the down the line. R also is responsible for most of deep court. Notice from the lighter shaded areas representing the coverage area for each, there is an area in the front right court that is out of both coverage zones. A perfect down-the-line kill that bounces twice in this zone is the one shot for which there is little defense. Still, a very fast L or R might pick it up. The other partner must then drop back to cover the bulk of the court remaining. This concept can be adapted similarly to any situation, and coverage zones should vary according to players' strengths.

Diagram 3 shows a badly placed shot that hops up in the center for your team (L & R). If L can take the shot, he has two good offensive opportunities with: (1) the crosscourt hard pass that gets by the opponent that is up and on the right but stays tight to the wall and difficult for the opponent on the left to pick up and (2) the pinch to the opposite corner that is available since L is slightly farther forward than the opponent on the right. That pinch sends the ball away from the opponent that is up, and too far up for the player that is on the same side. A third option is for R to take the shot and hope that the opponent directly in front of him moves badly to clear for his shot, leaving him a set up down the right side or a pinch to the right corner.



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Doubles Jeopardy

continued from page 16

Court Coverage

You should have a clear idea of who covers which areas, and keep some distance between you and your partner. Given two players of equal ability, the most effective coverage system is side to side (or a staggered side to side). If you end up side by side two feet apart in center court, something's wrong.

Instead, think coverage for the pass and pinch. During the rallies, if one of your opponents is positioned on the left half of the court to hit a shot, the player on the right must move up to cover the front court. I recommend one step behind the service line and look to read your opponent contacting the ball. From there, that player should be able to get most pinches and even some near-kills (two bounces in front of the service box) to his side of the court. The person on the left is responsible for getting the down-the-line pass or for covering his partner's back on the deep crosscourt. Done correctly, this puts that player several steps back, somewhat behind the shooter. The key is to make sure you have the high percentage shots covered. Reverse the pattern if your opponent is hitting from the right side of the court. Give your opponent the down-the-line kill which is the hardest to execute.

Developing a Doubles Team

Having confidence in your partner's ability is very important. Your partner's skills should complement your strengths and weaknesses. A good mix of skills, confidence in one another's play, and good communication can build a formidable team. In choosing a partner, look for skills such as:

Speed - the first skill I seek in a partner.

If you are slow of foot and so is your partner, you will be out of the tournament in the blink of an eye. I consider myself relatively quick, but I want a partner that is even faster on the court. Communicating and anticipating your partner's play become even bigger factors if both players are fast. Some of the best teams have been made up of a shooter and a retriever. If this is the case, put your shooter on the side that will receive the most serves (the left if both players are right-handed). Let your quickest man take the "point" position (the other side, forehand for right-handers) to cover pinches and kill attempts

Todd O'Neil is the 1996 Amateur World Champion, IRT World Doubles Championship Finalist & Singles #25, Past Winner of Six National and International Amateur Doubles Titles

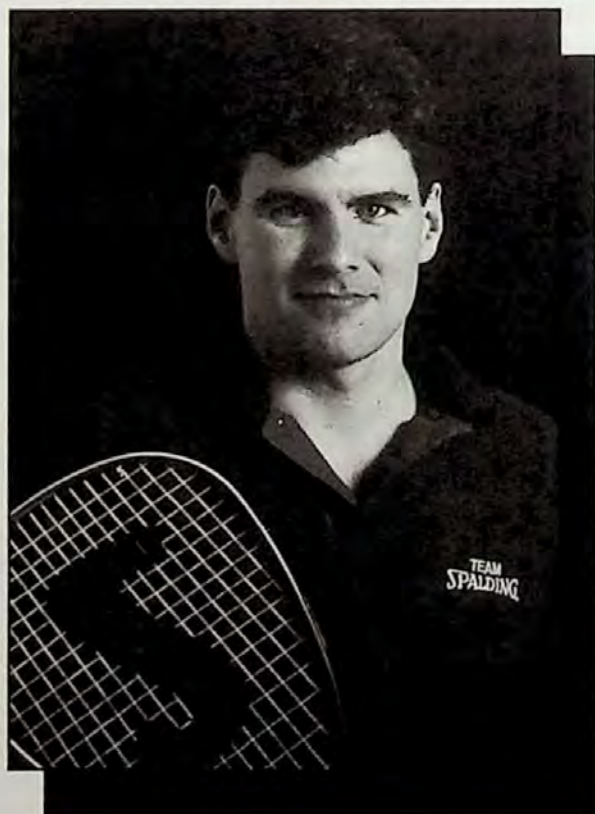
Consistency - next on my list as a valuable virtue.

If your partner tends to skip a lot of balls you will end up in a cesspool of frustration. I remember seeing Doug Ganim (one of the world's best doubles players!) blow a fuse at the Nationals after watching his partner skip a bazillion shots to end long rallies. You could hear Doug scream from four courts down, "Don't skip the ball!" A good pass or a solid ceiling ball is always a better bet than a forced killshot that skips.

Mental Toughness - the third of my essential attributes.

In the most recent Pro Doubles final in Pleasanton, California, Sudsy Monchik and Tim Doyle defeated Derek Robinson and me in the finals. Throughout the event, Sudsy took most of the shots, while Tim contributed great court positioning and consistency. Since Tim had been sidelined most of the season with an injury, he was potentially very rusty. Tim filled in the gaps from his shaky confidence with smart, high percentage / low-margin-for-error shots and strategic movement. He let Sudsy dictate the match with speed, power, and uncanny shot making ability. Tim's mental toughness showed through in two ways. First he assessed the situation and found what was necessary to win under the circumstances. Second, he played with confidence from a position of strength rather than choking from unnecessary risks. Sudsy was hot enough to go all out for the winners.

Geoff Butler, Complete Creative



Not For Juniors Only

By Andy Roberts

Recently, in designing a teaching and training program for juniors, I've had the opportunity to look at the needs of players who have a good introduction to the game, and nearly unlimited energy and interest in improvement. Because I've seen the entire process first hand by evolving from a junior player through intermediate and advanced play to the number one spot on the IRT, I am in a unique position to help prepare players for each step of the process. Whether you are a junior player, an adult beginner, or a veteran with some holes in your game, if you are truly committed to improvement, I can help.

My goal here is to offer some suggestions that will immediately improve your game, and insure that you keep improving in the future. I believe these concepts will do just that. Three things become clear in a quest to make maximum progress. You have to play. You have to practice. You have to learn. How you approach each will determine how much benefit you will get from that area. It will also determine how long you will stick to it. I can't give you desire, or energy, or willingness, or patience, or discipline, or any of the other attributes that will eventually determine your overall success, but I can give insight about playing, practicing, and learning.

Play

1) Don't be afraid to lose! (And you will lose.) You don't have to like it, but you do have to do it. When I think of how many times and how many ways I've lost, its amazing that I still play this game at all. But maybe not. In truth, only through all those losses and my sheer hatred of losing have I persisted until I learned to win.

2) My best advice for anybody that wants to get the most from his play is to keep a journal. Record every match you play. Be specific. Keep track of:

- A. What serves worked against that opponent
- B. What service returns worked well against that opponent
- C. How that opponent covered the court
- D. Any weaknesses that opponent had
- E. What aided you in winning or cost you in defeat
- F. Anything you saw that player do that you hadn't seen before
- G. Anything else you consider significant about the match

Use your journal to understand both your wins and your losses. Use it as a guide the next time you play that player. Use it as a yardstick for the effectiveness of your learning and practice.

Practice

- 1) Learn to be a good practice player. Find a way to enjoy practice. Make it fun. Keep it from being boring with lots of different drills.
- 2) Practice with intensity as you would play in a match. In practice, simulate match conditions as perfectly as possible so that practice really feels like a match.
- 3) You must work much harder during practice than you would in a match.
- 4) Make time every practice to work on your serve, and your return of serve. The serve is your best weapon, and the return of serve your best opportunity.

Learn

- 1) Ask questions of advanced players as often as possible.
- 2) Seek out a coach if you can, or at least a qualified club pro. I can't emphasize enough how important it is to have someone who can teach you, see your mistakes and help correct them, and monitor your progress to help you improve.
- 3) Look for camps and clinics, they are the fastest way to improve!



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Quick Answers to Racquetball Questions from Woody Clouse



Racquetball Drive-Thru

What should any player look to in order to improve his game?

Court coverage, shot selection, serve, return of serve

What about swing mechanics?

Very important, but can't be learned from a drawing. Racquetball strokes are an individual interpretation of a situation. Based on a player's movement and body structure, he will find there are endless variations on some basic efficient techniques. This is the territory for in-person teaching with a pro, a coach or at a clinic.

Is there a basic regarding swing mechanics that you can describe here?

Don't pull your racquet when hitting. Pulling your

racquet through a shot will end in disaster. Think of a pushing motion to guide the racquet into an efficient swing arc. I guess there is a sort of mental checklist that includes remembering prep, footing, lowering center of gravity, transferring power from the legs, and follow through.

What is the biggest flaw in most players' physical conditioning programs?

They neglect the "maintenance phase". By that I mean they train well on the court, or on weights, on the bike or treadmill, or with plyometrics. But that is the training, catabolic, tearing-down phase. If they don't rebuild and benefit from the anabolic phase, they haven't completed the cycle. They will overtrain, burn out, or just quit from lack of results. Proper maintenance means they pay



attention to nutrition, stretching, sleep, hydration, breathing, visualization, and anything else that contributes to rebuilding.

How much practice time do you devote to your serves?

Ideally about one third

What is the ideal amount of practice?

For some players, once each week is more than they are already doing. Ideally, I think serious players should practice more than they play in the off season, and at least as much during the playing season.

What is the biggest mistake players make in preparation?

Neglecting drills.

What's the biggest misconception about playing?

Probably that once you have a game plan and good execution that you will always control the game. Remember, your opponent has the same thinking so you will either trade control back and forth, or one of you will win a power struggle.

Do the pros cut off the ball more than amateur players?

They probably do cut off more balls, they definitely cut off balls more effectively.

What is the least appreciated aspect of the pro game?

How many of the shots in a match are offensive and so near kills.

What mistakes do you see most often from students at clinics?

Hitting without an offensive intent, leaving the ball up or in the center, bending over a shot, running around for a forehand, playing over their heads by attempting kills that aren't within their confident kill zone.

What technique is the most underrated in terms of producing results.

Too many players abandon ceiling balls because they think they

have become shooters. Lets be honest, its not an aggressive weapon or even usually a good first choice; but the ceiling ball will always have a place since it buys you coverage time.

Could any aspiring player make it to the IRT with enough work?

I guess I'm proof of that!

What's the toughest part of the game?

Finding the line between aggressiveness and overkill. Knowing the difference between confidence and foolhardiness. Figuring out when to take risks and when to play smart and within your skill level. Knowing when to shoot, and when to rally. Realizing the fine distinction between pushing your limits and overtraining. Figuring out going into a tournament if you are ready or not. Understanding that losing is part of the game and doesn't mean you didn't measure up. Understanding why after all these years I can still love this game!

One of the top IRT pros, an active clinician, and published author, Woody Clouse has built a career on his gifts as a talented athlete and a well-schooled competitor. Known for his humor and outrageousness on and off the court, Woody plays from an ample mix of supreme conditioning and racquetball knowledge. Here Woody agreed to serve up quick, usable answers to a series of questions as he might field at an event. He also agreed to a full length interview in an upcoming issue to allow us to really get into the head of one of the most outspoken and contagious characters at the top of the game.

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WHY WE LOSE

By Marvin Quertermous
Managing Editor

Why we lose is no big mystery at the early stages of play. The beginner loses because he has no grasp of fundamental skills. Often the developing novice or early intermediate has begun to get the mechanics, but loses because he has little understanding of strategy, coverage, or shot selection. Later, as consistent play and a better understanding of the game begin to develop, we need to learn which pitfalls to check.

Now let's get one thing straight about this losing business. What if you weren't evenly matched? What if you simply lost because you played a more advanced player? If that's the case, you should have lost! You should play opponents more advanced than you every chance you get. What's more, when you do, you should, and most often will, lose to them. While racquetball looks like a flurry of guns and gets, the truth is it is a highly structured and somewhat complex sport. Level of play is everything. If your opponent is truly more advanced than you, he will nearly always beat you. Seldom will genetic athleticism or superb conditioning overcome a more developed game.

Who loses?

Everyone loses. But not everyone is defeated. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. While Babe Ruth led the league in home runs, he also led the league in strike outs. The higher we set our goals, the more losses we encounter along the way. Losing is an undeniable part of progress. But being defeated by a loss is an unfortunate result of misguided thinking. The Swains and Monchiks of the world lose; yet they win far more because their losses serve them so well. A wealth of information hides in every loss. Using that information to your advantage will improve your game faster than any other method.

Nevertheless, there is value in playing a more advanced opponent. This provides valuable practice in covering better-placed and/or faster-paced shots. It is a true test of your command of basic techniques and a great stimulus for the development of your own resourcefulness. In brief, it stretches your limits and therefore raises your own skill level. When you adjust to covering better shots and blinding serves, they will gradually work their way into your own arsenal.

Still, just because you probably should lose under these circumstances, don't you dare accept it without a fight. Often it is in the face of a more accomplished opponent that a player will suddenly realize that his own skill level has increased. Fight to win, even when you have little hope. You may surprise yourself as well as your opponent. And little tastes sweeter than overcoming an opponent who doesn't expect it. Fight your best fight. Savor your win if you should get one. Most importantly, be grateful for the practice value if you don't.





Why

While losing can be valuable to you, you don't have to swallow it until the very last ball is down. Whether the tide has turned against you, or was never with you to begin with, you can assess your game while you play to find out why. If you find momentum escaping you during a match, instead of asking, "Why am I losing?" try checking these more specific areas. Turning a potential loss into a win may only require recognizing and correcting one or a few crucial things. Even if you are unable to make the adjustment during the heat of a match, look to these areas afterward to bring about a different outcome next time.

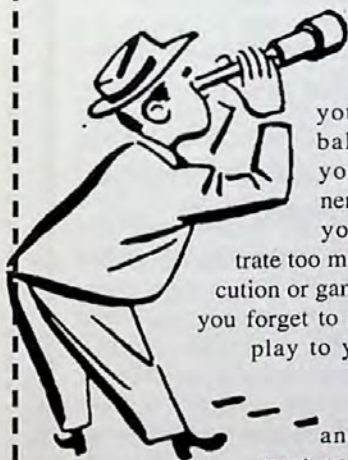
Is your serve working?

Your only goal in serving is to invite a weak service return. How you accomplish that depends on you and on your opponent. Your best weapon may be a drive, a lob or a Z, and may change depending on who you're playing. This one is simple - if your serves are producing weak returns from which you can play offensively, keep doing what you are doing. If they are not, your only hope is to switch to a different serve that brings about that weak return. Hint: if your lobs are easily cut off or kick off the sides into the center or your drives stay in play off the back wall, you're on the wrong track.

Are you returning serve offensively?

Most of the time, the winner is the one resourceful enough to use the service return to force a weak third shot. Hint: get the server out of center court. A kill on a service return is great, but if killing conditions are not right, go back to the idea of trying to gain an advantage now and closing out the rally on the next shot.

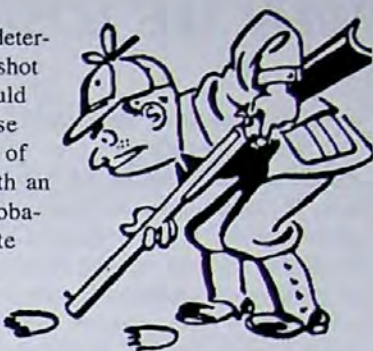
Are you watching your opponent?



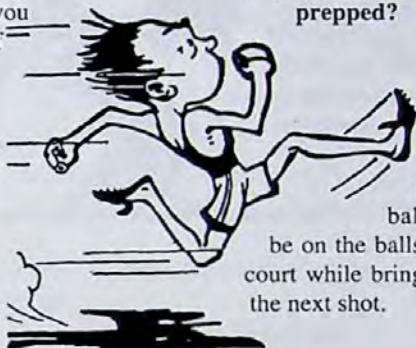
You win when you put the ball where your opponent is not. If you concentrate too much on execution or game plan that you forget to adjust your play to your opponent's style and movement, you'll only be guessing on shot selection. Use your peripheral vision to keep track of your opponent. Know if he is covering the pass or the pinch, then shoot the other one. Watch his swing to anticipate your next movement for coverage.

Are you tracking the ball?

You should be able to determine from your opponent's shot where your best set up should be. If you are having to use legwork to follow the path of the ball or cutting it off with an awkward swing, you are probably losing badly. Anticipate where the ball is going to be at its best position for a set up and for a cut off and be there to take one or the other. Hint: Don't get drawn into the haphazard rallies that result from playing an opponent who botches this one.



Are you getting back to center with racquet prepped?



Finding yourself down on points because you shoot well then admire your shot? Against a reasonably accomplished opponent, many of your prettiest shots will stay in play. Shoot the ball, make your followthrough, then be on the balls of your feet and moving to center court while bringing up your racquet to prepare for the next shot.



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WHY WE LOSE

Are you controlling the rallies?

There are only two positions available in a competitive match: the one dictating the pace, and the one feeling the pressure. If you are down on points, it's a given that you are not the one in control. If your opponent likes the set ups, shake him up by cutting the ball off and allowing him less time to react. He might have to hit from an open stance and give up a shooting advantage. If your opponent likes to move fast and apply pressure, avoid cut offs in favor of set ups, and stick your passes to the walls to make his life miserable.

Are you choosing your shots wisely?

If you are hitting passes when your opponent is in deeeeeeep court, you have a problem. If you are going for pinches when your opponent is hovering around the service box and you are at the broken line, you have a problem. If you are hitting ceilings when you have a set up you have a bigger problem. No matter how well you execute a particular shot, it's wasted if it's the wrong shot. Hint: When is a kill the wrong shot? When you can not afford the consequences should it skip or hop up!



Are you executing?

If your game is off, it's time to lower the risk factor. If you choose the proper offensive shot but choke when you attempt it, it's time to go back to some passes that have a low margin for error. You will be more consistent with easier shots. That may be the only way to keep the pressure on your opponent on an off day.

Are you playing too conservatively?

Smart, conservative play will keep a rally going and you in it, but may not win the game. If you are executing well, get aggressive. Shoot more and go for riskier shots.

Are you too predictable?

Throw your opponent a curve once in awhile. Do something uncharacteristic and unexpected. If you execute well and take your opponent by surprise, it will take a chunk out of his confidence. Sometimes, even when you can correct what is causing you to lose, something dramatic will go a long way in turning the tide. Hint: if you pick the perfect timing to do this and make it an incredible attempt but skip or leave it up, you'll be left with considerable egg on your face.

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Are you out of shape?

If you played well in the beginning of a match, but got cold, you may have run out of steam. In this case, you may find yourself going for fewer tough gets or being out of many points because you are not putting out the effort to get back to center court after a shot. Your shots may suffer because your racquet prep and followthrough will sag.



Momentum will turn against you very quickly if you try to compensate by attempting too many winners from bad prep or bad position. Instead, play smart even when you run out of gas. Put in more time playing since it improves your body's efficiency. Hit the bike or the Stairmaster to get your heart rate

in your training zone for and keep it there 20 - 40 minutes three or four times per week to improve your overall cardio health. Drink water, get your rest, and lay off the drive thrus. Racquetball is a physically demanding sport and if you want to play, you have to meet those physical demands.

Amazingly few developing racquetball players fully appreciate the lessons they can learn from a loss. Far too many competitors become so emotionally drained when they do lose that they are defeated. While professional players openly express their emotions during a match, they are playing for thousands of dollars, using professional referees, and acting in a completely contained court environment. It may sometimes get ugly, but never out of hand - simply part of the intensity of professional play. I am in constant disbelief of the amateur player in a friendly league or tournament with a peer referee who, instead of using a loss as a lesson, defocusses with a tantrum or attack on the referee. It would serve him well to examine the play a bit more and worry about a meaningless outcome a bit less. One of my favorite quotes came from an amateur tournament when a veteran referee for a C match who was under attack confidently returned, "Play ball, and lose the attitude until you become a real player."

I say accept a loss without pleasure, but with appreciation for what it can teach you about your game.

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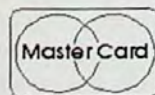
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Looking for some RESPECT

Jason Mannino & His Assault on the IRT

By Eric Muller

"I'm the most under rated player in racquetball, at least I was," grins young IRT star Jason Mannino, "I'm looking for a little respect." After fifteen years in the game, perhaps Mannino's career can be defined as a quest for just that — a little respect.



January 1995 - Nineteen years old with a haphazard shot selection and no service game to speak of, Jason Mannino arrived at the Racquet Club of Memphis for his inaugural professional event. Before even playing a match, Jason informed all of the top pros that he was serving notice - now that he was in town, their days atop the rankings were numbered. IRT veterans smirked. Jason's "in your face" psychological gamesmanship was an entertaining sideshow, a throwback to the days of the boorish professional racquetball of the 1970's. Jason's tough talk seemed harmless as he was bounced out of the first round by Drew Kachtik in a four game "routiner". After the match, Jason told Kachtik that he was "terrible" and that he would "never lose to him again." Kachtik scoffed.

January 1996 - Twenty year old Jason Mannino, with a more refined shot selection and pinpoint accurate lob serves arrived at the Racquet Club of Memphis. As has become customary, Jason continued to use every opportunity to remind the other players that he was a force to be reckoned with. In the second round, Mannino unceremoniously dispatched Drew Kachtik in a three game routiner.

March 1997 - Twenty-one years old and hungry for the big win, Mannino took out Mike Ray, Sudsy Monchik, and John Ellis to win his first pro stop at Rochester, New York.

Geoff Butler, Complete Creative

Now when Jason speaks, no one laughs anymore, and for good reason. After a mere year and a half on the tour, not long enough for most rookies to advance past the second round, Jason left several top ten players in his wake to finish the 1995-96 season ranked seventh. Impressive stuff, especially when considering that Sudsy Monchik was ranked eighth after his first year and a half on the IRT. "Mentally, Jason was way ahead of any other young player who had started the tour in the past. He believes he's going to win, he works hard every match and that's 50% of the battle. Still, it was difficult to take Jason seriously when he first joined the IRT because

neighbor and best friend Sudsy Monchik, showed the most promise. Growing up in Brooklyn and Staten Island, New York, Jason learned from an early age that a tough New York mentality, coupled with the talent to back it up would bring success on the court. In discussing his junior days, Jason says, "We knew that we intimidated the other kids at the Junior Nationals. That was part of our game plan."

While Jason showed potential and had several appearances in the semis and finals of the Junior Olympics, he was always in the shadow of Monchik. Not satisfied with being labeled as a cocky sidekick, Jason sought to create his own legend. Looking

attention," Jason explains, "so I showed them when I beat the national champion (John Ellis) at the Worlds and then won the 18's at the Junior Olympics."

Jason's victory streak may have continued for the remainder of his junior career had it not been severely cut short in July 1992. Having recently returned from a goodwill tour in Puerto Rico, Jason was involved in an automobile accident which nearly cost him his life. Quickly spiraling into shock with a broken pelvis and crushed vertebrae, Mannino pulled himself from his burning, mangled vehicle. Doctors predicted that Jason would have difficulty walking. Yet, after a year and a half of rehabilitation, Mannino returned to the racquetball arena at the Junior World Championships in December 1994 and won with remarkable ease.

Into the Present

Encouraged by his favorable performance at the 1994 Junior Worlds, Jason felt comfortable testing the treacherous water of professional racquetball. While Jason may have been a great junior player, the professional game is more grueling, polished, and sophisticated than any competition he had ever faced. The conventional wisdom on how to play Jason was that he had a poor shot selection, weak serves and service return, and he was easily fatigued. For the first ten or so events that Jason played, the other pros exploited all of his weaknesses. It appeared that Jason had gone from the forefront of junior racquetball to the back of the bus on the IRT.

Just looking for some respect, Mannino made the necessary changes in his game to compete successfully. So what did he do? His shot selection has improved. He re-kills the ball well in front court. His high arcing lob nick is as good as anyone's in the game. Yet, these tools do not win matches for Jason. What sets him apart? In a word, speed. Perhaps that understates the case. The truth is that Jason seems to get EVERYTHING! Monchik may have more pure speed and Swain may be more flexible, but when it comes to explosive speed and digging for balls in the front court, Jason is the best. Driven by powerfully built legs and soft McEnroe-like hands, Jason explodes, dives, and retrieves ball after ball. "I try to get every ball. I won't get every ball, but I want to get every ball and my opponents know that," Jason explains. His speed presses opponents to hit more shots than usual and forces them to hit perfect rollouts to win the rally.



A study in opposition. Mannino's hyper-aggressive style lies in sharp contrast to one of the sport's biggest control-game stars, Mr. Cool-as-Ice, Mike Ray.

his bark was louder than his bite," recalls retired IRT player and industry analyst Aaron Katz, "but you have to give the guy credit. He's beaten a lot of tough players and distanced himself from the pack. He's far exceeded even my high expectations of him, and at this point it is only a matter of time before he's a top four player."

Out of the Shadows

Mannino was a junior racquetball sensation. Back in the days when New York was a hotbed of junior racquetball prospects, Jason, along with his childhood

for some respect, Jason finally earned some by winning his first singles title at the age of 14 at the 1990 Junior Olympics in Dallas. This marked the beginning of a remarkable string of junior victories.

In 1991, as a 15 year old, Jason won the 16 and under singles title at the Junior Olympics in Minneapolis. Later that summer, Jason tried out for the US Junior National Racquetball Team, but was overlooked by the coaching staff. Not deterred, Jason defiantly declared to the coaching staff that he would just "win the 18's next year and then you'll have to put me on the team." The coaching staff simply shrugged. Yet, Jason, true to his word, skipped his second year in the 16's, entered the 18's and won the gold. The coaching staff, not laughing anymore, appointed Jason to the Junior Team. "I had to get those guys'



Mannino, center, with Elkova Icenogle and Alan Engle at the US High School Nationals in St. Louis in 1991.

Very few players have been able to refine their games and become a competitive professional in one season. Jason, similar to Monchik before him, seemed to skip a level. He never played on the US Adult National Team, a popular stepping stone for future IRT stars. How does Jason explain it? "Sudsy and I were the best junior players ever. We proved that at the 1991 Junior Worlds - it was the toughest juniors' draw ever, but in the end, we were in the finals. We really pushed each other." While the depth of the competition could be debated, Mannino has a point. Winning is a habit and Jason and Sudsy have been in the habit of winning since they first swung the short stick. Nonetheless, Jason's quick rise to respectability is phenomenal. Ask Jason about the source of his success and he'll tell you that it comes from mental toughness. "I'm the most mentally tough player on the tour. I think I've proven that by the number of times that I've been down and come back to win matches."

Growing up in Brooklyn with his family developed Jason's unwavering confidence. "My uncle taught me not to fear. My father taught me not to lose. My mother taught me that it's okay to lose." When Jason was a toddler, his uncle used to have him jump off the top of the refrigerator to teach him to trust his family with his life. "My family gave me my character - it's the most important thing about a person. Racquetball is not my life. I play to win, not to make money (although the money is nice). Racquetball is not life or death, not the be all, end all."

Moving On Up

Jason is every veteran pro's nightmare - irreverent, disdainful, talented, and hungry. He never has suffered from a lack of confidence nor was he ever particularly impressed with the top guns of the IRT. Jason's braggadocio chips away at his

opponents' psyche. Incessantly drawing a line in the sand, Jason goads, torments, and taunts his competitors. Rather than return his banter, most players try to ignore him and convince themselves that it's all an act. Jason's attitude is refreshing and is reminiscent of the Hogan - Yellen era. He makes no bones about his desire to win, and he does not need to be friends with his competitors. The end result is that when Jason is ahead in a match, the top guys get tight.

Jason is confident that he will eventually defeat everyone on the tour, including Cliff Swain. Jason says, "The last time we played, I took a game from him. When I started taking games from Roberts that was the beginning of the end for him, and the same thing will happen with Cliff. After every match with Cliff, I have something to say to him. He hears the footsteps. I don't think he's that mentally tough. Things affect him more than the other top guys. Pressure gets to him."

A Nice Young Man

When he's not on the court, you'll find Jason volunteering his time to put on clinics and exhibitions in the host city of pro events, schmoozing with sponsors, and teaching lessons at his family's fitness club in San Diego. This is a stark contrast from the Jason Mannino of junior racquetball days, who consistently tortured tournament directors and hotel managers. "My image has really changed because I've changed as a person. I did some stupid things back in juniors, but I was young and immature. People run to see my matches now and love to see me win." Indeed, Mannino wins fans at every IRT venue because his game is the physical manifestation of heart, hustle, and determination. Jason reminds some of a young Drew Kachtik - bloodied and appar-

ently beaten, Jason emerges victorious despite being the recipient of the lion's share of the blows.

The Future

Mannino has kept his success in perspective. Even with his first top eight finish and "Rookie of the Year" honors, Jason grows hungrier with each event. He recognizes that to get the respect he wants and to make a serious impact, he needs to win pro events. He's taken the first step with his recent win at the Piehler Motors Pro Am in Rochester in March.

Oddly enough, now that Jason has made some headlines, he finds himself back in Monchik's shadow. He is eager to shuck that label. Jason has only the highest regard for Monchik, but he is ready to stake his own claim.

Jason shared some of his thoughts about Sudsy. "I'm his biggest fan, but that's when he's playing other people. He's better than anyone I've ever seen, but I can beat him on any day and I've been in position to beat him when he's playing his best. I will. I don't see anyone else beating Sudsy in the next 10 years. Ellis may give him a little bit of trouble. Karp may give him a run every once in a while, but I'm the only one who can play with him."

"He's my best friend and it helps me when I play him. It affects him a lot more than it does me. That's not to say that he's not competitive or doesn't want to beat me."

At the beginning of this season, Jason's goal was to break into the top four. He has met that goal. Does Jason think he'll ever be ranked number one? "Definitely in 1998. After that, Sudsy, Ellis, and I will battle for 10 years or so." Maybe you disagree, but keep it to yourself because Jason will make you eat your words.



Geoff Butler, Complete Creative

Promus Hotels U.S. Open

All Photos by Michael Boatman

With the beginning of the new pro season in August, the racquetball community begins to look ahead to November for the second annual Promus Hotels US Open. Now recognized as the flagship event for pro racquetball, the US Open will return to its birthplace of Memphis, Tennessee. The event pits the top players of the IRT and WIRT in heated competition in a stadium environment, complete with all the hoopla, big prize money, television coverage, an industry hospitality village and more.

"We're setting out to produce the prototype for the racquetball event of the future", was one of the opening statements used by Doug Ganim as he presented the idea for last year's first US Open to members of the Racquet Sports Committee. "Racquetball courts are typically in places where crowd viewing is difficult, and on-site exposure is limited to current players.

The concept of the US Open is to build a spectator court, set it up in a stadium facility, and bring racquetball to the uninitiated masses."

Randy Stafford's Court Company answered the call with a spectator court that can be easily placed in any venue and could either be set up with four clear walls, or two solid, television-friendly walls to link with two lucite ones. The response was an enthusiastic thumbs up from hard core players as well as newly-inducted fans.

The term partnership set the theme for the entire undertaking. The concept drew industry forces together. It formed a partnership between the IRT and the USRA (the national amateur group, formerly the AARA). Most importantly, it linked the sport with Promus Hotel Corporation and American Express.

Ray Schultz, president and CEO of

Promus Hotel Corporation saw the vision and an opportunity. "We see racquetball as an extremely beneficial marketing tool. It's a sport that breaths excitement. Still, our involvement had to make sense from a business standpoint. I've been pleased with past involvement with the IRT on a smaller scale, and have great expectations from this bigger step. Promus anticipates a very real return from our investment in the sport and this event."

The sellout crowds for the last four rounds in the IRT draw and the last two rounds for the WIRT indicate the success of last year's Open. According to Ganim, "we have been amazed with the number of spectators that are just that-they were not here to play an event, they came to watch. The steady streams of guests from the Memphis business community and guests of supporting sponsors were another bonus."

While the new court became the proving ground, the event atmosphere was as exciting as the matches. Complete with laser lights, driving music and hot dance routines, showmanship was ever-present. The "Open Village" served up each manufacturer's contribution to the festivities, and nightly parties brought in everything from outstanding food and drink to the traditional Memphis Elvis sighting.

So what is in store for this year? according to Ganim, "We considered the first event a success. The idea is to build on that success, add some touches that make things even more 'spectator-friendly', and work to expand it into a series of events in the future. Ideally, I'd like to see two to three of these events next year. We're concentrating efforts to improve the timing of television broadcasts. Between Promus Hotels, American Express, and our team, we've accomplished a lot."

The second annual Promus Hotels US Open begins at The Racquet Club of Memphis, on November 12, 1997. While seating capacity has been expanded, all seats are expected to sell out for later rounds.





Clockwise from top left: Marty Hogan and Dave Peck; Caryn McKinney; Michael Bronfeld and Andy Roberts; Michelle Gould and Jackie Paraiso; Sudsy Monchik and Andy Roberts; Drew Kachtik and Sudsy Monchik; Tony Jelso; Woody Clouse.



Norm Blum's

Passing Shots

Norm Blum's e mail address is: promonorm@aol.com

A few months ago, Sudsy Monchik and I discussed his perspective on defending the No. 1 ranking. Obviously he had never been in that position before and his answers were based on anticipating what it would be like. Now, halfway into the season and just a few points ahead of Cliff Swain, Sudsy is aware of the pressure. "Defending the No. 1 spot is very hard. I now respect any champion in any sport that is able to repeat a No. 1 title or championship. It is very hard to stay focused every day," Monchik says. "But I'm still young and I'm still learning. I don't plan to go anywhere for a long time."

Monchik says the biggest surprise of the season has been the play of his best friend, Jason Mannino. Mannino, Monchik's buddy from his New York childhood, narrowly escaped with his life from a severe auto accident. He was told he might never walk, much less play any sport ever again. When Mannino fought his way back all the way to play on the pro tour, most thought he'd never have the chance to reach his potential. A recent pro stop win made him one of the very few players to break the Monchik/Swain stronghold on pro victories. "He's joined an elite club of players to win professional events. He's no fluke. He can play ball with the best of us", claims Monchik.

Racquetball in cyberspace? Granted, it's not a great physical workout but here are some passing shots that I picked up on the internet... Sudsy Monchik's e-mail ranges from inquiries about training routines and strategies to ladies asking him for his home phone number. He hasn't gone that route. The USRA's home page is under construction. The rankings are up, but it would be much easier if they were all under one heading. Each age group had its own listing. It was rather time consuming to have to search through each one... I'm really impressed with the site for E-Force. When you use the Yahoo search engine and click on racquetball, E-Force is one of the sites that pops up. "You Wanna Win or What? Racquetball is the only world we

know" - and the site makes a convincing case. The IRT site is going through a face lift. It promises to be the flagship of all racquetball sites. Of course, what's a web visit without a shopping experience. There's Racquetball Depot where you can order racquets on line. USRA publications don't take mail order ads with prices because they supposedly compete with pro shops at clubs. Well the USRA can't control cyberspace. You can order racquets, gloves, strings, or shoes on line... HEAD makes a strong case in the depot. In the 1995-96 tour 70 percent of the pro stops have been won by a HEAD player. The company has been in 11 of 12 finals... I looked at the pro rankings and saw Jason Thoenner ranked No. 23. I had played Jason when he was a 14-year old rising B player. I'm 1-0 against him and, well, let's just leave it at that... Marty Hogan, who is probably tending to his ranch, still popped up on the rankings at No. 145. Maybe he sent in an entry for a tournament. About 24 players were tied for No. 176... Saw some profiles of the top women players. Michelle Gould, who is again lapping the field, won all nine events of the '95-'96 season. Her 105-4 record means she has won 96 percent of her matches including 22 games by 11-0. The profiles on the other players were weak and could use a lot more human interest... Cliff Swain was also highlighted. Some tidbits included going through the draw of 64 three times in his career without losing a single game... Fran Davis, who probably has more moxie than 100 players (that's a compliment by the way) has her 900# on the link. Here's a free plug. Call her hot line at 1-900-772-8824, extension 13... Not too many have had better careers than Andy Roberts. Yet he's shortchanged in his profile... If you use the America On Line Browser and search for racquetball, there are no matches found. Ouch!

Got a chance to reread the analysis of the pros that appeared early in the season in **KILLSHOT** Magazine. Eric Muller and Aaron Katz didn't hold back in their assessment. I welcome what many consider to be rips. It made me realize that, until now, Mannino may have been the best kept secret among the top pros ... There are a

few people complaining about manufacturers. Those are the same people who complain about everything. All in all, I think the manufacturers have really come through for the sport... Back to the court. Okay, a racquet does make a difference. I played this guy (that I usually hammer) with an old HEAD Master racquet about the size of my hand. I lost to someone I usually beat by 10 or more points... I have to give the USRA credit for some guts for printing a letter to the editor of their publication that, in essence, said the publication had no personality and missed all the human interest angles... I know one member of a club where there has been a management change 12 times in 15 years. He keeps his cards and shows all 12 when the new team asks for a card. Each management group always changes the format of the membership card. So far, there have been six duplications over the years... I miss the towel service my club used to provide... I've heard nothing but positive review in regards to the Promus Hotels U.S. Open. It didn't make the headlines in many morning newspapers but remember, pro wrestling once received more coverage than the National Football League.



TCB

Taking Care of Business

Industry news and announcements



While most industry manufacturers turned out for the prod-

uct show portion of the Promus Hotels US Open, **Network Marketing's** Doug Smith brought along some extra personnel to help put the squeeze on his competition. Walter, a twelve foot long and very good-natured python, drew crowds to the Network Marketing booth throughout the tournament. Representing the Python Racquetball Grip, Walter spent his time in his huge glass home at the booth when he wasn't out schmoozing the crowds and posing for pictures. Doug tells us that the grips have been a hit, and so was Walter!

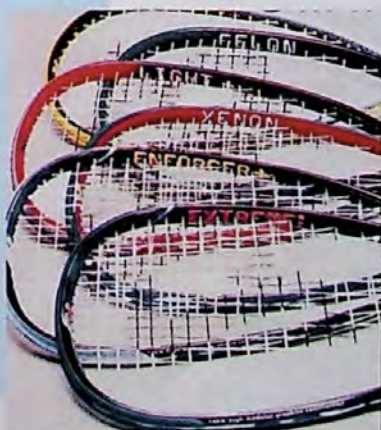


The **Ektelon Natural Foot Shape Shoe**, official shoe of the International Racquetball Tour, has now been identified as the official footwear for the US National Team. Besides its significant technical advancements and cool styling, the shoe is unique in that it immediately conforms to the foot without the traditional shoe "break-in period." With an aggressive lineup of programs and sponsorships, Ektelon has wholeheartedly taken up the task of building the sport, and reports positive findings in the return of "baby-boomers" to the courts. The New Jersey-based Ektelon Division of the Prince Sports Group Inc. remains committed to being both a supporter and a leader in the sport.



The **Pro Penn** ball, hailed by touring pros as the best ball ever developed has found its way into amateur play in a big way. While the green Pro Penn was designed for the demanding play of the International Racquetball Tour in 1994, it was soon after made available to all players in the wake of incredible public demand. It has since become the ball of choice for serious players worldwide. The perfect companion to the original blue Penn (USRA's official ball) the Pro Penn was officially introduced into the USRA regionals for the first time this year. Over 6,000 players from throughout the nation fought for regional championships at fifteen sites in late April.

The official racquet of the International Racquetball Tours, **Spalding** has unveiled its new frames for the 1997 - 1998 season. The focus for the new line is on light, stiff frames that retain Spalding's exclusive and very popular Reverse Sunburst String Pattern. All the frames get a hot new look with terrific colors and graphics. The flagship of the new line is the **Extreme Pro** which hits the courts at a whopping 22 inches in length while maintaining a mere 200g mass. The line reintroduces some favorite frames in a new upgraded version such as the **Enforcer** and the **Felon**. The line features models to hit most every price point and should start popping up in clubs over the summer.



Kenneth Levine of Ashaway String and chairman of the Racquet Sports Committee of the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association included in his recent address to that committee that unit sales of racquetball equipment are up nationally for the first time in years. Across the industry, Levine reported an increase of 3% while he noted that sales for Ashaway (the only US string manufacturer) were up slightly more. The news comes as a relief to the racquetball industry which has banded together in an unprecedented show of unity for the purpose of rebuilding a recently sagging industry.

Racquet stringers may now earn professional certification by the **United States Racquet Stringers Association**. With initial testing sites announced throughout the US, Canada, England and Australia, the certification program has been developed in conjunction with its sponsors, Babolat, Dunlop, Head, Ektelon, Prince, Wilson, and Yonex. Two certifications are offered: **Certified Racquet Technician** (for storefront stringers) and **Certified Stringer** (for independent teaching pros and home stringers). More information is available at (619) 481-3545.



By Aaron Katz

Outside ^aKatz-eye view Looking in

Is Sudsy a Tiger?

Never has there been as striking an example of talent, personality and marketing coming together to lift a sport to the next level as quickly as with golf's Tiger Woods. If you were able to quantify Tiger Wood's impact, it would be enormous. That impact can be realized in green fees, golf cart rentals, equipment purchases, etc. However, Woods did not do it alone. Nike and the PGA recognized what they had in their grasp and joined forces to create "Tigermania"! Maybe (on a much smaller scale) we need to create "Sudsymania"! Tiger Woods' name is recognizable even to those outside of professional golf circles. He is a marketable player with ability and style who becomes a walking representation of the industry.

In racquetball, Sudsy certainly has the personality. Anyone that has spent five minutes with him or watched his performance on TV knows he's very contagious. As for his ability, Sudsy is about to finish his second consecutive year as #1. With Cliff Swain (arguably the greatest player to date) most likely at the twilight of his career, there does not seem to be a legitimate contender anywhere in sight. Sudsy's childhood sidekick, Jason Mannino, has made tremendous strides, and should be commended, but he has not yet shown the ability to contend for the top spot. John Ellis possesses many of the same physical attributes as Sudsy and is a class act both on and off the court. But Ellis' five year pro career has been plagued by inconsistency. Guidry, Fowler, Karp, Jelso and a whole host of great young players have been unable to step up to the top of the pro game. As time goes on it becomes doubtful they will. Veterans such as Kachtik, Ray and

Roberts still play outstanding racquetball, but are unlikely to contend over the course of an entire season. As for young players coming up, Rocky Carson has great ability but has yet to make a commitment to the tour. Jack Huzek appears to be something very special, but is too young too tell (I don't like making any bold predictions until a player is old enough to have a driving permit). Maybe the industry as a whole should join forces with the IRT in a major campaign to saddle up Sudsy to see how far he can take us!

US Open, Portable Court— Where do we go now?

Let me start by saying that I feel fortunate to have gotten the opportunity to attend the Promus Hotels US Open. It was without a doubt the best event in which I have ever participated. The entire event was first class from start to finish. Our industry has invested a tremendous amount of energy and resources into the event and the portable court. As I understand it, the Open was not planned as a money maker and is not budgeted to break even for several years. That means that the thought process must be - the Open will help drive the sport. I am not so sure that that can happen until some other things are put into place.

I know that when I coach juniors, the emphasis is on fundamentals (forehand, backhand, footwork, etc). I don't try to teach them how to dive or hit a splat right out of the shoot. By analogy, our sport has a remarkably weak infrastructure and foundation. There is virtually no public access to courts and the club industry is taking courts out much quicker than they are putting them in. Our major focus MUST be on building the foundation, not the roof. Let's say, for the sake of argument, that airing the US Open causes a huge influx of participants into

the sport - what next? Will these players all of a sudden go out and join a private club? Will these private clubs hire club pros and programmers to handle the crowds? I doubt it. The fact is that there is not a legitimate, qualified, reputable teaching pro available for most clubs, even if they wanted to hire one. And unfortunately, only a select few have even wanted to. We need to put tremendous energy into firming the infrastructure so that "Grand Slam" events will fund, not drain, the various grassroots programs.

The Longer the Better?

The first oversized racquet frames appeared in the mid 1980's. Next came the midsize and hybrids of all types. The Assault even pushed the envelope in 1990. Well, brace yourselves, it's time to redefine the standard as manufactures tool up to produce even longer frames in 1997. Inevitably the emergence of over-sized racquets will once again cause the debate whether these racquets are good for the game. I say don't waste your breath arguing. The longer racquets are not going to drastically impact the structure of the sport. They will make it a little easier for beginners, and more fun for everyone else. Longer racquets are as good for the game because of their marketability as much as their playability. As product technology has leveled off the last several years, players have no longer needed to purchase a new racquet every year (by now most frames are relatively durable). By changing the size of the racquet, many more players will now realize that they will be left behind if they do not invest in the new long-bodies. This will be good for sales and the manufacturers will be able to invest more into the sport. Prepare to jump on board the longer-is-better bandwagon because in the end, the sport reaps the benefits.



Release the thunder!

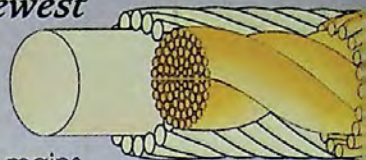
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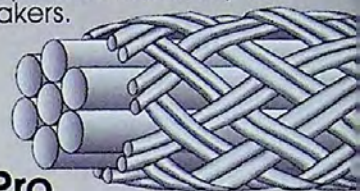
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