

# SAHA - 2001 King of the Courts

## All Hail King George!

It was a perfect day for handball and a big crowd turned out at Roy Wilkens Park for the 4th annual King of the Courts tournament. This is clearly Big Blue's most prestigious event, for although the NYC Championship draws more contestants, the King of the Courts is more heavily weighted with top players.

John "Rookie" Wright, the game's dominant player, was the favorite to take the title for the 3rd time (having lost only to Ray Lopez in 1999). And if Rookie couldn't win odds were that former champion Ray, or Emmitt Fitzpatrick, the runner-up at each of the prior contests, would seize the crown.



"Lefty George" Figueroa, the 2001 King of the Courts

Last year "Lefty George" Figueroa was injured and could not compete in the tournament. This meant that he was not ranked in this year's top 15 spots and would have to work through the entire field to achieve a victory. Still, George was considered one of the top players in the event.

George had come close to victory in the NYC Big Blue Championship, succumbing to Emmitt in the semi-finals in a match marred by a number of controversial calls. George is a quiet man, clearly not one of the game's trash talkers. While this is appreciated by the other players, many felt his low-key style might have been a disadvantage in the City meet. Today George left no doubt that his quiet determination and intensity can be a winning combination. When he is on, his game is as good or better than any of the sport's best players.

It was a day of tight matches and big upsets. Early on the crowd was stunned as Eric Cruz handily defeated Rookie. Peewee was destroyed by James, and then in one of the great matches of the day, George knocked out Ray Lopez. Ray, one of the game's most creative players came into the day feeling good and his game was tough. Unfortunately, he had to face George in this first match. Ray might have prevailed, but barely missed a couple of killers in the final points allowing George to battle back and win 21-20.

There were many other tough matches and upsets and the semi-finals provided the large crowd of spectators with a great show as Emmitt defeated Tyrone Snell and George beat Eric Cruz. Both Tyrone and Eric had been on fire all day playing their top games and neither went down easy, but as fate would have it, the finals went down to a replay of that intense match from last month. There it was, the final game; two great players each with something to prove, each trying to seize the last game before night to win the title. It went back and forth as they traded leads and great shots, neither giving ground. There wasn't much to separate them. Perhaps George was hungrier, perhaps he felt the need to overcome last month's bitter defeat. Perhaps it was just a couple of lucky breaks. Whatever it was, that little edge lifted George to a 25-23 victory and crowned him King of the Courts.