

Handball, the City's Most Popular Game

## Up Against the Wall

by Vincent M. Mallozzi

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Talkin' smack:  
Rookie displays his championship form.  
(photo: Michael Kamber)

**G**hetto President dived for a ball streaking out of bounds, got his finger tips on it, and just before tumbling to the asphalt, put up a beautiful shot that turned Ace's mug redder than the Jack of Diamonds.

"Goddammit!" barked Ace, jumping in the face of his teammate, Rich Fabre. "When you got a man down," Ace reminded Fabre, "you kick that man! Don't ever let him get up!"

With that remark, the boo birds began flying around the West 4th Street courts on Sunday and a murmur rose from the crowd that had gathered to watch and, for some, to bet on the proceedings. But Ace and Fabre quickly got their act together and defeated Ghetto President and his teammate, Donald "Jevon" Whitten, 25-17.

"Hey, I'm just trying to let my partner know I got his back," Ace said after the match. Ace, a/k/a Robert Acevedo, a 40-year-old Brooklynite with long hair and a short temper, summed up with, "It's all in good fun."

But it wasn't for Margie, a courtside spectator. Margie lost a \$10 bet on Ghetto President, figuring a guy sporting a diamond earring, baggy blue jeans, a backward baseball cap, and his nickname tattooed across his washboard stomach just couldn't lose.

But he did.

"Ghetto President?" asked Margie, as she handed the 10-spot to another woman. "Who the fuck voted for him, anyway?"

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Every day of the week, from sunup till sundown, in school yards all across New York City, people like Margie come out to cheer, jeer, and even wager a few bucks on players with nicknames as slick as their games.

Players like Rookie, Power, and Pee Wee talk mucho trash on the blacktop and sometimes kick the intimidation up a notch by playing a physical brand of roundball that New Yorkers are known for.

While the game they play sounds an awful lot like basketball, they're actually hooked on basketball's little, inner-city cousin—handball.

One-wall handball to be exact.

"Every sport has its top players, and handball is no different," said Justin Sullivan, a 26-year-old journalist who recently put the finishing touches on an intriguing, 57-minute video entitled *Big Blue: The New York City Handball Documentary*. Sullivan, a native New Yorker who grew up playing handball, explained that his film took its name from the soft, blue racquetball that City players use to play their game. It's also to differentiate it from the smaller, heavier, solid-rubber orb used in Small Ball, a slightly different brand of handball.

"There's something so pure about this sport," said Sullivan, his eyebrows heading north as he watched a series of wicked exchanges between top seeds Rookie and Robert "the Iceman" Sostre in a doubles match at one of the big handball tournaments last month. "There are no million-dollar contracts in this sport, no greedy players," continued Sullivan, who is constructing his own handball Web site, [Bigbluehandball.com](http://Bigbluehandball.com). "But somehow, as often as it is played here, it never really gets the kind of attention it deserves.

"New Yorkers kind of take handball for granted," he said.

That's hard to believe, especially when you consider the fact that there are 2052 handball courts spread over New York's five boroughs. According to the Parks Department, there are 673 courts in Brooklyn, 640 in Queens, 406 in the Bronx, 277 in Manhattan, and 56 in Staten Island. "Handball is the largest sport in the city," remarks a player in *Big Blue*. "There are more people on the handball courts than on the basketball courts on any given day."

At the Big Blue Championships, a city-sponsored tournament that draws the best players in the sport, Rookie—handball's Michael Jordan—went on a serious roll. He had Goland Bokobza for breakfast, Power for lunch, and Emmitt for dinner en route to taking the \$500 singles crown. With his second consecutive Big Blue title, Rookie established himself as the best one-wall player in the world.

After crushing his opponents by scores of 21-7, 21-3, and 21-4, Rookie, a 6-1 player with long, muscular arms, paraded around the court. He held the ball high over his head, sidestepped some trash talk—"You ain't shit, Rookie!"—then bowed before the hundreds of cheering fans whose noses were pressed against the chain-link fence that surrounds these Queens courts.

"I'm in great condition, I don't smoke, and I don't drink," said Rookie, standing near his first-place trophy in London Planetree Park in Woodhaven. "All I do is play the game; that's why I'm the best. It's all about the game."

Ahh, the game. The ancient game.

Historians claim the game of handball began with the invention of the ball, dating back to the Egyptians in Thebes in 2000 B.C., where tomb paintings depict priests striking a ball with their hands.

And there's a lot more history to be learned in *Alley Cracker: The Story of Handball*, a film produced, directed, and narrated by Ben Thum that was released last year. In

the documentary, handball historian Tom O'Conner tells us that the Greek writer Homer mentions a handball game invented by Princess Anagalla of Sparta in his own, Homeresque sort of play-by-play: "O'er the green mead the sporting virgins play, their shining veils unbound along the skies, tossed and retossed, the ball incessant flies."

Alexander the Great (450 B.C.) is credited with spreading the game to Italy, where it then migrated to other parts of the Roman Empire.

It was the Irish, though, who developed the modern form of handball, bringing the game to America during the 1849 California Gold Rush. The original Irish ball was known as an "alley cracker" because of the sharp cracking noise it made when hit against the stone wall of a handball alley.

Handball migrated to New York via Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, at the turn of the century, when locals passed the time by batting the ball against the breakwaters at low tide.

By the late 1920s, handball's popularity took hold, with the spread of outdoor athletic clubs—like the Brighton Beach Baths and the Castle Hill Club—that featured the game. Handball has since been standardized, employing a 16 foot-by-20 foot wall and a 34 foot-by-20 foot court.

These days, the two biggest handball tournaments in New York are the Big Blue Championships and King of the Courts, which will be held July 14 at Roy Wilkins Park in St. Alban's, Queens. King of the Courts awards \$1000 to the winner.

"I'm going to win King of the Courts," said Lloyd "Power" Babb, 26, a construction worker who was full of sweat and misery after being taken apart by Rookie in the semis of the Big Blue tourney. "My power game is stronger than Rookie's. He just has a psychological edge over the rest of us."

But that edge was not a sharp one during Rookie's thrilling Big Blue doubles semifinal, which featured him and teammate Fred Lynch against Iceman, a world-class paddleball champ and top-ranked handball star, and his partner, Ervin Irizarry. "Don't be afraid to hit it to him!" Iceman yelled to Irizarry, coaxing his partner to challenge Rookie. "I'll take care of the rest."

And he did, blasting a low, unreturnable ball (a "killer," in handball parlance) to Rookie's backhand, polishing off the singles champ and his partner by a score of 21-15.

Huge favorites heading into the match, Rookie and Lynch let a lot of bettors down that afternoon. "C'mon Rook," a voice shot out of the crowd. "There goes my fucking rent."

John Gregory Wright, otherwise known as Rookie, is one of the many handball phenoms profiled on Sullivan's documentary. "When I was coming up, people called me Rookie of the Year," Wright explained. "But you can only be Rookie of the Year once, so the next year, they cut it down to Rookie."

A 27-year-old clerk at OTB, Rookie is the betting favorite for most of the well-tanned men and women sitting on folding chairs in straw hats and sunglasses at his tournaments, following him from borough to borough, and wagering hundreds of dollars on each of his games. Players also bet on themselves, which often enables them to double or triple the size of their tournament winnings.

"Rookie, Emmitt, those guys don't want to play with you if you don't have any money," says Marvin Jones, an A-player himself, in *Big Blue*. "In one year, I probably lost \$2000 in handball money alone."

The film pays no attention to Small Ball, which uses a harder-to-hit golf-ball-sized sphere, or to 3-wall handball, which is more of a California game, or 4-wall handball, which Sullivan describes as "where a bunch of lawyers might meet on a Tuesday and play at their local YMCA. "If you want a definition of a subculture, this would be it," continued Sullivan. "What's going to surprise people is that handball is a self-contained community with its own heroes, its own legends."

*Big Blue* opens with a series of the city's best handballers playing to an African drumbeat on various courts throughout the city. There's no narration, but through a series of insightful, colorful, and sometimes comical chatter from the players, the viewer gets an up close and personal look at the sport and the characters associated with it. Culled from more than 80 hours of footage from last summer, nothing comes across more than each player's burning passion for the game.

"Nobody who ever played handball, even a little bit, ever really stopped playing," Joe Durso, the Mickey Mantle of handball, says to the camera. "It's a weird thing," continues the 45-year-old Durso, who, along with rival Buddy Gantt—handball's Willie Mays—dominated the sport for two decades. "You have to play it a little bit to understand. But it's just so pleasurable that you don't give it up."

Perhaps the most telling piece of footage in *Big Blue* concerns Rookie, who, like most of the players, is a perfect gentleman off the court, an egomaniacal, hotheaded sore loser on it. "When people play sports, they seem to forget to have fun," pontificates Rookie, smiling wide for the cameras during an off-court interview. "When you don't have fun, your aggression, your anger, stays bottled. You have to have fun."

In the next scene, Rookie is on the court playing doubles, but clearly forgetting to have fun: "What the fuck is wrong with you?" he screams at a teammate who forgot the game plan. "I told you to stop hitting the ball to him! Why can't you listen to me? I don't understand you! Do you want to lose?"

It is that kind of intensity, as well as the pure athleticism and skill of the players, that breathes real life into the film.

"It's a little like . . . underground" is how Durso describes the sport. "It's like a secret society."

Every member of that secret society—which does an awful lot of gabbing on the Web site [Streetplay.com](http://Streetplay.com)—seemed present and accounted for by the time the Big Blue doubles final got started. Hundreds of fans, many just arriving from the Puerto Rican Day Parade, began climbing the fences to see the Iceman and Irizarry do battle with

legendary Ray Lopez, a former champion whose powerful right hand is widely regarded as the best in the business, and his partner, Shawn Conrad.

Lopez, dressed in baggy blue jeans and a white dress shirt with a Puerto Rican flag painted on it, took exception to someone in the crowd who criticized his left hand. After closing out a long volley with a left-handed smash, Lopez, his Puerto Rican flag flapping in a warm breeze, looked into the crowd and shouted to one in particular, "Like my left now, baby?"

While the match was being played, Raul Fantauzzi, the varsity handball coach (we kid not) at Automotive High School in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, unveiled a set of handball trading cards that he and a friend will soon try to market.

"This man is known as Lifeguard Ed," one of the cards reads. "His game is all whip, kill, whip, kill."

The hottest card in the heap, of course, was Rookie's.

"Rookie Gold," the card said. "He is one of the youngest players to come out and dominate handball. His game is pure power, straight killer from anywhere on the court."

The best part about his handball trading cards, Fantauzzi said, is that unlike the players from most other sports, "these guys will actually sign them for you."