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Hand and Ball

By DAVID HINCKLEY
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It was the fortune of the brothers Oscar, Ruby and Carl Obert to possess exceptional skills in a sport whose only measurable reward is satisfaction in a job well done.

Handball was their game, and for much of the 1950s and 1960s, they were the best family act around. In fact, they may have been the best family act ever to play any game, ringing up 92 national titles among them before they hung up their thin leather gloves and let the calluses soften on the palms of their hands.

Writers have said they floated above the hot, stark concrete courts of handball the way the DiMaggio brothers soared over baseball, but a Chicago writer may have been more accurate when he half-jokingly compared them to the Marx Brothers - not because they were clowns but because much of their success lay in collective achievement.

Oscar, considered the most accomplished of the brothers because of his dexterity with both hands and his tenacity on the rare occasions when he fell behind, won six national one-wall singles championships between 1959 and 1965, losing only in 1962. He also won five consecutive doubles titles in those years, 1959-63, teaming with Ruby.

Sometimes the Oberts would divide things up when a major tournament rolled around. One would enter singles, the other two doubles, so they didn't beat each other.

Born in the Bronx in the heart of the Depression – Oscar in 1931, Carl in 1933, Ruby in 1935 – the Oberts fell into handball by default. Their mother wouldn't let them play in the street, so they went to the schoolyard around the corner and bounced a spaldeen - a small soft pink ball more often associated with stickball - off the walls.

Along with other youngsters banished from the street, they would play King-Queen, a game that had different rules than handball's but much the same intent. King-Queen eventually pushed the Oberts toward handball itself, which is played with a smaller and much harder black ball.

In New York, in particular, the purest form of the game is not three-wall or four-wall, where the ball is continually redirected toward the playing surface, but one-wall, where the player must always keep the ball in front because there are neither second chances nor recovery options.

Perhaps because it requires only two pieces of equipment – a hand and a ball – handball has been traced as far back as 11th-century France. It caught on most strongly in Ireland, however, and it was primarily Irish immigrants who carried it to the New World. A handball court was documented in San Francisco as early as 1851, but the sport's true home base was New York, where Irish immigrant Phil Casey built a court just for handball in Brooklyn in 1882.

Casey charged money to play, and used the proceeds to build more courts. He also was one of his own most prominent customers, helping organize the first national championship tournament in 1887 and beating fellow immigrant Barry McQuade to win it. He then challenged the Irish champion to a world title match and won that championship as well, collecting $1,000 as his reward.

Considering what $1,000 was worth at the time, it can be safely said that handball is one of the

few sports whose championship is worth less today than it was a century ago.

THE U.S. Handball Association, which has directed the game since 1978, after resolving a long turf dispute with the AAU and the YMCA, says about 2.5 million people play handball today, on about 3,000 courts. The problem is that no one wants to pay to see it. In 1934, noting how thousands of people would crowd the beaches of Brooklyn to watch handball matches, the AAU brought some of the top players to Madison Square Garden - and drew barely 400 spectators.

Handball seems to be like a flower that cannot be transplanted from its native soil, which in New York is mostly the concrete walls of the boroughs. Legend has it that New Yorkers developed the one-wall game 100 years ago by playing against exposed jetties on the beaches of South Brooklyn at low tide, but whether or not that is true, athletic clubs built dozens of handball courts in the 1920s and the city added hundreds more as public works projects in the '30s.

As a result, handball has developed its own culture, and an acute sense of self-worth often has become a substitute for financial rewards. New York's Joe Durso, a nine-time singles champion in the 1980s and '90s, was known for berating and humiliating everyone in sight: opponents, referees, spectators. "Look what I rule," he brayed in 1993. "A kingdom of schmucks. They don't understand my greatness because they don't know what it's like to walk in my shoes."

The Oberts were not passive on the court, either, though next to Durso, almost everyone looked like Mr. Congeniality.

In the 1969 AAU championships at Coney Island, for instance, Carl Obert was leading Steve Sandler, 20-18, in the third and deciding game of the finals when referee Morris Levitsky called Obert for an unsportsmanlike block.

This took away Obert's serve and gave it to Sandler, who promptly scored three points to win the game, 21-20, and take the national title. After the match, Carl stormed over to argue his case with Levitsky, and soon Ruby ran out to join him. A close championship game ending with a shouting match denouncing the referee. It doesn't get better than that.

The Oberts later filed a protest, which was turned down. By the early '70s, they were phasing themselves out of the game, leaving the titles to the next generation: Vic Hershkowitz, Sandler, Jimmy Jacobs, Durso.

But it's unlikely any brother act will play this peculiar and tenacious sport like the Obert brothers from the Bronx, and for their achievements they were properly rewarded by the National Handball Hall of Fame, to which Oscar was inducted in 1972, Ruby in 1987 and Carl in 1999.