

Ektelon – Leach: The Pioneer Racquet Companies

by Bo Keeley

From 1971 to 1986, virtually every top player in the sport was sponsored by one of two San Diego based racquet manufacturers, Ektelon and Leach Industries. Both companies were the brainchild of retired elite athletes. With the help of racquetball pioneer, Dr. Bud Muehleisen, Ektelon was founded by Bud Held, an Olympic Javelin Thrower and Pan Am Games, Gold Medalist. Leach was started by its namesake, Bud Leach, a multiple National Water Ski Champion. Other manufacturers tried to break in the traditional manner of signing national champions. The two companies had similar roots but very different cultures and both inspired fierce loyalty from their players. The most well known from the Ektelon and Leach camps in the 70's and 80's are below:

Ektelon: Bud Muehleisen, Bill Schmidtke, Steve Strandemo, Jerry Hilecher, Mike Yellen, Dave Peck, Ed Andrews, Ruben Gonzalez, Cliff Swain

Leach: Charlie Brumfield, Steve Keeley, Steve Serot, Rich Wagner, Davey Bledsoe, Craig McCoy, Marty Hogan, Benny Koltun, Bret Harnett, Gregg Peck.

*Wilson signed 1977 National Champions Davey Bledsoe, Shannon Wright, and pro racquetball rookie Dave Peck in 1978.

*Vittert signed multiple National Champions Bud Muehleisen and Peggy Stedding

*Brumstar was started by Multiple National Champion Charlie Brumfield and his pal, Ron Starkman

*Head signed Canadian National Champion and top pro Steve Strandemo and Junior National Champion, Doug Cohen

My little place in the pioneer companies began at Ektelon with a nervous walk as a fresh Michigan State grad that despite multiple Paddleball championships had played racquetball for less than a year. Ektelon was little more than a machine shop with metal bending machines; however, Bud Held greeted me with a warm smile and handshake. I admitted fishing for a new Muehleisen metal racquet at cost that gave the hitter a 10 point advantage per 21-point game. He told me as an athlete he understood, and I walked out with a free new racquet to test, and if I liked it the hint of a contract. In a matter of months the '71 first Singles National Invitational was thrown just down the road at Mel Gorham's Sports Center where I walked in as one of the sixteen participants and Bud Leach, whom I had never met, put a new fiberglass racquet in my hand with a \$20 wrapped around the grip. After I won my first match he treated me to a steak dinner and for dessert offered an equipment contract for all the free racquets I wanted plus travel expenses to the Big Four (and only) annual tournaments: National Singles Open and Invitational, and National Doubles Open and Invitational. I had the first verbal equipment contract in the sport, and later the first apparel contract with Converse tennis shoes. It was an honor getting to know the Buds Leach and Held over the years, and I lived first with the Ektelon and later Leach general managers Doug Burns and Charlie Drake respectively, as well as many of the players on both sides including Muehleisen, Brumfield, and Hogan. I played with a Leach Bandito 321 gram racquet throughout my ten year career.