

How Racquetball Got Its Name

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It was in early 1969, that the Jewish Community Center in St. Louis had the foresight and chutzpah to send a letter to virtually every facility in the United States that might have a 4-walled indoor court-and where they might be playing with a small strung racket-inviting their players to a National Tournament.

The “game” was invented by a tennis pro named Joe Sobek, who resided in Greenwich Village. The story goes that one winter, when the snow outside prevented Joe from teaching tennis, he thought of the idea of cutting down a tennis racket and moving indoors to a 4-walled handball court in order to be able to get a workout while at the same time practice his tennis strokes.

Joe used the inside of a tennis ball which, at that time was called a Pensie Pinkie (made by Pennsylvania Tire & Rubber). The ball having a rubberized surface gave itself traction on the polished wooden floors, used by the handball players. Soon a “game” was started which patterned itself after handball. A Paddle Rackets Association was formed in the New England area, and the game slowly spread to various hotbeds throughout the United States. Now, the game had a founder, equipment and association, but not a *name*.

St. Louis heralded its event as the ‘The First National Tournament for Paddle Rackets.’ Entries were mailed out, and at tournament time, lo and behold, upwards of 250 participants showed up from all corners of the USA. The director of the 1st tournament at the JCC in 1969 was Bruce Hendin. Divisions were made up for both men and women in singles, and doubles as well as senior age groups for both.

Early on in the tournament, time was set aside for a big “organizational meeting” of the players at the tournament. The room was packed with the participants. The meeting was chaired by Mr. Robert (Bob) Kendler from Lake Forest, Illinois, the President of the National Handball Association at that time. A Board of Directors of seven was elected representing the different sections of the country, and each more or less headed a committee to further develop the “new” sport. Bob Kendler was installed as Honorary President of the Association with the National Office being set up at his Lake Forest headquarters. He also used his handball staff there to start things underway, including the handling of the dues and communications with its new members. Soon, that procedure was completed, and it was announced that we needed to give a new name to our new sport and organization. A hum swept the room. The problem arose because the many paddleball players voiced the opinion that the racket was NOT a paddle. That opinion was unanimous.

A chalk board at the front was filled with 6-8 potential names, and then each was put up for nomination. After scrutinizing the names for a few minutes, and bantering their possibilities

about, the room buzzed in confusion. The reason is each and every name seemed to conflict with other sports such as tennis, paddleball, paddle tennis, paddle rackets, etc...

During a lull in the action, a tall man in the back of the room stood up, and introduced himself as Robert (Bob) McInerney from Coronado, California, who had traveled there with the contingent from San Diego. He proceeded to offer the thought, "Since the sport uses a racket and a ball... why not call it...(Racket)ball?" Well, it was like a light from above went off in the room. The name was quickly put in motion, seconded, and won by acclamation!

Then started a 25 minute debate as to the spelling of the sport's name. This was because of the connotation of "Racket" lending association with the Underworld of Rackets, and reputed Mafia members might therefore object. Finally, Bob McInerney stood up again and suggested the French spelling of 'Racquet'... and once again, it was quickly adopted by acclamation.

As the meeting adjourned and the players filtered back to their matches, a pride began to permeate throughout the building that OUR SPORT, which was so much fun to play, was called.....Racquetball!