

The Roots of Pro Racquetball

Fortieth Anniversary

by Steve Keeley

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Racquetball for me started in 1971 at the most pivotal national singles tournament that transformed the sport from amateur to professional.

I was a relative unknown, as was racquetball that year, never having paid it attention except for a few hits against the coming king of the decade, my nemesis Charlie Brumfield. Brumfield had moved from San Diego to become housemates at Michigan State University for the prior summer after I had beaten him in the finals of the '71 paddleball nationals where he screamed at the Flint, Michigan gallery before losing, 'Stick a fork in him, you farmers...he's done!' It was my first championship. Brum returned to San Diego and his mentor, Dr. Bud Muehleisen (present holder of 69 national and international titles) counseled, 'Keeley's your only threat, babe. Go back to Michigan and live and learn from him.' He did, and he did.

Later that year, the '71 national racquetball singles invitational rolled around in Mule and Brum's hometown San Diego. Indeed, they called me a hayseed despite beating in succession the incumbent national champion Bill Schmidtke and New York state champ Charlie Garfinkle, before taking on Brumfield in the quarters.

The tournament is memorable for a couple scenarios. At the time I was collecting \$50/mo. under the table from Trenway Sports to use their wooden clunker racquet. Then lo, Bud Leach stood in the doorway of the Invitational host Gorham's Sports Center greeting each of the 16 invitees with a green Swinger racquet newly molded in his garage and a \$20 bill wrapped around the handle. I struck a deal with him for equipment and plane tickets to each of the four national tournaments and invitationals in singles and doubles. My genius doubles partner Charlie Drake, also soon to graduate from MSU with a PhD in sociology, hustled Bud at the tournament, and soon owned 51% of the company.

The craziest instant was losing to Brumfield in the quarterfinals. I took the first game with a serve right to surprise him, he flailed a famous forehand and the ball disappeared. He, the ref and gallery searched but could not find it. We adjourned to the drinking fountain where his Swinger racquet dangled by the thong... with the ball stuck between the handle and frame. He screamed to let the gallery know, 'When's Leach going to string the crotch!'

Bikini'd girls handed out awards at the '71 Invitational, the Pacific lapped five blocks away, and a year later this hayseed vet school graduate took the sheepskin to California where a snafu in the vet licensing thrust me into the burgeoning sport pro racquetball.

