

Showdown on 92nd Street

Paul Haber won the national title, but discovered it meant nothing unless he beat Jimmy Jacobs

For an event that turned out to be The Great Underground Game of 1967, it all started quietly enough. Paul Haber, 31, who is the national handball champion, picked up the telephone in one meaty hand and called Jimmy Jacobs, who used to be the champion, and said the magic words. He challenged Jacobs to a quiet, final, man-to-man showdown. Nothing fancy. No hoo-ha and publicity. They would pull on their white soft-leather gloves and duel to the death, that's all. All strictly unofficial, cut-'em-up, nothing at stake. Well, nothing except the whole world of handball, which promptly heard the news and came running.

Jimmy Jacobs was so excited about the prospect that he even accepted collect charges on the call, San Francisco to New York. They agreed to meet unobtrusively on 92nd Street in Manhattan, on the fourth floor of the YMHA, a Jewish island between Germantown and the advancing Puerto Rican belt. There would be two matches, one on Saturday night and one on Sunday, to give more fans a chance at the few available seats.

This was roughly two weeks ago. By last Saturday night, when Jacobs and Haber were tugging on their gloves, everybody who was anybody in the game had assembled at the Y. Betting money began flowing like wine at an Italian wedding, because, in New York City, Jacobs is the Jewish Clark Kent, fine and clean and pure and strong and true,

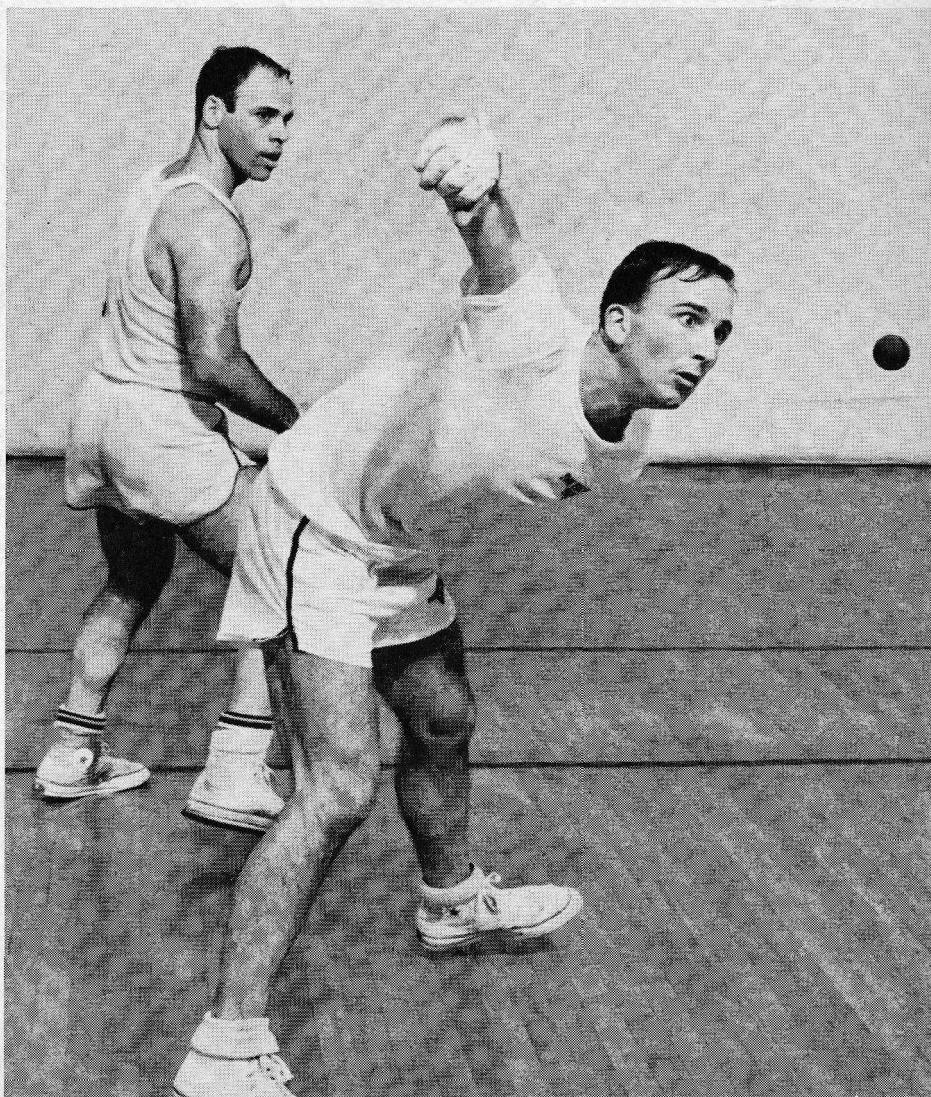
even if he is 36 years old and getting to the point where he combs his hair slightly forward to cover the thinning spot. What matters is that nobody beats Jacobs at handball.

After Jimmy accepted the challenge he hung up the phone, dashed to his checkbook, paid for Haber's plane ticket to New York and arranged for his expenses plus \$150 personal-appearance money. Then Jimmy began to flex his forearms, which are extremely large and hairy, and nervously wait for the big day. The YMHA agreed to pay back Jacobs by selling its few seats at \$10 each—which was a nice gesture for a secret game. They could have sold out Yankee Stadium at twice the price.

To understand the reason behind all this midsummer lunacy one must first understand something about the sport.

Handball is a game that might have been devised by the Marquis de Sade as something fun to do while his whips were at the cleaners. The four-wall version is played by two men locked inside a 20-by-40-foot room, off whose walls, ceiling and floor they slam a small, black rubber ball at speeds up to 100 mph. There are only two ways to win: by scoring 21 points first or by having your opponent suffer a coronary occlusion. In one match (two out of three games), a good player will sweat off at least six pounds, and the palms of his hands will begin to look like the soles of combat boots.

Jacobs has been the leading gladiator of New York's elite handball-oriented community for a long time. Between 1955 and 1965 he won six national singles championships and shared in four



INTENT ON THE BALL, HABER COCKS A POWERFUL RIGHT WHILE JACOBS GETS SET

doubles titles. The last two years, out of ennui, he gave up the singles game and concentrated on doubles, which he won laughing.

All this was fine with New York, but bitter for California and Paul Haber, who won the singles titles in 1966 and 1967. The championship had a certain taste of ashes to it because he had beaten everybody of consequence—except Jimmy Jacobs. It got to the point where people were saying, “Oh, sure, you are the national champ, all right, but. . .” And Haber, who is a proud man, began to be rankled.

The night before the big match Haber sat in a Third Avenue restaurant, moodily poking at a steak, his steel-pipe forearms hidden under the sleeves of a green blazer. “This here is a mess,” he said. “I mean, my coming back to New York to play him on his own court. I was raised in the Bronx, but I left when I was 10. Still, I’d go to China to play this guy, just to get the thing settled. *Anywhere, anytime.* I can outshoot him, and that’s all there is to it.”

Not too many blocks away, Jacobs sat at a back table in the Old Murray Hill restaurant, a dark, beamed-ceiling place on East 40th Street, daintily picking at a chef’s salad and shaking his head in limited wonder. Jacobs had not lost a singles match since the year of the blue snow. “An unfair myth has arisen around this country,” he said, “that I cannot be beaten. This is just not true. It *is* true that I have not lost in a long time, and it *is* true that it’s been about 10 years since anyone has challenged me at four-wall, but. . .” His voice trailed off.

Haber had begun the soft psych that is the specialty of the game by stopping off in Phoenix to play a few tune-up games with The Monster. The Monster is Dave Graybill, a kindly, gentle man in private life but a killer on the court. Haber wrote Jacobs from Phoenix that “The Monster was playing tremendous ball. But, alas, not good enough.”

Jacobs countered with the reverse ploy. “Of all the handball players in the world,” he said, “Haber is the greatest. He is a ballet dancer on the court and a thing of beauty to watch. Now, I have not played him for five years, but it is my feeling that Haber is the complete player. Haber does it to you with consummate grace. It’s like a man carving a turkey: first a wing, then a leg. He does it all with fluid moves, while I—” Jacobs

sighed modestly—“while I simply have to play my own game, which is to *squash* my opponent.” And he ground the heel of his thick right hand into the table.

When Haber arrived at Kennedy Airport he was accompanied by a small, dark, intense-looking man named Al Gracio, who owns a place in Long Beach, Calif. called The Town House. Gracio is also the floor manager of the U.S. Handball Association and rules and referee chairman of the Southern California Handball Association.

“It shoulda been held in Texas, which is neutral,” sniffed Gracio. “This here is bad, I mean, playing here. But Paul and me, we’ll go anywhere to get at Jacobs.”

“I understand,” Haber mused, “there is a guy here in New York who has got a lot of money and he is giving 2 to 1 that I won’t get a total of 21 points in two games.”

“I want some of that money,” said Gracio.

And then someone—nobody knew quite who it was—said someone had offered to put up \$5,000 worth of California money against \$5,000 New York money—even—that Haber would win. There was, it was noted, a stampede to cover it.

By game time, on a hot, muggy evening, the action picked up. One unconfirmed story reported a mysterious phone call to Haber from Las Vegas in which the caller had offered \$50,000 if Haber would throw the match.

“Hell,” growled Haber, all tuned up for battle, “they would have to offer me a *million* dollars to throw this game. There isn’t enough money in the whole world to make me lay down and die for Jacobs. And besides, everybody knows this is an *amateur* sport and nobody can take any money.”

Outside the Y the odds were 2 to 1 plus two points on Jacobs.

“Where is all this money supposed to be?” asked Jacobs. “You hear about all this betting, yet if you try to search out a guy to get some money down, you wouldn’t be able to find him. I don’t believe any of it is true.”

So saying, they stepped inside what the 92nd Street Y jovially calls “the steam room,” and locked the door behind them. It was terrible to watch.

First game: Haber began carving. Deft kill shots, balletlike sliding knee shots. First a leg, then an arm. He won 21-6.

Second game: Haber coasted and carved only when it served his purpose. He kept looking fixedly into Jacobs’ eyes. At one point Jacobs called for time out to change gloves, and behind the glass Gracio jumped up nervously.

“Now what?” he barked.

“Dry gloves.”

“Oh, God,” said Gracio. “We’ll be here all night if *this* keeps up.”

Jacobs won 21-16.

Third game: Haber went back to soberly carving, now growing impatient. Halfway through, the calf of Jacobs’ right leg suddenly tightened into an angry knot the size of a fist. Six suddenly anxious impromptu attendants wrapped it in cold towels. Time out, while Haber paced alone inside the sweat box. Jacobs returned with both calves wrapped in elastic bandages.

In the next few minutes Haber finished carving and reduced Jacobs—as they say on 92nd Street—to chopped chicken liver. It was 21-7.

Haber promptly got on the telephone to call everybody in the world, standing there limp, soaked and several pounds lighter. Downstairs in the locker room Jacobs was magnificent in defeat, almost as though he had waited for the moment. “It’s true, like they say,” he said. “The legs go first.”

And that would have been that—the old king fallen, long live the new king—except that they had agreed to play that Sunday match. And what happened then is still a trifle difficult to assess.

Jacobs, after it was all over, said he switched strategy—from a high to a low serve—to tear Haber apart. And, if the scores are to be accepted as evidence, that is exactly what he did: 21-8, 21-2. But Haber, perhaps sated by his victory of the night before, perhaps unwilling to let a legend die so easily—or perhaps looking ahead to another challenge, with New York money traveling west this time at even odds—obviously was making no attempt to offer serious competition. He already had done what he had come to New York to do.

“Don’t forget,” said Jacobs. “Everyone has to lose sometime. I embrace the idea of combat, and we’ll play again.”

“You bet,” said Haber.

So Jacobs went home to his Manhattan apartment, and Haber went home to California. But where all that Las Vegas money went, no one has figured out till yet.

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