

# IT WAS ACTION DAY IN BROOKLYN

*When Jimmy Jacobs, the legendary world champion of four-wall handball, dropped in to try his hand at the one-wall game against a local nonpareil, the borough's bettors flocked around to back their boy* **by TOM BRODY**

Just as "to hell with Babe Ruth" whipped up the Japanese army 25 years ago and 200 years before that "the Redcoats are coming" served to get the colonials out of bed to take on the British Empire, the people of Brooklyn respond to their own battle cry: "Hey, Irving, action!" The variations on this particular call to colors are few. "Hey, Maurice" or "Hey, Sammy" may be substituted, but mention "action" and only a foreigner would fail to make straight for Avenue P and Fourth Street—and bring money, Irving. It is there that Brooklyn males meet to play handball, the one-wall variety, and when the local hotshots are at it Las Vegas is your local parish and Jimmy the Greek is a choir-boy. Brooklyn is a place where if something is happening you bet on it; the air-pollution index gets a big play every night just before the 11 o'clock news. And handball is a major happening. The games are tough, fast and precise, and the feeling is nurtured that nobody plays the game any better anywhere else.

Last week Jimmy Jacobs, long a Los Angeles celebrity and currently the world handball champion—four-wall variety—put that theory to the ultimate test. He challenged 26-year-old Steve Sandler, the reigning one-wall champion of Avenue P and the country, offering to play *Sandler's* game in *Sandler's* ball park and with *Sandler's* rules. No titles were at stake, but as one Brooklyn man said, "When a foreigner hurls a salami at your feet, you cover."

Superficially it looked like the biggest mismatch in history. No less a critic than former Los Angeles Ram Quarterback Bob Waterfield, who has been known to react to incredible athletic feats with a grunt, has said the 36-year-old Jacobs "could be the best athlete in the world." Golf scores in the low 70s, skeet-shooting championships, sub-10-second 100-yard dashes, not to mention practically

every handball title outside of Brooklyn, have been his.

But if the world thought of it as a mismatch, Avenue P, Sandler and Jacobs did not. Especially Jacobs. It was stipulated that Sandler would play with one hand only, his left, at that. If that seems a severe handicap when facing up to someone like Jacobs, remember, one-wall handball is an entirely different game than the more worldly four-wall version. In fact, the reactions involved are almost opposites. For example, in four-wall the player holds his ground to take the serve and drops back for the kill. In one-wall he drops back to take the serve and rushes in for the kill. And for those who have never heard of Steve Sandler, take it from those who have bet on or against him, he is unbeatable at his own game.

Until he was 16 Sandler had basketball, not handball, on his mind. Then someone pointed out that at 5 feet 7 his chances of making the New York Knicks were limited, so why not try handball. Four years later Sandler won the national one-wall championship.

The trouble with winning championships, as Sandler found out, is that nobody will play you over at the Avenue P courts unless you forgo the use of your right hand. So he learned to play with just his left. Eventually, of course, his left hand became devilishly effective, and his sense of anticipation, his quickness and his ability to play the game with guile became greater than ever. But when tournament time came he had no right hand. At age 22 Steve Sandler retired.

It is entirely possible that Sandler would have stayed retired if Howie Eisenberg, the man who took his place at the top, had not urged him to give it another try. Sandler did, beating Eisenberg in this year's National AAU Championships, 20-21, 21-5, 21-11, and taking back his title.

Some time ago, during a stay on the West Coast, Eisenberg met Jimmy Jacobs. Jacobs has a curiosity about sport, and he agreed to play Eisenberg at one-wall. Eisenberg won the first game, all right; it was a slaughter. But that was all Jacobs needed to catch on to one-wall. In the second game he beat Eisenberg, who even at that time was one of the best.

"You know what I thought then?" says Eisenberg. "I thought nobody could take Jacobs with just his left hand. Not even Sandler." Eisenberg also thought he would revive the "action" cry as it had not been heard in years if he could get the two champions to square off. Jacobs, however, was not enthralled.

"What do I stand to win?" he said. "You beat a guy who is only using his left, and what does it prove? And if he beats you, oh, brother." Eisenberg is a persistent man, however, and he brought the matter up with Teddy Brenner, the matchmaker at Madison Square Garden and a man who would pit a couple of American Beauty roses against each other if he could figure a way to get a crowd into a vase.

Jacobs, who was back in New York, found Brenner a tough fellow to fend off at close range and suddenly said, "Get your man, and I'll be there Saturday morning." Just that quick a major athletic contest was arranged. No one around Avenue P was aware of what was coming until the morning of the match. It was as if Pete Rozelle had called the AFL and said, "You get Buffalo, I'll get Green Bay and we'll play this afternoon."

Early Saturday, Avenue P regulars were ambling over to the courts as is their habit, hoping that such favorites as Bald Irving or Jack the Devil or Big Joe or The Farmer might get things moving. Steve Sandler was there, too, looking pale and drawn—"I've had this virus

for the last few days," he said—but he mentioned that a fellow named Jacobs was going to show up for a game. "Jacob who?" asked one of the regulars, and when it was explained to him just who Jacobs was, the cry was up: "Hey, Irving, action!"

Action was right. Jacobs arrived with a camera crew and camera, which interested the crowd. Even more interesting was the later arrival of a stranger who had \$5,000 to cover everything he could get on the Californian. "If I'd only known," wailed a florist. "If somebody had only told me," and he started to race back to his shop and break open the till. "Don't do it," Sandler said, explaining about the virus. The florist stopped to give things more thought. In fact a lot of thinking was being done.

"You know what I can't understand," said a regular, "is why this guy Jacobs would come here and play a game he knows nothing about." He walked off like a man who smells a hustle.

"I'll bet ya a fiver he's been at it for a year," said somebody. "At least six months," came another opinion, which drew a chorus of agreement.

They were wrong, and even though their gamblers' instincts told them something was rotten, Jacobs' motives were straight enough. For one thing, the camera was to catch Sandler in action, not impress Brooklyn. And Jacobs has always been willing to take his lumps, provided he is sure he can learn something. Before play began he startled the crowd by giving a little speech. "I'm inquisitive, but I don't pretend to know what I'm

doing," he told them. "I appreciate your coming out to watch this, this *exhibition*. Please bear with me when I make mistakes that only a beginner would make. I came out here simply because it was a challenge."

"Now he tells us," came a voice that used to ring loud and clear from the bleachers of Ebbets Field.

Sandler had been worried about facing a man who had Jacobs' reputation as an athlete. As in the case with most champions, it served to make him absolutely ready. "Actually I stopped worrying when I saw Jacobs warm up," he said later. "He said he was new at the game, and I could see it was true. You could tell the way he was practicing his kills."

When play began, the champion of Avenue P ran up four straight points, lost his serve, won it back and ran up three more before losing a point. Jacobs was breathtakingly quick, and his shots were hit with power. The problem was, shots that would have caromed crazily off a wall on a four-wall court just flew out of bounds in the one-wall game. Jacobs was reacting to shots like a good four-waller, but three of his walls had tumbled down. Sandler's left hand was not only returning Jacobs' best, they came back with something on them. "He ain't no poet," said a man with a bet, "but he don't make a mistake, and nothing gets by that kid." Nothing did, and by the time the score was 16-1 the same beautiful bleacher voice sang out: "How'd you get a point, you bum?"

That's Brooklyn for you. But when Jacobs came up with a play that Sandler could not handle they gave him a hand, and that's Brooklyn, too. Once, after losing a point, Jacobs went over to his cameraman and said, "Are you getting all of this? I want to see what a champion looks like." The crowd approved of that.

Just before the end Jacobs got his fourth and last point on a shot that seemed completely out of Sandler's reach. Yet Sandler got a hand on it. Jacobs turned to him and said, "You are unbelievable."

"But the return's no good," said Sandler.

"You are *unbelievable*," said Jacobs.

The fact is, both of them are. Now Jacobs has his film, and a fiver says he is going to show up at the next one-wall national championship. The action is sure to be hot.

END



Grimacing Jacobs smashes a shot, but unruffled Steve Sandler is positioned for return.