

The History of Paddleball

Chapter 1 – First Draft

The Beginnings

Though the history of paddleball is basically undocumented, it obviously originated from American handball, which is played on the same court using the same or similar balls and a bare or gloved hand. The motivation for the "invention" of the paddle was the cold weather in the northeastern US, which combined with the force and hardness of the ball, exasperated the pain. An early pioneer of paddleball was the late Chris Lecakes who wrote the following: "In the years before and after World War I, handball was the rage for men in cities and towns throughout the US. Among those attracted to the sport was Dr. Frank Peer Beale of Brooklyn, NY. However, Dr. Beale soon discovered that his brittle hands could not take the punishment of hitting the hard ball used for the game. So that he might continue his enjoyment of the sport, he devised a paddle stick with which he and his friends would use to bat the ball against any expanse of wall that was available to them. Dr. Beale's interest and enthusiasm for the game continued as its rules and equipment were developed. When the United States Paddleball Association (USPA), then known as the Metropolitan Paddleball Association, was formed in 1959, some of its members consulted with Dr. Beale, who was then in his seventies. His recollections and reminiscence of the game were both inspiring and helpful to its modern proponents." According to Mr. Lecakes, Dr. Beale died in the 1960s, and at that time he was known to many players as the "Father of Paddleball."

The beginning of organized paddleball starts with Chris Lecakes. He made the first solid paddles, ran the first organized tournaments and established the first paddleball organization, the USPbA, earning him the title the Father of Organized Paddleball, which is engraved in his Paddleball Family Alliance Hall of Fame plaque.

Shorehaven Beach Club - the 50's and 60's

Shorehaven was a key factor in the early growth of paddleball. Per Dave Siegel, "Paddleball as I know it started in Shorehaven Beach Club in the Bronx during the 1950's. I was 10 years old in 1956 and paddleball and handball were by far the most popular sports. Shorehaven had 30 courts and often all were being played concurrently. The ball was the old Spalding pink ball (spaldeen). There was only one paddle, the old Sportcraft, made from cheap wood with no holes, a short handle and a painted-on grid. Very few people owned their own paddle. They were borrowed at the field house. You gave them your pass and the field house "kid" loaned you two paddles. If you lost or broke a paddle, it would cost you \$1.25.

The spaldeen was a very live ball, but I didn't realize it then, because I was a kid. Yes, it was the same size as the present big ball, but its liveliness made pink ball paddleball far different from the present day big blue. By the time I was 14, in 1960, the Shorehaven paddleball players had switched to the black Seamless 555 handball, and the spaldeen was out. That's right, Seamless, not Seamco. Seamless was deemed to be a misleading name, because of course the ball had a seam. Indeed, there was some sort of intervention by maybe the Consumer Product Safety Commission or some brilliant lawyer and they were forced to change the name and chose Seamco. By the way, Spalding also made a black handball, which was actually a truer bouncing ball than the 555, but it never failed to break during the first or second game of paddle ball."

So paddleball was huge in the 50's and 60's at Shorehaven. There had to be hundreds of players of all ages. Yes, paddleball was big with the kids, unlike the present day where the young player needs plenty of encouragement from the mentors and veterans to play the game. Club tournaments were held for

specific age groups, including adults (men) and Shorehaven developed some very good players, both male and female. Probably the three best players were Herbie Zagarow, Rickey Brecher and Mark Vogel (who went on to become one of the top players in the game.) There was no shortage of excellent female players either, producing Linda Hecht who was one of the best of the women. In the late 60's Shorehaven paddleball got a burst of enthusiasm when Howie Hammer and his touring entourage came several times to the beach club for exhibitions. They showed the Shorehaven crowd a new dimension of paddleball excellence.