

David Rojas has been referred to by many as a handball legend, winning consistently whether in big blue, little ball, and pink/pump ball for three decades. Described as having good court sense, great ball control, Dave was arguably the best right side player in the sport.

He was surely a formidable force on the court. Standing 6' 1", David had deceptive speed and a strong off-hand. Also known as "The Great Dave," he was introduced to the sport at the age of 12. David grew up in Manhattan, specifically in the Chelsea area where there were no available handball courts. As a result, he played in the driveway behind the schoolyard using the curves in the sidewalks as his short and long lines, having no idea that he would one day compete on the national and international level.

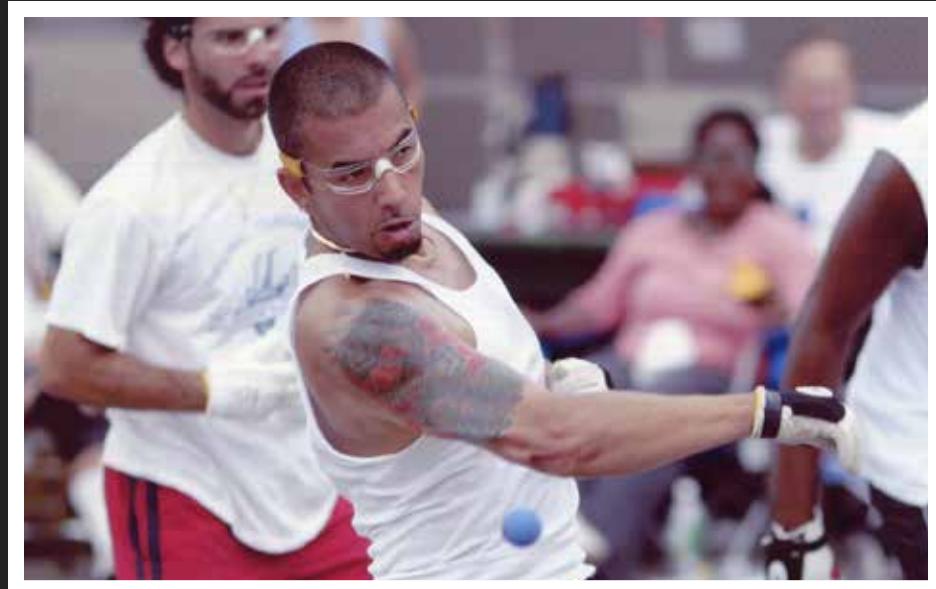
Eventually David ended up at West 4th Street, where he played with veterans such as Buddy Gant, Fred Lynch, and Angel Marquez. He gave credit to these individuals for helping him develop his game including Joe Durso of Coney Island. He definitely felt embraced by the older "A" players and learned a lot from them. Dave

David Rojas

grew up in an era when you had to play the best to be the best. In his words, you had to "pay your dues" to become an "A" player. As such, he traveled from court to court playing the best park players and beating everyone in order to make a name for himself. In the '80's he observed a lot and on any given night, you would find him practicing what he learned during the day at West 4th Street and putting it into play on the nearby courts of Carmine Street. He would spend hours strengthening his game by incorporating drills in his daily routine. In order to improve his opposite, he would play three older players against his left. Determined, he was like a sponge watching the veteran players he called "Titans" battle one another. He often equated these players with watching a karate movie where you had to fight to the death to get to the next level in order to reach master status.

In 1985, at the age of 14, Rojas competed in his first pink ball tournament. One could not enter the "A" division without placing in the lower division, but, needless to say, David won the singles in both B and C divisions. The following year in Castle Hill he played in his first big blue "Open" tournament and took 1st Place playing with Fred Lynch, one of his mentors, and he won 1st Place in singles at West 4th. At 15, David was the youngest Open division player.

Although David was seasoned in tournaments, he wasn't yet experienced in doubles play. He felt a lot of pressure considering that the crowd was cheering for the hometown favorites and coming from the famous West 4th courts. In spring of 1987, Spaulding stopped manufacturing the pink ball, but by then David, at age 16, had quickly risen in the rankings to the fourth spot on the National PEAK Pyramid Singles (NAPP). To top off the summer, at only 17 he beat the legendary player Buddy Gant, earning the respect of his mentors.



For the next few years, players, who predominantly played pink ball, went through a transitional period while adjusting to the big blue. The handball circuit consisted mostly of several annualized neighborhood tournaments such as 12th Street Park and Handball City. In 1991, Dave won back-to-back singles titles in the 12th Street Park Tournament, and he won the Open Doubles with partner Joe Rodriguez at Handball City (E. 102nd Street). Dave Andre, the father of one-wall pink ball tournaments, was known for organizing the prestigious PEAK Singles Events, which, at this writing, would be the equivalent of King of the Courts. In 1994-'95 David Rojas was ranked #1 defeating Buddy Gantt in 1994 and Israel Amador

aka "Cricket" in 1995. To finish the 1995 season, Dave teamed up with friend and competitor, Cricket, to compete in the 1st ever ICHA NY State Championships in collaboration with Dave Andre. Dave and Cricket beat Paul Previti and Eddie Golden.

With the support and guidance of Tony Roberts and Cesar Sala, David first came on the little ball scene as early as 1995 by winning the Inner City Handball Association (ICHA) Singles State Championship, defeating Eric Davis in the finals. In the same year, he won the USHA One Wall National Tournament "A" Doubles with Tony Roberts and took the "B" Doubles with Cesar. In his first attempt at 3-wall, David won in 1998. That year he took 1st place in

the regionals "B" singles and doubles held in Maryland. In addition, David, along with Tony Roberts won the USHA Nationals in "B" doubles. By winning in the Nationals in Toledo Ohio, the team of Rojas and Roberts (RR) were no longer eligible to play in the "B" division. Their wins would propel them to compete in the Pros.

In regard to USHA National play, Dave consistently placed in the doubles competition from 1995 – 2005 reaching no lower than the top three seeds. David Rojas won the USHA National 1-Wall Doubles Championship in 1997, 1998, and 2001. In 2003, 2004, and 2005, he reached the finals. In 2006, he placed third. Unfortunately, for two straight years his partner, John "Rookie" Wright, was injured in play causing him to withdraw from competition in 2007 and 2008. Finally, in 2009 Dave and Rookie earned third place.

Dave's first taste of international play came in 1997 when he competed against 11 countries for the first time ever in the World competition in Winnipeg, Canada. He was humbled by the opportunity to represent his country. He trained intensely by working on cardio and timing with the little ball. Dave enjoyed meeting players from Japan, Ecuador, Spain and Ireland. In the finals, he ended up playing a 2 out of 3 game match edging out Eddie Maisonet, a 3 time USHA national singles champ, to win the 1st World Championship in singles. Once winning the singles title, he set his mark for the doubles competition hoping to slam. He knew he would have stiff competition from the team of Maisonet and Williams. Although these players met in National play and in the Mayor's Cup, the stakes in Winnipeg were high and either team could have been victorious. The match ended with Rojas and Roberts winning 15-9 and 15-7.

...David Rojas

Once David was back on US soil, he made it a point to visit his father's grave. With his dad's favorite drink in hand (Barcaldi dark) Dave toasted his father and shared his news of winning the world title. Dave's father had passed many years prior when he was just a young man. Jose Rojas had made a prediction prior to his son's involvement in the sport of handball, which he shared with Dave's mom, Gilma: "Dave will either follow in my footsteps as a military man or be someone great in sports." Truer words could not have been spoken.

To recap, Dave's international accomplishments include: in 2000, in the city of Chicago, he and Tony Roberts defended their title winning 21-6, 21-7 against rivals Maisonet and Williams. At this writing, they are the only team to repeat that championship title. They held their title for six years straight. In the singles category, David won 3rd place that year and in 2003 he repeated in Kilkenny Island. In the doubles competition, David and Tony were defeated in the final by Herman Mendez Jr. and William Polanco.

In the USHA Nationals of 1997, Dave was set to play Joe Durso in the quarter -finals. By this time, Dave was the world champ and, of course, Joe was a legend in his own right. It is unclear who initiated, but there was some trash talking before the match. Although this was the first time David played Joe in little ball, it was not the first time they faced one another. As a product of the trash talking, a friendly wager was made. If Joe won, Dave would have to wear Joe's favorite lucky spandex shorts and if David won, Joe would have to relinquish his most personal possession-a button which Joe received at a young age. The button simply read, "World's Best Handball Player."



The crowd at Coney Island was standing room only. Spectators were hanging on the fences and even on the phone booth to watch the match. In the first game, Joe took the lead and won decisively. Joe had complete control of the first game not by score per se, but by sheer mastery and skill of his shots. After this loss, Dave walked out of the park to gain composure. Karen McConney, a USHA Woman's champion, then offered supportive words to Dave, which restored his determination and confidence. She said, "Forget about the first game- one game is not the match."

In game two, Dave won by changing the pace of the volleys and by elevating his level of play. Mixing his styles, David had Joe second-guessing his shot selection. Dave inevitably won the second game. In an 11 point tie-breaker, there is never a comfortable lead and by all indications Joe was "going for broke." David, reaching match point

first, committed to closing out the match by attempting an off the wall kill shot. Joe incredibly dug the shot out, much to Dave's amazement. In the process, Joe flicked the ball, causing it to flat roll. The crowd erupted and, in animated Joe fashion, he removed his goggles, raised his hands in the air "like Stallone in Rocky" and yelled over the crowd, "Come and touch greatness." Because of the roar of the crowd, Joe had to wait to serve; this gave Dave a moment to reflect on strategy. He foresaw Joe serving wide crosscourt to Dave's opposite. Dave took the chance, because he had the lead. When Joe committed to the serve, Dave cheated to the left, got a good hit, and killed the ball. Just like Durso, Dave removed his goggles and, in Joe-like fashion said, "Come touch greatness." Once again the crowd could not be contained, which made David feel strongly about his ability to close out the match.

From 2006 – 2008, a New Jersey based

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trucking company (CPQ) sponsored tournaments with the largest cash prize to date in Flamingo Park. It brought in competitors from other states and the level of play was intense in these doubles competitions. For these events, Dave trained to build stamina in order to combat the Florida heat. The top prize in David's career in the early '80's was \$125. Twenty years later, the prize money was teetering around \$1,000 for first place. The Florida tournament elevated the level of play and increased the purse exponentially. The prize money ranged from \$5,000, which was for the first tournament thrown by CPQ to \$25,000 for the largest 1st place cash prize. David won two tournaments earning him a total of \$25,000 in prize money with partners Tony Roberts and Ray Lopez.

The Slaps Red Bull Tournament was in the forefront of showcasing the top players since 2010. This invite-only tournament brought 96 inner city players from the five boroughs to compete for the ultimate bragging rights. The tournament, at this writing, is a single elimination format with no player rankings. All players are put in a random draw to determine brackets and match ups. Rojas won 1st place in 2011 and 2013 in pump ball, and in 2014 was a finalist, two points away from winning three years in a row. Ironically, David saw himself battling Buddy in the finals as he has done so many times in his career.

David had some additional experiences in handball which are worth noting. He participated in clinics and taught the fundamentals of handball to students in inner-city high schools. He worked for Sports Authority as Manager, and, as such, he was able to work out a deal for product sponsorship. He wore the Sports Authority logo and their apparel at tournaments.

Along with another top seeded player, David was also sponsored by Avia sneakers for one season. In addition, he shot a commercial for the food chain, Subway, which appeared nationally. David was awarded "Best All-Around Player" by the Handball World Counsel in 1997 and "Player of the Year" by St. Albana's Handball Association. Not only has David Rojas made a name for himself in the sport of handball, but his skill in fishing has also brought him notoriety. As an avid fisherman, David was featured on two ESPN episodes- one dedicated to fishing in Central Park, viewed on Bass Center, and another named "Sportman's Quest," where David was competing head-to-head against Mike Dicka. As recently as October 2014, Rojas shot an episode on "Lunkerville" for the World Fishing Network. It aired to great reviews and was picked up by NBC Sports.

Looking back, Dave has won numerous doubles titles with different partners- over 15. However, he was always most grateful three individual players who helped him make his mark in the history of handball: John "Rookie Wright," a good friend on and off the court, Herman Mendez Jr., with whom he had a great two year run almost going undefeated, and finally, Tony Roberts, with whom he shared the most wins.

Regardless of how many tournaments and accolades David Rojas received, what meant the most to him was the admiration and support of his mother, Gilma Rojas. His sister, Diane, was also instrumental to his success because of the countless hours of support she offered at tournaments. He was proud to have had those individuals by his side throughout his career. Without them, he claimed, "none of this could have been possible."