

Mike Grabowski

Mike Grabowski was first introduced to handball when he was five by his father. He would try to hit a pink ball at a cement wall. If all the courts were taken then he would go across the street and use the wall on the side of a supermarket. One-wall handball was a simple game. All he needed was a wall and a ball.

When he was eleven his family moved to the James Monroe Houses in the Bronx. The next year a park was built across the street with four 1-wall handball courts. This jump started his lifetime of playing handball. The next year, when he turned thirteen, he saw a sheet on the park house on which he could sign up for a handball tournament. When the day of the tournament arrived, the recreation director was making up the draw. One of the experienced players asked to play him in the first round. Mike lost and that was the end of his first tournament. The next year he made it to the finals before losing. The third year, when he was fifteen, he again made the finals. Down 20 to 17 in the first game and 20 to 16 in the second, he managed to win both games 21 to 20, and finally won a tournament.

Part of his happiest memories as a teenager was the handball games he played, partnered with his father. They won some and lost some, but it didn't matter. One day Mike's dad took him to Modell's Davega Sporting Goods and bought a pair of handball gloves and a black handball. His father was a lefty and Mike was a righty, so his father figured they only needed one pair of gloves. The handball was out of a bin of seconds, costing nineteen cents each, or three for fifty cents. He figured they needed only one for practice. Even with a glove on the ball hurt Mike's hand. About a year later Mike's father got sick and didn't play handball any longer. Mike got a job after school and on weekends, and he found an interest in girls.

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When eighteen Mike joined the Marine Corps. All his friends were getting drafted and he wanted to get his service over with. He spent thirteen months in Viet Nam, and then was stationed in the Brooklyn Navy Yard as an MP waiting for discharge. While on leave one day, he had a bad fall and hurt his right wrist. He thought it was a sprain and would simply tape it up and play handball. But it continued bothering him a year later. Eventually a doctor told him one of the wrist bones was broken. After two operations and a year in a cast, it was as good as it was going to get. Mike lost thirty to forty percent of the motion in his right wrist. Those low killer shots he used to make, where he would run back and take the ball six inches high and drive in rollers, were no longer there. He started alternating between handball and paddleball. Paddleball helped to strengthen his wrist.

At twenty-two Mike had a night job and started to play handball at Orchard Beach in the Bronx. Up to this time he had been only a pink ball player. Pink ball games became harder to find and they played black ball every day at the beach. This guy, Oscar Obert, would be there on Mondays and Tuesdays, and what a great player he was.

At twenty-three Mike was married to his wife, Maria, (forty two years as of this writing – 2015). With being married and working there was little time for handball. Mike wound up with a job that started at three o'clock, and he was able to play handball in the mornings. There were fewer and fewer players at Orchard Beach, but Baily Avenue Park had games every day starting around ten thirty in the morning. There were many excellent players at Baily on week days and even more on the weekends. Mike's game got better, and he began was beating some good players.

A few years later Mike not only had a wife, but a son and a nine to five job. The only time left for handball was a Saturday afternoon if the weather wasn't bad. Mike had always played outdoors, but when the days got shorter there weren't any lights so there weren't any games. Around this time something new was happening. Indoor paddleball courts were being built. No longer was playing dependent on daylight or weather conditions. The only problem was this was all paddleball. There were tournaments almost every weekend. Mike played paddleball for the next ten years. Once he even played two tournaments in the same day. The Mount Vernon Doubles Tournament was from seven in the morning until four o'clock, and the the PaddleRama Tournament was from five until

three in the morning. Mike managed to take third place in both, although he did have different partners. In those days they played for third and fourth place.

By 1986 Mike hadn't played handball for ten years. He lived on Long Island and played paddleball on Tuesday and Thursday nights. These outdoor courts had lights. There was also a group of handball players who played on Monday, Wednesday and Friday nights. He had kept a pair of handball gloves in case he ever wanted to play again. He showed up on a Wednesday night. The handball players made fun of him, saying paddleball was Tuesday and Thursday. He replied that he'd have to try this game. He wanted to play the left so he chose one of the weaker players. They won the three games they played. It was like riding a bike. He didn't forget. He still wasn't able to kill the ball, but he played very steady plus the paddleball had quickened his reflexes so much that they couldn't get a ball passed him. He was back.

One of the things that made his transition back to handball less difficult was that on Long Island, handball was played with the green paddleball. This ball was fast and the games reminded him of the pink ball games of his youth. One of the players asked if he wanted to play in a green ball tournament in Queens. They wanted to play in the open division, but they had enough open players, but there was a spot in the seniors. They won the seniors.

Once he was playing handball regularly, certain shots came back to him. There was one shot he had developed, where he played the ball shoulder high and shot down low into the left corner. Because of the downward motion, he could place the ball next to the left line and keep it in the court. This shot was very difficult to return and enabled him to win many games. During this time there were two brothers who started to come to his park to play. Someone said they were National Doubles Champions, but Mike didn't know them then. He wanted to play against them, but they never wanted to wait for next. They would always start a new game. One day Mike got to the park late. Two courts were going and the two brothers were warming up. Mike was number three. Then his partner arrived. When he did, the game began. It was a good day. Mike's shots were on and his partner was playing strong. Mike turned around to see that all the other games had stopped and everyone was around his court watching his game. They were winning, 17-4. Their

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opponents made a run to eleven, but were then then closed out. Mike and partner won, 21-11, but the fact that they did it in front of all the local players of their park make it all the more memorable.

They started looking for better players, and began to play at Plainview Park on the weekends. They would usually win the first three or four games before they could be beaten. One day they wound up playing against National Hall of Famer Arty Reyer in their second game. Reyer didn't look like much, but he was an excellent player. Nothing got by him. It was a close game until Arty's partner hit a shot at him. Mike was on Arty's left waiting for him to move so he could pin the left corner. Mike's partner was on Mike's right waiting to hit the right corner. The ball hit Artie. Mike called Artie out. Artie told Mike it was a "do over" because Mike was in his way. Mike tried to get an outside call, but no one would call against Arty. Mike didn't realize that Arty was a legend and so well-liked and respected by the handball community. They did the play over, but Mike had lost his drive and lost the match. It took years but Mike finally got even. They were playing against each other, and again Arty's partner hit a shot at him. This time Mike waited for Arty to move. Arty tried to hold position, but the ball bounced and rolled up his leg and landed inside his shorts. Mike again called Artie out. Arty looked around, tried to think of something, and finally handed Mike the ball and walked back to the long line. Mike and Arty remained great friends (at this writing for more than twenty five years).

Two of Mike's great memories of handball were playing doubles with his father and later teaming up with his two sons to play Big Blue. Mike's older son lost interest in handball early, but his younger son liked to play. They would go to the local parks and play against the local players. They played well together, winning most of the time. It had gone full circle: Mike's father and Mike and Mike and his son. A couple of knee surgeries ended his son's handball days.

Mike never wanted to play in the Nationals in Coney Island. The drive there each day, the parking, the wait for the matches, the heat, having to wear eye protection were all detracting factors. The games at Merrick Park were great. There were so many good players. The beers, pizza and camaraderie after the games were something that he enjoyed very much. One day in 1999 Artie Diamant asked Mike to be his partner in the Nationals. Mike didn't want to get involved with Coney Island so he made an excuse and

said, "Next year." When next year came and Artie asked again, Mike consented.

In 2000 Artie and Mike were both fifty, so they played in the fifty doubles. Artie was an excellent player. They had always played against each other in Merrick. Diamant/Grabowski won the fifties without too much trouble. Artie then wanted to play in the 3-wall and the Worlds. Mike didn't have time for both, so they decided to play in the Worlds. Tournament management combined divisions and they played in the over thirty five doubles, and won the championship.

In 2001 Diamant/Grabowski repeated their National 1-Wall Golden Masters Championship. But in 2002 Artie got hurt just before the tournament, and Mike had to find another partner. There was one player who was looking for a partner the day of the tournament so Mike teamed with Sal Cataudella and got to the final without too much trouble. But in the final and they faced a tough team - Danny Maroney and Dennis Uffer. Danny started off on fire. The score was eight to zero with Danny serving. Mike remembered saying to himself that this looked like the end of his winning streak. Danny then hit a sharp angle to the right corner, but Sal caught up to the ball and returned it to center court. Now Sal was off court and Danny had a setup. Both corners were open so Mike raced up the middle. Danny hit a low shot to the middle of the court, but Mike was able to get to it and roll it out. After that Cataudella/Grabowski outscored them 21-5 and won game one, 21-13. They won the second game 21-7. That gave Mike three National doubles titles in a row.

In 2003 Sal and Mike again made the finals, but were defeated by Al Torres and Glen Hall, and in 2004 they lost in the finals to Joe Agosto and Abe Haimon.

2005 started out to be a good year. That year Mike was teaming up with Ray Clark, a lefty who had given him a lot of trouble in tournaments. Mike was playing his best handball in years, winning every game. Two weeks later he wasn't strong enough to get out of a chair. After a few doctors and many tests, it was determined that he had Polymyalgia Rheumatica, an inflammation of the muscles and joints. He was put on medication and started lifting soup cans, the only thing he could lift. This was April and he had an eye on the tournament in August. As he got stronger he started hitting a handball.

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He realized that he no longer had the strength or endurance he once had so he changed his game. He couldn't use up energy serving, so he went to a soft overhand serve and, instead of hitting killers, he would hit left then right and keep his opponents moving. This got him to the finals again. The first game was a long drawn out battle. Mike and partner won, 21-19. The second game was even longer and Mike lost, 21-15. The thing about it was Agosto/Haimon were using a lot of energy and Mike was conserving. In the tiebreaker Mike was able to open up. He won, 11-4. This was his happiest win because he had thought his handball career was over.

In 2006, in an effort to give the players more games, a round robin format was played. Mike was undefeated going into the final round, but wound up losing. This created a three way tie. A formula was used, and Mike lost by points totals.

In 2007 Mike barely made the finals. He cramped up in the semifinals and just managed to win. In the finals he pulled a hamstring after the first five points. He lost 6-11 in the tie breaker.

In 2010 Mike teamed with Joe Agosto for the National Super (60's) event. There weren't enough teams and they were asked to play down to the 50's. They lost, 4-11, in the tie breaker. After the tournament, Mike wondered why he was getting tired toward the end of the matches. He thought he was just getting older. He decided to get some tests done and they found that his right coronary artery was 90% blocked in three places. He had figured that a lifetime of handball would have kept the blood flowing. Three stents took care of the right side.

In 2012, ten years after their first partnership, Mike teamed up again with Artie Diamant and they won the National 1-Wall Super Doubles, but, in 2013, in a rematch of the year before, they lost in a tie-breaker. This was Mike's last handball game. He is, at this writing, deciding if he wants to replace his left hip so he can keep playing.

- **1964 2nd place** - PS 100 Pinkball Singles
- **1965 1st place** - PS 100 Pinkball Singles
- **1987 1st place** - US Greenball National 35's Doubles
- **2000 1st place** - USHA One Wall National 50's Doubles
- **2000 1st place** - World Handball Championship 50's Doubles
- **2001 1st place** - USHA One Wall National 50's Doubles
- **2002 1st place** - USHA One Wall National 50's Doubles
- **1st place** - Mayors Cup 50's Doubles
- **1st place** - HES One Wall Invitational Doubles
- **2003 2nd place** - USHA One Wall National 50's Doubles
- **1st place** - Staten Island Invitational Doubles
- **2nd place** - Mayors Cup 50's Doubles
- **2004 2nd place** - USHA One Wall National 50's Doubles
- **1st place** - Mayors Cup 50's Doubles
- **1st place** - HES One Wall Invitational Doubles
- **1st place** - Long Island Open Four Wall C Doubles
- **1st place** - Fishkill Four Wall C Doubles
- **2005 1st place** - USHA One Wall National 50's Doubles
- **2nd place** - HES One Wall Invitational Doubles
- **2006 1st place** - Mayors Cup 50's Doubles
- **2nd place** - Long Island Open Four Wall 50's Doubles
- **1st place** - Staten Island Invitational Doubles
- **2007 2nd place** - USHA One Wall National 50's Doubles
- **2009 2nd place** - HES One Wall Invitational Doubles
- **2010 2nd place** - USHA One Wall National 50's Doubles
- **2011 2st place** - Long Island Open Four Wall 60's Doubles
- **2012 1st place** - USHA One Wall National 60's Doubles
- **2013 2nd place** - USHA One Wall National 60's Doubles