

Carlos Centeno

It was 1981, when Carlos was attending Westinghouse High School in Brooklyn, that he saw several girls hitting a ball against a wall. While he had always enjoyed playing sports including softball, basketball, and football, he had never seen any form of handball.

The first time he hit a ball to a wall he fell in love with the game! Despite his defeating all the players on Westinghouse's handball team, he was unable to play for the squad. His schedule in high school was a strict regimen of going to classes, studying, and working after school in the family-owned bodega in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, where he was raised.

By 1984, after high school graduation, he began entering local Big Blue tournaments with the late Rocky Fantauzzi and Rocky's brother Raul. Carlos and Rocky won four of the dozen events they entered. All the while Carlos' love of the game continued to grow.

In 1986 he was introduced to West 4th Street Courts in Manhattan, the hub of the best pink-ball and Blue Ball players in New York. There he met and competed with Buddy Gantt, "Flip" Wolfarth and many other top players.

Having honed his skills by the turn of the century, and having observed how tournaments were run and how they should be run, his mind began focusing on growing handball by presenting tournament opportunities to as many people as possible. He credits the late Dave Andre and Sam Wilson (The Ajax tournaments) for motivating him in that direction.

At this writing Carlos has moved from top wallball doubles player to a premiere tournament director of wallball events in New York – and beyond. For the past eleven years he has run the "Buddha Memorial," named for the late Luis Read (whose nickname was Buddha), Carlos' long-standing partner and friend. The two won over 15 tournaments and placed high in at least thirty others.

The Buddha Memorial has hosted players from all parts of the city and beyond. There have been several entries from Canada and even a few from Europe. At its inception it boasted 150 entries, which has increased every year. In 2022 that number swelled to 280! The tournament is held every June at handball's mecca, the courts at West 5th Street in Coney Island.

But the Buddha Memorial is not nearly the only event Centeno directed. The following is a list of wallball tournaments he has run, with Adam Panetta and Justin Rodriguez as The Committee, some of which they continue to run:

1. May 2024 – Snipes Singles: this event was held at IS 10 in Astoria, Queens, supported with a \$5000 donation from Snipes Clothing Store. It hosted 16 A players and 16 B players.
2. February 2024, 2023, 2022 – Florida vs. The World: the event hosts approximately 80 teams, half from Florida. The tournament is set up so that when it begins teams from places other than Florida play teams which come from Florida. The tournament takes place in Hollywood, Florida.
3. May 2022 – The Titan: this was a doubles tournament where an A player is teamed with a B player. It consisted of 22 men's teams and 14 women's teams. It was played in Brooklyn's Coney Island park.
4. December 2023, 2022, 2021, 2020 – East Coast Battle: the tournament is a team concept. Five team captains each choose five doubles teams who square off against each other. There are at least 25 teams competing. The tournament has been held at Zerega Gym in the Bronx.
5. May 2022 – Braddock B Invitational: 24 B players were invited to compete in an all- B event. The event was held in Braddock Park in Queens.
6. July 2021 – Ultimate Warriors: the event hosted 80 players 48 Men for singles and 16 women's teams. It was played at St. John's Park in Brooklyn.
7. May 2020 – Mini-Buddha Invitational: 16 teams were invited to compete in Queens' Braddock Park.
8. October 2019 – Players Cup: tournament hosted the Top 16 Men's singles player and top 4 Women's doubles teams. The event was held in Castle Hill in the Bronx.
9. March 2021-Over 40 Under 40
The event was a doubles with a player on each side of the 40 year old mark. 28 teams battled at Zerega indoors in the Bronx.
10. June 2020- B Round Robin Singles
The top 24 B singles players were invited to battle it out culminating in a 3 man round robin finals held in Queens.

In addition to the many events Carlos has spear-headed, for the past ten years he has been generous with his assistance at USHA Nationals held in Coney Island both wallball and handball from the days when Vern Roberts was executive-director to this very day while Jared Vale is USHA vice-president. Carlos assists at the desk, with the amenities, and, most important, with refereeing.

Carlos attracts lovers of wallball via his Facebook and Instagram pages. His call for players includes demands for fair play and proper deportment during competition. All his events require entry fees to be collected up front, requests for donations (including his own) and occasional sponsorships, like the one offered by Snipes Clothing Store.

What Carlos likes most about running wallball tournaments is seeing spectators observing the games, knowing that there is a possibility that some of them, like himself, will fall in love with the game and play it.