

Los Angeles Times

12 inches; 407 words

SATURDAY, APRIL 14, 1990, SPORTS, PART C, PAGE 15
COPYRIGHT 1990 / LOS ANGELES TIMES000048648
FAX page #3

Tepper Finds Athletic Niche

■ **Paddle tennis:** West Hills man who warmed the bench in youth sports has blossomed into an accomplished player.

By JEFF MEYERS
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Nobody ever mistook Lance Tepper for an athlete when he was growing up on Long Island in New York.

Sure, he had the agility to maneuver a trayful of pastrami sandwiches through his father's kosher deli and handle himself on the handball court, but he didn't play varsity high school sports. And the only time he tried tackle football he wound up with a bruised ego.

"I was always on the bench in (youth) football," he says, "and after the last game, I heard my mother tell the coach, 'Thank you for not playing my son.' She had made him keep me on the bench because I had a slight heart murmur."

At 20, Tepper didn't want to be permanently "stuck working in the restaurant," so he packed up and moved across the country to Venice. In the 15 years since, he got married, had two children, started a successful mobile car-wash business and became an athlete of some note in the paddle-tennis world.

Last summer, Tepper and his partner, Javier Sartorius of Spain, came in a surprising second in the national paddle-tennis championships in New York. Seeded seventh, they won all their matches in the winners' bracket but lost in the final to the team they had upset the day before—the No. 1-seeded duo of Sol Hauptman and Scott Freedman, both from Los Angeles.

What changed Tepper when he moved to Venice was his discovery of the public paddle-tennis courts on the beach. He spent most of his spare time playing paddle tennis and in a few years was an A-class player, winning the city doubles championship in 1979. A couple of years ago he moved up to open class.

"The only reason I got better," he says, "is because I was playing against better people."

When Tepper saw a videotape of the '89 nationals, he said to himself, "Look how fat I am." Indeed, at 217, he was not a picture of sleekness. The spare tire around his middle and a thick mustache gave him a bookish appearance. But his reflexes were anything but slow, allowing him to turn his opponents' whistling shots into winning volleys. Tepper was a terror at the net while Sartorius took the overheads.

"My game is at the net," says Tepper, a 6-footer who has trimmed down to 195 pounds and shaved off the mustache. "I don't really make the great shots, but I do keep the ball in play and use my opponents' power to pass them."

Tepper's game nearly went into the dumpster when his wife Allison persuaded him to move from the West Side to West Hills about seven years ago. As far as public paddle-tennis courts go in this area, it's Death Valley. Tepper couldn't get to the private Sand & Sea Club in Santa Monica or to Venice frequently enough to play regularly.

"Moving to the Valley definitely made me cut down on paddle tennis considerably," he says.

But Tepper met paddle-tennis enthusiast Barry Zelner about three years ago and has been able to keep his game sharp on Zelner's lighted court in his Tarzana back yard. He now plays about 20 sets a week, all doubles.

"Once you play doubles," he says, "you're hooked."

Photo:

The Valley may be paddle tennis' Death Valley, but Lance Tepper placed second nationally after finding an oasis in a friend's yard.

Photographer:

MEL MELCON / For The Times

Type of Material

Sidebar

NOTE:

May not be reproduced or retransmitted without permission. For permission, call: 800 LA TIMES, Ext. 74564.