

Los Angeles Times

86 inches; 3035 words

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 1985, WESTSIDE, PART 9, PAGE 1
COPYRIGHT 1985 / LOS ANGELES TIMES

000085798
FAX page #11

King Holds Court

■ Driven Player Strives to Put Paddle Tennis in the Limelight

By ALAN CITRON

It was dusk at the Sand and Sea Club, a private haven on prime ocean-front property in Santa Monica. As sun-bathers grabbed the last of the day's light, silver-haired bridge players dealt the final hand at poolside. A busboy in a white jacket collected cups against the backdrop of the gently rolling surf.

The serenity seemed inviolable, even as rush hour traffic edged by in a cloud of fumes along Pacific Coast Highway. But in a nearby room where the lights were turned low to afford a better view of MTV, one man cracked the silence with a booming discourse on life as the King of Paddle Tennis.

'I Am the Champion'

"I am the current national champion," said a dead-serious Sol Hauptman, as he pounded the Formica table. "I'm the national open paddle tennis champion. In other words, I'm the professional champion. It's the highest division. You saw me win the L. A. City Championship. Write that down. You were there."

Hauptman wanted everything written down, despite the presence of a tape recorder that shook whenever he whacked the table. A full day of teaching people how to play paddle tennis—a fast-paced combination of racquetball and tennis—had left him weary. With his receding hairline, he looked older than his 27 years. But the eyes that darted behind a pair of oversized black-rimmed glasses revealed an intensity that has helped Hauptman and a trio of partners capture 16 national titles in the sport's doubles division.

The unprecedented winning streak is chronicled in the pages of the Paddle Tennis News, the game's official publication. "Beckendorf and Hauptman

March Their Way to 1984 Doubles Title, Premier Team in Paddle Tennis," reads one headline. "Fleitman-Hauptman Take National Open Doubles Championship, Eighth Time in Nine Years," heralds another. "Spectacular," trumpets a third.

Even on a bad day, Hauptman might be described as "real good." He claims to have won as many trophies as John McEnroe, a role model. But McEnroe doesn't have to give lessons to toddlers to pay the rent on a one-room apartment. That's the cost of committing yourself to a sport that ranked somewhere between target shooting and sky diving in a recent Gallup poll.

"Paddle tennis simply needs more publicity," said Hauptman, a Culver City resident who estimated that top prize money for one season equals about \$5,000. "But I love it. I guess it must be in my blood. I just hope I'm not an old man before there's any money in it."

As Hauptman spoke a small diamond sparkled in his left ear. Around his neck was a thick gold chain with a pendant in the shape of the numeral 1. A bracelet with his name written in Hebrew circled his wrist and his left hand sported a large gold ring. With his brawny, compact build he looked more like a weightlifter than a paddle tennis player. But people who have followed Hauptman's career say no one can match him for sheer intensity and drive.

Mistakes Bring Groans

Twirling, lunging and slamming balls like a man stuck in fast forward, he makes each point seem pivotal. Mistakes bring agonizing groans and self-deprecating remarks. A partner's error is regarded as a personal affront, and opponents can expect to encounter the full force of his determination.

"When you've got to kill someone, you've got to kill him," Hauptman said. "You don't give them a chance. I've always believed that if you find a good loser, the guy will never be a winner. I hate to lose more than I like to win. If you beat me you deserve it. I don't give away anything at all."

Hauptman didn't have to press the point. For three months he'd bested the competition in a series of matches stretching across the country. Some of the wins had come easily. Others were the result of 11th-hour rallies. The over-riding factor was consistency. Hauptman, who could be found disco-dancing till the wee hours before a match, seemed almost incapable of losing.

"In men's doubles, Sol is the best player to have played the game," said Bill Brothers, a paddle tennis organizer. "He just never seems to miss."

That was the word around Venice Beach earlier this summer when paddle tennis players gathered at the southern end of Ocean Front Walk for the Los Angeles City Championship, one of the first major stops on the way to the national championship matches in South Carolina and Florida.

On a day when 1.5 billion people stayed indoors to watch the Live Aid benefit concerts for Ethiopia, a couple of hundred paddle tennis fans could be found milling around the courts, checking the match-ups and debating whether anyone would beat the man organizers had called the world's best player.

With his first match more than an hour away, Hauptman was standing apart from the crowd. A look of bewilderment crossed his face when a stranger approached and asked for an interview. Then a long silence ensued while Hauptman considered the merits of publicity. Finally, he handed over a business card and muttered, "Call me late" as he walked away.

Over the next couple of days Hauptman lived up to his advance billing as he and his partner, Rick Beckendorf, devastated the competition. People who had followed paddle tennis called it one of the most lopsided victories in recent memory. The Paddle Tennis News noted that Hauptman-Beckendorf won without surrendering a single set. What it didn't mention was that Hauptman had screamed at his stoic partner throughout the tournament.

"It goes in one ear and out the other," Beckendorf said afterward. "At times he'll apologize in the middle of a match. But we recognize what our roles are. He's a little better player than I am. So when he tells me something I respect the fact that it's true and he's usually right."

Antics Criticized

Others have criticized Hauptman's court antics and suggested that someone should quiet him down. But if unbridled emotion alone made champions, the King of Paddle Tennis would have had a lot more competition for the crown.

Nearly 100 years after its founding, paddle tennis remains something of an outlaw sport played by a small but devoted group of people who seem suited to the freewheeling nature of the game. One female player has been known to fling her paddle into the air, scream and kick the fence for more than 10 minutes after an unsuccessful match. Others routinely hurl so many obscenities that organizers have been forced to threaten them with heavy fines.

"Paddle tennis is one of the few sports I've seen that that can take the nicest gentlemen in the world and make them complete maniacs," Hauptman said. "I've seen people with no temperament immediately start to shout. It's just a very intense sport because people play so close together. Write that down."

Historians say that Frank P. Beal of Albion, Mich., started the game after being cut from his college tennis team. When Beal moved to New York he introduced it to underprivileged children in Greenwich Village, and soon afterward the first paddle tennis tournament took place in neighboring Washington Square. The United States Paddle Tennis Assn. was founded in 1926. Years later the game became popular in California, South Carolina and Florida.

A player and organizer named Murray Geller is credited with making modern modifications. Geller enlarged the court, making it 20 feet wide and 50 feet long, with a net 31 inches high. Under current rules, matches are played with a partially depressurized tennis ball and a stubby paddle with air holes. The scoring is essentially the same as that used in tennis.

Heats Up in Summer

The season stretches over most of

the year, but heats up during the summer. Because of the difficulty of sustaining volleys in a sport that sometimes resembles hand-to-hand combat, doubles matches are the most popular. Paddle tennis organizers claim that acceptance of the sport is growing, pointing to the considerable exposure it receives on Venice's touristy Ocean Front Walk and in benefits such as the annual pro-celebrity tournament in Marina del Rey.

Hauptman, who usually doesn't miss a major match, was forced to bow out of this year's benefit because of work. But the next night, Aug. 29, he suited up and traveled to the Forum in Inglewood to play before nearly 9,000 people, one of the largest crowds in paddle tennis history.

It was a match that almost didn't happen. By all accounts, Forum officials were not thrilled when two unknown players named Scott Freedman and Greg Lawrence asked permission to stage an exhibition of the unfamiliar sport during a break in the Tennis Challenge Series featuring Yannick Noah and John McEnroe. When the Forum relented, Hauptman got his first chance to perform for the masses.

He arrived early, dressed in a flashy black and red tennis outfit and surrounded by a small entourage from the Sand and Sea Club. There was a long stretch before the end of the McEnroe-Noah match, and Hauptman spent most of the time pacing between the stands and the entrance tunnel. When the Forum finally announced the upcoming match more than half of the crowd got up and headed for the restrooms and concession stands.

If the paddle tennis contingent was offended, there was no time to show it, because they had been given only 20 minutes to set up, play and leave. Working fast and hard, they assembled a paddle tennis configuration on one side of a tennis court. As they started to play, the game looked minuscule in the immensity of the Forum. But a funny thing happened as the match progressed. People returning to their seats took notice and started cheering.

Buoyed by the crowd, some of whom drifted to the floor for a closer look at the match, the players gave a spirited and exhausting performance. Lawrence-Freedman matched Hauptman-Beckendorf game for game

until the end, when Hauptman's team took a one-game lead and served for the match. One Hauptman shot came down like a missile, bouncing several rows into the stands. On the following point he simply refused to let the ball get past him. With the steady support of Beckendorf, the team narrowly won the final game.

Afterward, Hauptman stood near the railing and signed autographs for a small group of children. He was stone-faced as McEnroe strolled by. But the unsolicited comment Hauptman uttered as the children drifted away gave the impression that he was aware of the proximity of his tennis counterpart. "People think paddle tennis is easy because the court is small, but they're wrong," Hauptman declared. "Look at me. I'm sweating!"

On Guard

Even in victory, Hauptman kept his guard up. The edginess seemed out of place for a guy who spends most of his life in shorts. But the key to Hauptman's personality may lie in his heritage.

His mother, a Polish Jew, lost most of her family to the Nazis during World War II. His father, a Russian Jew, fled his homeland to escape religious persecution. The two met in Israel in 1950. They settled on the outskirts of Tel Aviv, and Sol was born there in November, 1957.

Baby Sol, named after his maternal grandfather, did not come into the world easily. Regina Hauptman was less than seven months pregnant when she went into labor, and Sol weighed in at 1 1/2 pounds. After spending two months in an incubator, he contracted meningitis. Regina Hauptman was told to expect the worst. When Sol survived, the doctors called him a miracle baby.

"They told us it was hopeless," Regina Hauptman recalled, her accent still thick. "Everyone was shocked because he was so small."

By the time the Hauptmans moved to New York to be closer to Regina's two remaining sisters, Sol was a healthy 4-year-old. Regina Hauptman remembered that he first picked up a paddle at the age of 7 and was rarely seen without one afterward. "I wanted him to do more schoolwork," she recalled. "But the only time he was happy was when he was playing."

When Hauptman reached high

school, he started competing seriously. He won national championships in platform tennis and racquetball, but paddle tennis was his passion. After spending two years at New York-area colleges as a physical education major, Hauptman dropped out to play full time.

Teaming with Jeff Fleitman, a friend from a Brighton Beach club, Hauptman started carving out a reputation for aggressive play. Seemingly unbeatable in East Coast matches, the two became known as "The Great Wall of Brooklyn."

The Los Angeles paddle tennis circuit, meanwhile, had its own heroes. One of the biggest was a player named York Hafner, who was known for his dramatic net play. Next came the doubles team of Greg Lawrence and Brian Lee, a powerful duo who dominated the game during the mid-1970s.

It was only natural that Lawrence-Lee would meet Hauptman-Fleitman in competition. And it was only natural that Hauptman-Fleitman would be somewhat confident, especially with the 1977 national tournament being played on their home turf. But when the match occurred, the Great Wall of Brooklyn crumbled. **Avenged Loss**

Hauptman was not amused. After the loss, he taped a picture of Lawrence and Lee to his wall and threw darts at it each night before going to sleep. Hauptman-Fleitman avenged the loss the next year and continued winning afterward. But in 1981, Hauptman left New York and his partner for Los Angeles.

Hauptman relocated for the same reasons most people travel west—the weather and the life style. Within weeks of arriving, he had settled in with a transplanted family from New York and started scouting for a partner. He eventually found Beckendorf, an up-and-coming player seven years his senior, on the courts in Venice.

"Sol approached me the first year he arrived," Beckendorf said. "At first I didn't want to play with him because he was a little on the loud side. But at the time I was coming in third and fourth, so I thought, what the heck. What we found is that one of our great strengths is communication."

"The problem was Rick never had a partner as good as he was," Hauptman said. "I got him to concentrate and open

up a little more. I said, you be a tiger and go for the kill. He was too much of a gentleman on the court."

Beckendorf, tall and lanky with a mustache and blond hair that doesn't move, remains the antithesis of Hauptman, but the odd chemistry seems to work. When the two competed in the California State Championship, held at a Torrance Country Club called La Casa de Vida on a breezy, cloudless Aug. 4, they moved easily through the early rounds.

The semifinal match, which pitted them against Mark Rifenshank and Steve Magit, was a little tougher. The first set was tied 5-5 before Hauptman-Beckendorf won it in a tie-breaker. They advanced to the finals after battling on to win the second set 6-4.

After a two-hour rest, Hauptman-Beckendorf faced the team they had played at the Forum, Lawrence-Freedman, for the championship. In the first set they seemed well in control, winning 6-4. The second lasted longer, because a number of Hauptman's shots weren't landing. An exasperated Beckendorf finally told Hauptman to keep his pointers to himself, and the team eventually triumphed in a tie-breaker that seemed to last half the afternoon.

Later, at the Sand and Sea Club, Hauptman reflected on the fact that he had won only \$150 for the two-day struggle. "It was toilet paper, toilet paper!" said the champ, pounding the table. "Write that down."

Traveled by Bus

By now the unique rhythm of Hauptman's life was becoming clear. True to his New York roots, he traveled solely by public bus. He could be reached only in the early morning or late evening. Otherwise, he was working at the Sand and Sea or working out at a Culver City health club. Hauptman had always been a fitness buff, but moving to California has made him particularly aware of his body, and he maintained a rigid schedule of weightlifting, bicycle riding and running. Often, he would stop in the middle of a sentence and just stare at his biceps.

Hauptman said he is continually trying to toughen up. After breaking up with a girlfriend, he added six inches to his waistline and took a lot of kidding before the weight went away. But it's an

ongoing struggle.

"I love eating," Hauptman said. "I eat a lot of food, but I don't eat garbage food anymore. I've cut red meat completely out of my diet. I also don't use salt and sugar. But I do cheat, because no one can be strict all the time. I eat a lot of pasta. My other weaknesses are burritos, pastrami sandwiches, New York-style pizza and chocolate egg creams."

As a bachelor, Hauptman also tries to keep himself in shape for the dating game. "There was a point where I only went out with athletes because I liked jocky athletic women," Hauptman said. "That's still pretty much my taste. I like to work hard and sweat and play sports. Some women say, 'I want you to stay home. I don't want you to play ball.' Hey, I'm not looking for that."

Regina Hauptman has visited her Americanized son once since he ventured west. She's glad that he's happy, but uncertain of what to make of his appearance. "It's beautiful to live where he lives," said Regina Hauptman. "But last time I saw him I said, 'Sol, do what you want when I'm not here. But when I am, please wear proper shorts and don't wear the earring.'"

Sol's mother wants him do something big with his life. Most of the players in the paddle tennis hierarchy are gainfully employed. Beckendorf, an insurance broker, is one of them. Hauptman falls somewhere in the middle. He has a part-time job, but he can't teach paddle tennis forever. He talks about opening a bookstore and says he's saving money toward that end. But there's always one more tournament, and one more challenger waiting to test him.

That was the case as Labor Day drew near and Hauptman announced that he would attempt to win two national championships in two weeks with two different partners. The first match, the National Men's Championship at Folly Beach, S.C., brought Hauptman back together with Marvin Silver, a partner from New York. The second, the National Beach Championship in St. Augustine, Fla., would reunite him with Jeff Fleitman, the other half of the Brooklyn Wall.

Brutal Match

By all accounts, the South Carolina match was brutal. Temperatures

approached 100 degrees and gnats swarmed about the court. Several players became ill between games and others fell from heat exhaustion. As they pulled into Florida the next week, Silver said he felt like he had played inside an oven. "That's not important," said Hauptman, offering to pull off his shirt and count the gnat bites. "What's important is that we won."

After playing under such circumstances, the athletes were glad to arrive in St. Augustine. The National Beach Championship is a longtime favorite among players because the crowds are large, the town is friendly, the bikini-clad women are in large supply, the packed sand makes for a good playing surface and the hours between matches are given over to endless parties.

Even the town newspaper got involved, running colorful stories about the athletes who converge on the small city each year for the Labor Day weekend event. Who could guess that Hurricane Elena would saunter up to the western coastline, sending sheets of rain and driving wind so strong that outdoor competition became a ridiculous notion?

Not Hurricane Hauptman, who seemed somewhat miffed at the prospect of playing inside a steamy high school gymnasium sans bikini-clad women and packed sand. But the change in venue didn't hamper his game. Hauptman had bragged that it would take a broken limb to stop him from winning, and he seemed remarkably relaxed all the way to the finals.

After long days on the court, players retired to a popular hangout called the Passport. Some took comfort in the free-flowing alcohol, others in the fashionably dressed women who sidled up to the natural wood bar. Hauptman could be found on the dance floor in his dress tennis outfit for several hours at a time, acting out the verses to scores of pulsing disco tunes.

Jeff Fleitman, his partner, perched on a corner bar stool and conserved energy. On the court he was every bit as vocal and demanding as Hauptman, but socially he was subdued. On the night before the finals he spent much of his time staring across the smoky room at the two players who would challenge him and Hauptman for the

championship—Fleitman's brother Steve and another New Yorker named Russ Garber.

Excitement in Air

When dawn broke on Labor Day, the sun shot through the clouds for the first time in several days and there was a palpable excitement when organizers confirmed that the final, whittled down from 22 teams, would be held on the beach. Within hours the paddle tennis nets, barbecues, ice chests and bikini-clad spectators were in place—looking as if they had been there all along.

While he waited to play, Hauptman sat on the back of a pickup truck facing the ocean, remarking how much he loved St. Augustine and a family called the Ryans who had given him room and board. He and Fleitman took to the sand around 4 p.m. and screamed at each other until 4:20, when the match ended.

With about 100 people standing by, the champions were doused with champagne and awarded \$1,200 in prize money. Then they adjourned to the Passport for a final night of revelry among people who love paddle tennis.

When morning came the locals dutifully returned to work and the players started a small exodus to the airport. At highway speeds, the landscape became a blur of vegetation and fast food stands. But one sight along U.S. 1 stood out against the unfamiliar scenery. The King of Paddle Tennis was standing on the roadside with his thumb in the air.

He had been standing there for more than 30 minutes and no one had stopped. Jumping into the car he groaned and explained that he had less than an hour to make his flight. With the car moving illegally fast, the miles disappeared and the airport drew closer. Somewhere along the way, with planes flying overhead and the end of the sojourn in sight, Hauptman turned and uttered his last quote.

"You saved my life," he said. "Write that down."

Times Staff Writer

Photo:

Sol Hauptman, left, and Jeff Fleitman at national paddle tennis championships in St. Augustine, Fla.

Photographer:
Steve Sego

Photo:

Paddle tennis champ Sol Hauptman gives lessons to students such as Scott and Jennifer Bornstein.

Photographer:

CASSY COHEN / Los Angeles Times

NOTE:

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