

The Squash in my Life

Not the vegetable, the game. Which is played with a longish racket and a small black ball in a boxy room, as in the photo taken in 2017 through the glass back wall at El Gancho Tennis and Swim Club.

As a sophomore in high school, I tried out for the school's tennis team. Tennis, as you know, has a heavier racket and the ball is bigger and bouncier. After about two weeks I was unceremoniously cut from the team. I tried again as a junior – cut again. And again, as a senior. Apparently the coach must have thought I was too small to play tennis well. Which seems a little odd, since I eventually turned out to be a nationally-ranked squash player (in my age group).



For those who don't know the game, a short video from which the above photo was taken can be seen by going to pages.swcp.com/~silbar/ and clicking on SFeOpen.mov (9.6 MB).

I only learned about squash when I was a Sophomore at Michigan. The professor whom I was working for (doing scut work in his lab) was starting to play it. As an “experienced” paddleball player and being pretty arrogant at that time, I said to him, “Peter, I bet I can beat you at that game.” So, he took the bet, we tried it out, and I lost the bet.

Years went by without my playing any racket sports. Sometime after arriving at Los Alamos, Mark Bolsterli and I started playing tennis. Then one wintry day, at age 30, he suggested we go over to the YMCA and try squash. He, of course, knew the game very well and I was awkward and bumbling. Nonetheless, we continued with it and I started to play less clumsily. It took a few years before I could play evenly with him. There were few other squash players in Los Alamos at that time, even though the Y had been built with two American-sized courts and two, later three, handball courts. The latter, being larger (being eight feet longer), were also being used for racquetball, the successor to paddleball.

Things changed, around 1982, when Pat Martin came to town to work as a metallurgist at the Lab. He was a *good* and very enthusiastic squash player. He started giving us informal lessons, and everyone's game improved. Also, around 1983 he said to us that there was a tournament (!) down at the Albuquerque Tennis Club, and that a bunch of us Los Alamites should go to it. So we did. I entered the C's, the bracket for the least experienced players. I don't remember how well I did, but I certainly did not make it to the finals. I did learn that going to tournaments was a cheap way to get good squash lessons. And this was my first introduction to other squash players around the state.

Pat, in his enthusiasm, also organized the first of many Los Alamos Open squash tournaments. With two courts that was relatively easy, once one found a sponsor for the tee shirts and, possibly, prizes for winners. After Pat left town, the job of organizing passed on to me. That job got harder when the Y decided to convert the two America-sized courts into weight and exercise rooms. When our now larger group of squash players learned of this plan, we complained about not having a place to play. The Y, after deliberation and the promise on our part to provide some financial support, agreed to refurbish one of the handball courts with a movable back glass wall. It was still possible possible to host tournaments, but the scheduling with one court was trickier.

After that first Albuquerque adventure I started going to all the local and nearby tournaments I could find. One problem with that, besides the time and travel, is that one begins to accumulate a lot of tee shirts and other paraphernalia given out to all entrants. And, if one improves to the point of beginning to get to the semi-finals or better, there may be some prizes to take home and to brag about.

One particularly interesting tournament venue was at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. For some reason some general who had played squash in college thought that it would be a good aerobic exercise for the cadets. So, the academy's gym was built with about ten singles and two doubles courts. A bit excessive, of course. Most of these courts were only lightly used and, eventually, many were converted into weight and exercise machine rooms.

Nonetheless, we had some good times up there. And Coach Cowart commissioned Maggie to referee. Refereeing a squash match is mostly a matter of keeping the score, but now and then one has to make a judgment call about whether some rally was a let (to be played over) or a point. But she decided to quit refereeing when, in one match, a poor sport in the court started cursing her and her decisions. It is fair to say, however, that poor sportsmanship in squash circles is pretty rare.

After a few years at the Academy, squash in Colorado Springs moved to Guillermo's Club, which Bill Palmer and Edd Biggs built in town. In fact the very last squash tournament I participated in was there at the end of February 2020, just before the pandemic hit.

Another Colorado tournament venue was in Cascade, by Vail, where in 1989 I got to play in the 50's Finals against Hashim Khan, a many-times world champion. Of course he was close to 80 at the time and of course I lost in three straight games (out of the usual best-of-five). I might have played and lost to Hashim once more, I'm not sure, but he was very kind to say that I would eventually beat him some day. Never did have that opportunity.

We also went up to Denver for tournaments once or twice each year. The big one there was the annual Hashim Khan Tourney at the Denver Athletic Club, where Hashim was for many years the pro. He always greeted Maggie and me with enthusiasm. In fact, I suspect he was quite fond of Maggie, the squash widow who almost always accompanied me on these jaunts to tourneys.

Having mentioned racquetball above, many Los Alamos squash players started with it and then, often at my urging, graduated to squash. I say "graduated" because, it has been said that racquetball is like checkers while squash is like chess. In fact three of these converts – Richard Hammer, Chris Fontes, and the then-teenager Jesse Giron – frequently ended up being the open-flight champions in New Mexico. In fact, most of the members of the Los Alamos team that usually won the New Mexico league playoffs were ex-racquetballers. As an aside, Jesse grew up, is now a Ph.D. physicist working at LANL; he is still playing squash. Another aside is that not all the Los Alamos recruits from racquetball

were male. I helped starting out two young women – Julia Sheppard and Binh Wakeford – who were talented enough to get to the point where they would usually beat me at the game I taught them.

Soon after that first Albuquerque tournament, it became evident that there were now a fair number of squash enthusiasts, many of whom were new to the game. So Randy Kahn and Walter Burke transformed the already existing Albuquerque Squash Rackets Club into the New Mexico Squash Rackets Association, which in turn became affiliated with the national U. S. Squash Association. Among other things, the NMSRA sponsored and organized the state-wide league matches that were mentioned in the paragraph above. From time to time I served as one of its officers.

Everything I've described so far before, i.e. up to 1986, was about American hardball singles squash, played in courts that were one-and-a-half feet narrower than the present softball standard. The softball squash rules are slightly different, as is the style of play. Since we Americans continue to refuse to convert to measuring things in metric units, it is almost amazing that we were more or less in one year able to switch over to the world-standard softball game. (The American hardball game continues to be played by a few die-hards, mostly on the East Coast.)

There is, however, a version of hardball squash that continues to be enjoyed by many – it is doubles. It involves four people swinging their rackets in close proximity to each other. But it happens in a rather bigger court, in length, width, and height. To me the doubles game is more fun to watch and to play than singles, as there is a greater variety of shots that one can make and the rallies are usually not very long.

The problem with doubles squash is finding a place to play it. There is *only one* doubles court in all of New Mexico, and that is at the Kiva Club in Santa Fe. This is an exclusive private men's club, no women allowed, and it is difficult to become a member. Nonetheless in 1983 or so, they began to host the Kiva Classic tournament, an Invitational, with age-group flights, for men only, from the 40's up to the 70's and, for doubles, to the 80's. The Classic is nationally-renowned and now attracts players from all over North America. (In recent years this tournament has also been open to a few women players, usually of US championship quality.)

Well, for some reason I was invited to participate in 1985. They hosted singles age-group flights in addition to doubles, so I obviously, knowing nothing about how to play doubles, opted to play in both. I tended to do well at the singles game, in my age-group, but by the time I was playing in the 70's when in my 80's, I began having trouble beating all those youngsters. I was lucky enough to be able play in the Kiva Classic twenty-six times, and for that was once awarded a Nambeware plate for good attendance.

Doubles, however, was for me a slow learning process, since I would get to play it only three or four times a year. One problem is that to get good one needs to find a compatible partner. In my case that partner turned out to be Hank Palmer, from Fresno. While I am small but fast and do better playing on the right wall, Hank is tall and a bit slower with creaky knees. Nonetheless, he has good racket skills and as a left-hander fits very well on the left wall.

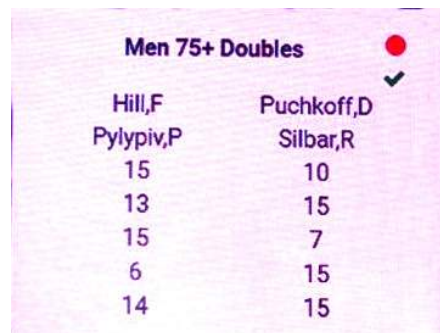
So, together we began to win matches and sometimes even got past the semis. One interesting tourney was at the University Club in San Francisco, one with handicaps. In our first match, we even beat an older guy playing with Kevin Jernigan, the 29-year-old president of the US Squash Association. To be truthful, we had something like a +6 handicap, while the other team had to overcome its handicap of -7.

(Doubles matches are to 15 points, with every rally awarding a point.) We obviously tried to mostly hit to the old guy, but Kevin was able to cover and return many of those shots.

Another interesting tourney was a Centennial match-up between the University Clubs of San Francisco and Boston. “Centennial” means the combined ages of a team had to add up to 100 or more years. As the San Francisco contingent needed a fifth player to fill out the team, and I was available, they declared me to be an honorary Friscoan. On arrival in Boston, I was paired with a not-so-young player, Chip Adams, and our combined ages came to 128 years, probably the oldest team. However, Chip is a very good player and we ended up winning the finals (and the resulting silverplate platters).

In about January of 2015 I answered our home telephone, and a fellow named David Puchkoff introduced himself. What is this all about, I asked myself – is he trying to sell me insurance or something? He claimed, however, that he was looking for a doubles partner to participate in the National Championships to be held in Philadelphia in March. My response was “Huh? Who are you?” He said that he had gotten my name (and phone number) from the US Squash Rackets web site. He was judging from my ranking that I was a right-wall player who might work well with him as a left-wall player. “Hmm,” I said, “I normally don’t travel East to play squash. Let me think about it and call you back tomorrow.”

I thought about it, discussed it with Maggie. Could I (or we) afford it? She, the squash widow, suggested that I *could* go alone. So I called Puchkoff back and, after some discussion regarding how, what, and when, I said yes to partnering in that event. I was to fly to New York City, his home, where I would meet him and his wife, Eileen, and stay in their apartment a few days before the Nationals. And we could get in a day or two of practice matches at his club, getting used to how we’d play together. So, all that happened. We three then drove to Philadelphia and we had some fun, as evidenced by the following scoreboard:



Men 75+ Doubles	
Hill,F Pylypiv,P	Puchkoff,D Silbar,R
15	10
13	15
15	7
6	15
14	15

That match was, unfortunately, not the finals, which we didn’t get to.

Later that year, in November, I returned to New York, so that, after more practice matches, David and I would drive up to Montreal to participate in the Smitty tournament. It was in the Adirondacks that we had a flat tire. In an area with no cell phone access. And, we couldn’t figure out how to remove the lug nuts to replace the flat with the spare. It turned out there was a special jig in the console of his car to do just that, as pointed out by the mechanic who eventually arrived to help. Anyway, we did get to Montreal, and we also had fun there, not *quite* winning our age group flight.

Since then David and I have partnered on other occasions, including a time when he and Eileen came to Santa Fe for the Kiva Classic.

On moving to Santa Fe in 2019, I switched to playing my squash at El Gancho, with only occasional appearances at the Los Alamos Y. However, as I mentioned above, the Covid pandemic came in at the end of January 2020. I concluded that playing against an opponent in a small enclosed room while wearing a mask wasn't really worth it. So, I dropped my membership at El Gancho and my squash days are now probably over. Maybe. I, like Hank, have graduated to playing pickleball instead. Besides being outdoors or in a large gymnasium, one advantage is that the majority of the players I see are women. Certainly not as strenuous as squash, but now I'm 85 and maybe that's a good thing. We will see.

Afterthoughts added, November 2022:

In the spring of 2002 Maggie and I spent a month vacationing on the South Island of New Zealand. That is, their fall, which is when the Kiwis start *their* squash season. In preparation for the trip I bumbled around the world-wide web looking up things about the New Zealand squash circuit. I fell into e-mail correspondence with the pro at a Christchurch club. He was probably amused about such an odd contact from New Mexico, and he suggested I bring along my racquet and plimsoles. He said he could arrange a game or two for me.

So I did and he did, soon after our arrival at Christchurch, our first stop. On one of the breaks one of my opponents learned that we were about to make a counter-clockwise circle trip around the Island in a rickety rental car. He then commented that there was usually a local squash tournament every weekend at one place or another. On telling me where they were and when, we planned our itinerary accordingly. So, in the course of three weekend tourneys and in a few pick-up games during the week, I was introduced to the coterie of South Island squash players. There are, incidentally, a lot of good women players in that group. And, despite learning that I was by no means as good a singles player as I thought I was, it was a lot of fun.

Returning to 2022, with the pandemic abating somewhat, I began to think about returning to the game. This was precipitated by an August announcement of the rejuvenated Kiva Classic, to be held the first weekend in December. Could I do that, having to play in the 80's doubles flight against guys who had continued playing through the pandemic? So, I started scrambling around (again, by e-mails) to see if I could arrange a partner. Hank Palmer, of course, was as usual interested in returning to Santa Fe, but he said he'd hold off saying "yes" because he had developed a double-vision problem that might, or might not, be cleared up by December.

David Puchkoff was also interested in returning to Santa Fe, and he had put out some feelers for a doubles partner among his New York buddies. Nevertheless, in case none of those worked out, he suggested I come to the Big Apple for some practice doubles games at his club. By and by it looked like he thought we would be partnering for the Kiva Classic. So Jere and I spent a week near the end of October in NYC for three days of hitting a doubles squash ball in a proper court. Along with a bunch of museums and some good meals.

However, David and Eileen decided that they were not able to make a trip west in December – they learned that one of their daughters was expecting a child at that time. There might be some complications with the birthing, and, in any case, there was a conflict with a baby shower. I learned this just after Hank called to say he *did* want to come partner, his double-vision having now cleared up. So, doubles partner problem was solved.

And what about singles? It also turns out that my buddy Gary Mazaroff is organizing a one-day tournament at El Gancho on November 19. Being somewhat crazy, I will also play that tourney, despite not having hit a squash singles ball since January 27, 2020. As I said above, we will see.