

Alvarado Oui, Roberts Non

The Quebec Pro Stop was the second win in a row for Alvarado as he primed for the Nationals.

by Terry Muck

Quebecer's took time out from campaigning for a political referendum May 15-18 to host the eighth stop on the Spalding Pro Tour. Although the Quebec Referendum, calling for more serious discussion of French Quebec separatism, was resoundingly defeated at the voting booths with *non* votes, the overwhelming consensus vote for the handball tournament was *oui*, especially for winner Naty Alvarado who defeated Vern Roberts 21-8, 21-16 for the title.

Alvarado regained his number one ranking by dominating Roberts for all but ten points of the second game; in that game Roberts took a 9-0 lead over a lethargic Alvarado who was still reveling in the good feeling of winning the first game 21-8. That ten point stretch was the only time Vern shot well from deep court, a part of his offensive game on which he heavily relies. The rest of the match Vern missed as many shots as he made, and fifty percent isn't good enough when you're playing Alvarado.

For his part, Alvarado took to the difficult glass court at Le Neufchatel, Inc. Handball Court and used it to his advantage. He served hard down the right side wall of glass and constantly killed to the right front corner where it was difficult to see the ball. But it was more than the glass court that beat the vastly improved Roberts (now ranked number two on the tour ahead of Fred Lewis). It was the Alvarado of old, the Alvarado who has dominated the pro tour for the last three years.

The yardsticks by which we measure athletic domination vary from age to age. In the barbaric past when athletic contests were truly life and death affairs, the measuring stick was simply survival; the winner on the Incan ball court kept his life, the loser forfeited his.

In more recent times athletic success sometimes is weighed in terms of political impact; the Olympic heroes often are not the best in their sport but their wins against the hated Russians, for example, are glorified because they prove the virtue of the American way. Occasionally success is seen in the more idealistic terms of excellence under pressure; Jack Nicklaus playing his best golf when it counts the most in major championships is the best example here. Or how about fame? The Brazilian soccer star Pele was probably the best known athlete in the

world, and his world wide fame in many ways reflected his success (Muhammed Ali is a similar case). Modern American athletes tend to be measured by how much money they make; tennis star Jimmy Connors is one of the only businessmen in the country who can turn to the newspaper's sports pages for a quick peek at his current financial condition. Baseball, football, and basketball stars bask in the glory of long term contracts instead of fifty home runs, 2,000 yards gained, or slam dunks.

THEY TRIED AGAINST NATY AT QUEBEC CITY. . .

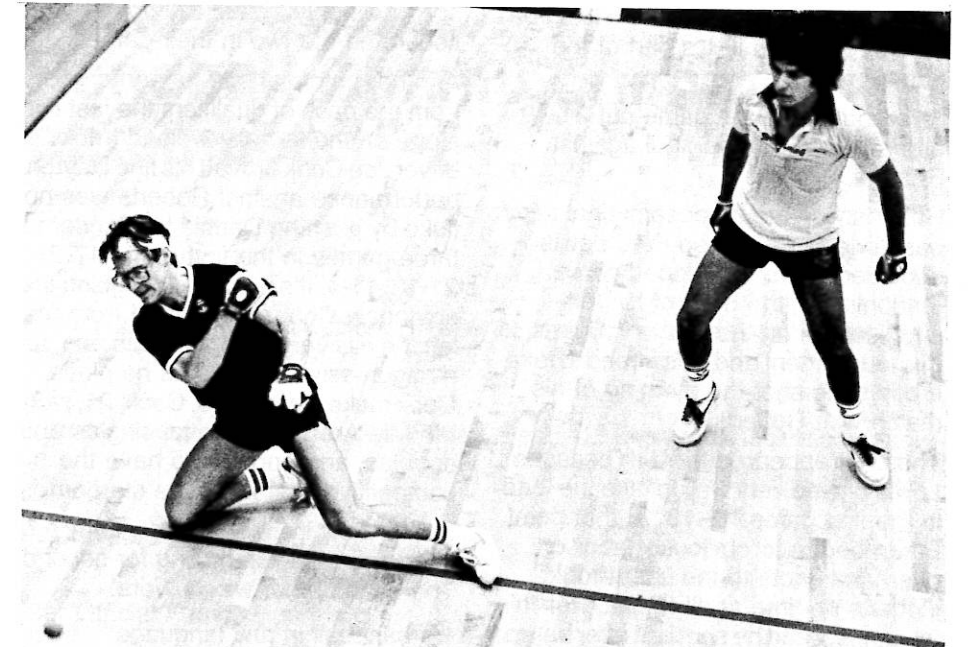
Dennis Hofflander gives it the strong left hand effort in his losing battle with Alvarado. Naty tuned up fine in this last pro stop before going on to win the nationals at the Tucson Athletic Club.



The question naturally arises as to how handball players measure their success. How good is Alvarado? None but the seventy and over Diamond Masters players consider survival the key to a successful match. The glory of playing for one's country is absent from this non-Olympic sport and the only way handball players could effect Salt II is by using less on their steaks. Excellence under pressure is a possible criteria, but handball is a part time sport for even the best players and with no one devoting full time to pursuing excellence of play one suspects the level of play is two or three cuts below what it could be were it a bona fide professional sport. Fame escapes Naty Alvarado as surely as class eludes Jimmy Connors. That Alvarado is an athlete one can readily see from watching him negotiate chairs and tables in a crowded restaurant, but one would never hear the whispered, "That must be a professional handball player," as he passes by. And if handball players depended on their annual earning power to justify their expended energy, the best players would be considered as successful at handball as the government is at controlling inflation.

What does make a handball player successful then?

The only objective measuring stick we have is the number of tournaments won against the best players. The past five years the best players in the country have competed on the Spalding Pro Tour, and in this top flight competition, Alvarado has been without peer. His record has genius stamped all over it — in 24 out of 32 tournaments held since November of 1976 Alvarado has finished first. He won five out of seven starts this year and has regained the number one ranking he temporarily lost to Fred Lewis.



Vern Roberts Jr. goes to a knee in attempting a bottom boarder in futile attempt to overtake Naty Alvarado on Canadian Pro Tour stop.

Because this outstanding record says so much so simply, it's tempting to look for more sophisticated measures of success. None are available. Handball's limited status as a professional sport means money, fame, prestige, and potential all fail to reflect success. The only thing that separates the good from the great is tournaments won.

There is one qualifying statistic that might be added to pro tournaments won — national tournaments won. But that record only proves the rule. The two players who have dominated the national tournament — Fred Lewis has won five and Alvarado has won two national crowns, but Lewis has the advantage of ten years more play. Alvarado will even up this statistic in short order.

Alvarado came into the Quebec determined to remain intense throughout the weekend, particularly against his semi-final opponent Dennis Hofflander. Their last meeting in Austin had seen Hofflander come back from two big second and third game deficits to win an 11-10 tie-breaker, and Naty well knew he had to play full games to win in Quebec.

"I only play well when I go all out," reported Naty before the match. "Some guys seem to be able to play well while holding something in reserve. I haven't learned how to do that yet. The minute I try and relax a little bit I lose it all."

He put on his game fact for Hofflander and the first game it worked extremely well. He served well, shot well, and cracked aces instead of smiles. No matter how serious Naty tries to remain, one always looks for the impish grin so characteristic of Alvarado off the court or during a match he knows he can win easily. But in this 21-6 game the grin didn't appear.

It didn't appear in the second game either, but what did appear was Hofflander's left handed kill. Shots he missed in the first game rolled in the second and Alvarado found himself down 16-9. Two things enabled Naty to win the game. He began to hit a sliding serve down the right side glass wall that gave Hofflander fits. He also was aided by a bone bruise on Hofflander's right palm.

"The serve gave me trouble all tournament," said Hofflander. "The bone bruise is just one of those things."