

"If It Didn't Happen Here, It Was Never Going to Happen"

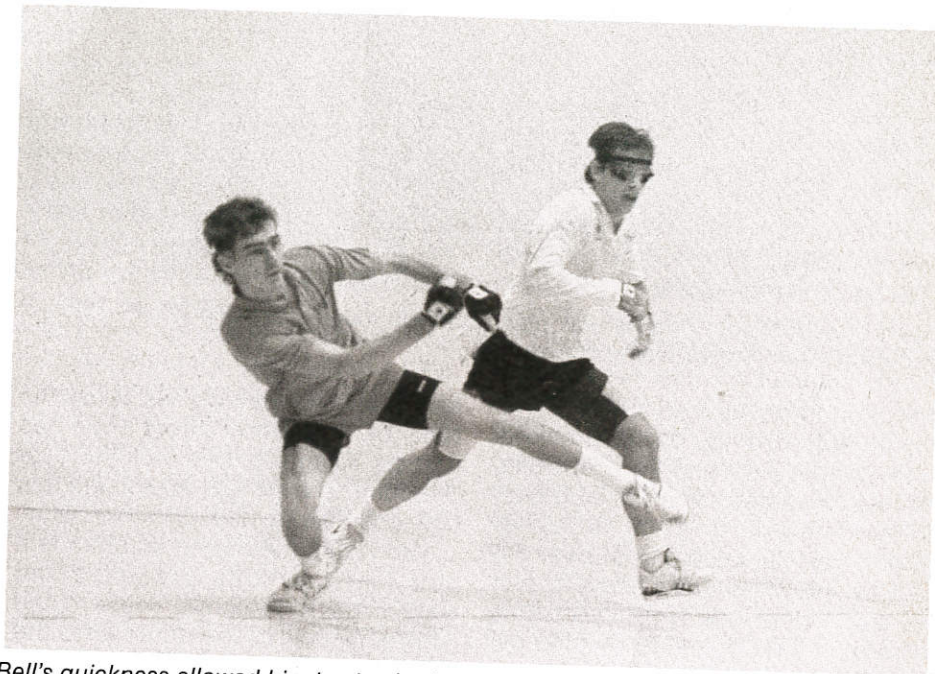
Quebec's Danny Bell Wins First Pro Stop

It's a short list of great players when you look at the names on the sidebar. For most, it took years of effort and second-place finishes before breaking through for their first win. Though it's taken five-time Canadian National Champ Danny Bell years to break through for his first final appearance, he made the most of the opportunity. Bell withstood a near-perfect first game barrage from John Bike, losing 21-8, and then turned the tables to win the deciding games most impressively, 21-6, 11-5.

"I had trouble with his (Bike's) pace. I didn't have a match and I just needed to adjust to the speed. But at the end of the first game, we had some good rallies and I knew I was back in the match," Bell said later.

Danny was back in the match alright. Bell started the second game on a tear, holding the serve until he double-faulted at 7-0. Bike, who broke open the first game with a deadly Z-serve that was hit so hard into the glass it couldn't be hit until it kissed the left side wall and slithered along the back wall, couldn't find the range in the second game. After a game of pounding, the ball didn't move like it did at the beginning of the match. For Bell, that meant he was able to stay in the front court without worrying about protecting himself should Bike blast one right at his position. There's no better retriever on the tour right now and Bell tracked down everything Bike blasted and stood his ground in the front court. With a feather-soft touch on his rekills, Bell had Bike questioning his shot selection.

Even when Bell mounted a large second-game lead, it didn't seem likely he would garner the first serve in the tie breaker. But he held the athletic Bike to just six points and went to work with his old faithful. "In the tie breaker, my serve to the right with a reverse into the glass was the difference. It was my good serve all week," Bell said.



Bell's quickness allowed him to stay in the front court with Bike.

In spite of the easy points on his serve, four to be exact, Bell had to withstand a few gut checks. At 4-2, Bell dug, dove, slid, picked blasts out of the air from behind his back, and performed other acrobatic moves to keep the rally alive. Dan finally tallied No. 5 with his best kill, a right hand to the left corner that catches the opposition off guard. At that point in the match, most felt it would be a case of winning the battle but losing the war against the finely conditioned Bike. Instead, it was the momentum builder that won the match.

"It was the best feeling of my life," Bell said after he scampered up the front wall ala Naty Alvarado's nationals' celebratory climb. "It won't be my only win this year, I've been playing so well, working so hard, and I've been healthy," he added.

Bell does feel he has some unfinished business. "I wanted to play Alvarado — he's my idol — in my first final.

Other than the final, and his early morning practice games with Bike each day, including Sunday, Bell

didn't have a match. He did have one close game, though, in the first round against speedy Dan Armijo. Bell had made a New Year's Resolution to "just enjoy himself" on the court after earning the not-so-desired label as the "worst-pro-to-referee." When Armijo led 14-3 and 19-10, Bell continued to tell himself to "relax, not to worry, I'll win even if it goes three games." Amazingly, the match didn't go three games as Bell rallied for a 21-19, 21-5 win.

"When I called Donald (Cote, Bell's coach), I told him about the new Danny Bell. But Donald interrupted and said, 'No, not the new, but the old Danny Bell.'"

There was no need to talk to himself again until the final, as Bell cruised in the quarters and semis, defeating Richard Valenzuela and Poncho Monreal, respectively. When Bell eased up at the end of the second game against Valenzuela, it still wasn't enough to avoid handing out the first "donut" in some time on the tour. Monreal, who edged Valenzuela in the final of the