

## Handy

### Ray Kunkel -- off-the-wall champ

By TOM BAER

You can say three things about Ray Kunkel after he's finished a game of handball. He's tired, he's sweaty and he's usually a winner.

Kunkel, a 40-year-old Southfield resident, teamed up with 39-year-old Larry Brown to win the Michigan Handball Association doubles championship at Detroit's Palmer Park recently.

Kunkel and Brown, who lives in Warren, defeated a pair of Detroiters, Bob Plater and Bernie Samet, in the finals, 21-6 and 21-18. Last week, Kunkel was preparing for the state singles tournament which also will be played at Palmer Park.

Winning the state doubles crown had a special significance for Kunkel and Brown. They beat some good young players along the way. And beating the younger players is one incentive which keeps Kunkel running after competitive handball titles.

"It gives you a certain satisfaction of being able to play with the younger guys," said Kunkel, an automotive engineer at Chrysler Corporation's Highland Park offices.

"You just don't want to feel that you're old. It's nice to be able to prove that you can still get out there and run with the 25-year-olds."

AND RUN he does, almost every evening at the old Palmer Park courts. At 40, he usually feels the effects of a 90-minute handball workout. The session always begins with an application of Vaseline to his feet because of blisters.

"I have a unique problem," Kunkel said. "A few years ago I developed tendinitis in my right arm from trying to hit the ball hard. Your arm can go on you, but my case is unique. Usually guys have their legs go."

Kunkel, who placed third in the national three-wall (outdoor) handball tournament in 1970, is looking forward

to entering the nationals again this year. The tournament will be held in Columbus, Ohio over the Labor Day weekend.

Kunkel has a good chance to finish high in the nationals. But he feels his age plus the fact that he's been playing for only 12 years will prevent him from winning a three-wall national title.

"I started playing a little late. You should start at about 14. The earlier you start, the better you can be."

KUNKEL BECAME addicted to handball while he was training for another strenuous sport—weightlifting. He won the Michigan AAU weightlifting championship in the 165-pound class in 1956.

He found the years of training with weights really helped him when he decided to get serious about handball.

"Weight lifting really helped me for handball. It built up a lot of physical strength and left my body in much better shape. It helped my body to last longer."

What's ahead in competitive handball for Kunkel?

"I'd like to be the over 40 four-wall (indoor) national champion," he said.

Last winter, Kunkel played in the indoor nationals in Knoxville, Tenn. He'll try again this coming winter, when the journey shifts to the Tropicana nightclub in Las Vegas.

In addition to tournaments, Kunkel's summer evenings will be filled with the impromptu games with his friends at Palmer Park. How long will he keep on playing this young man's game?

"Probably until I die," he answered. "We have guys who are 60 years old playing the game. I know one guy who is 67 and he's still playing handball three times a week."

But between middle-age and senior citizenship, Kunkel has a lot of competitive handball left to play.

Ray Kunkel of Southfield has a handball workout at Detroit's Palmer Park.

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— Ray Kunkel

## Handball-- Palmer Park animal sport

Some of the best handball players in the state gather each evening at Detroit's Palmer Park.

The park, at Woodward and McNichols, offers one of the few spots in the metropolitan area where a man can play some outdoor handball without a lot of residency hangups.

And they come each evening from all over—from Detroit and from many of its suburbs. They come to play each other in impromptu games and to play in the Michigan Handball Association tournaments which were held there recently.

Palmer Park may not be the prettiest setting in the area, but then handball isn't a pretty sport.

"It's an animal sport . . . not a pretty sport like tennis," said one sweaty player from Troy.

Ray Kunkel plays at Palmer four or five times a week, even though new handball courts are available just a half mile from his Southfield home.

"All the good players go to Palmer Park," Kunkel said. "The courts in Southfield have some bad things about them. There are some I-beams hanging down. The main thing is that they play all the tournaments at Palmer, and you want to be where the tournaments are played."

Kunkel is a good example of the caliber of players who frequent Palmer Park. He and his partner, Larry Brown, won the state doubles tournament there a few weeks ago.

"The greatest part of this game is that you get a terrific workout in the minimum amount of time," Kunkel said.

"And you only need one other guy to play. You don't have a lot of team arrangements to make."

Summer afternoons mean handball in Palmer Park for this dedicated group. When it rains, the game usually moves down McNichols to the University of Detroit's inside courts.

Photos by  
Craig Newman