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Quick, Timely Reads  
On the Waterfront

**Leonard Tomczak:  
Erie YMCA Legend**

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence  
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*Lenny Tomczak*

I'll begin by saying that I found it odd that I first learned about Leonard "Lenny" Tomczak while I was a graduate student in Ohio. During my first year on the campus of Kent State, I was being mentored as a new handball player by a faculty adviser and professor. He saw me playing paddleball in the gym and invited me to play handball with him. An exceptional player, he was teaching by partnering with him during lunchtime doubles games. He was "carrying" me during those lunchtime contests, and I was learning.

During the winter 1968 term, the school sponsored a faculty-student handball tournament, and after being eliminated in the second round, I came to the final Saturday of the event to watch the finals, plus a pair of exciting and highly publicized exhibition matches. But the story of my handball "career" had begun much earlier.

As a youngster, I was one of the hundreds of rugrats who reported to the Downtown YMCA Boys Division (women were yet to become welcome additions to the Young Men's Christian Association) in Erie, Pennsylvania, every Saturday morning at 9 a.m. At about 8:30, I would hop on the eastbound West Fourth Street bus and head downtown for an exciting, day-long adventure. Clutching the quarter that was to pay for a hot dog, sweet roll, and cardboard container of ice cream, I would exit the bus at the corner of 10th and State streets and walk a block to the corner of 10th and Peach where a line was already forming at the boy's division entrance.

As kids entered, we were divided into two groups, one that would begin in the swimming pool and the other in the gym. Swimmers went right to the pool where they would strip down step into mandatory athlete's-foot baths, and head for the water. The hour was filled with water exercises designed to help us learn to swim, followed by free time, during which we could swim, dive, play tag, or whatever else we wished. The swimmers moved from the pool to the gym after an hour while the gym boys went swimming. In the two gyms, we could either play basketball (10 vs. 10 in the north gym) where there were short (7-foot-high) baskets (total chaos), or alternatively, we could engage in various gymnastic activities in the south gym, including climbing up and down ropes suspended from the ceiling.

I was lousy at rope climbing, thus distractable. Queued-up in the gym and waiting for a turn at the rope, we could hear the magical sound of balls ricocheting off plaster walls. Eventually, many of us managed to sneak away from the gym and follow the sounds to the handball courts. We were just tall enough to peer over the spectator galley walls to watch.

In those days, walls were painted white, players wore all white (other colors were not allowed), and handballs were black. Unlike today's blue handballs, which last

a long time, the old black handballs were only good for a few games, after which they lost their “bounce.” We soon learned that if we hung around next to the handball court doors, players would give us the defunct balls. They were not lively enough for the good players, but they were good enough for us. We stuffed them in our pockets and took them out to bounce whenever we needed to annoy adults. Once in a blue moon, if we had brought them with us to the YMCA, we could sneak into empty handball courts and throw the little black balls around, imagining we were real handball players.

The first thing that I realized about the handball court was that there were not 40 or 50 kids fighting over one basketball, unlike the madness that was happening in the gym. Handball is a solitary (or doubles) game. I loved it!

The final rush for the boys was lunch. For our quarter, we received a coupon that entitled us to hot dogs, ice cream, and a sweet roll, plus a wax container of milk. As might be expected, the YMCA provided an infinite number of cartons of white milk and far fewer cartons of chocolate milk. So, the first frenzied tussle was trying to get one of the prized boxes of chocolate milk. That hardly ever happened to me. With full bellies and hot-dog breath, we exited to the street to find a bus home.



*Thurmon Munson went on to star for the New York Yankees*

Fast forward 20 years. I am standing on the crowded spectator deck at the university watching the finals of the student and then the faculty competition. A single game of 15 for the best two students and two faculty members. Thurmon Munson, who was an All-American catcher on the Kent State University baseball team and had been drafted by the New York Yankees, was the overwhelming winner of the student competition. My faculty adviser, a psychology professor, easily won the faculty competition. But the best was yet to come.



*Jimmy Jacobs evolved from champion handball player to “wheeler dealer”  
and boxing promoter*

Retired handball champion Jimmy Jacobs had arranged a pair of exhibition matches that were scheduled to follow the student and faculty finals after a quick lunch. Jacobs, the master of money-making arrangements, had brought two famous NFL football players to Kent to play handball that day. They were scheduled to play one game of doubles (to 21 points) against the team comprised of faculty and student tournament champions. The celebrity players were Johnny Unitas and George Blanda during an era before multimillion-dollar NFL contracts. They needed to earn extra money in the off-season.

Jacobs, who was not there that day, had worked with a local group, which had managed to raise the money needed to bankroll the exhibition matches. The event was advertised in local and surrounding newspapers and was well-attended. A \$10 ticket was required to be in the gallery and a reception with beer, soft drinks, and snacks was served between the final tournament games and the exhibition matches.



*Johnny Unitas, quarterback for the Baltimore Colts*



*George Blanda, Oakland Raiders quarterback and place kicker*

The major highlight of the day, however, was not to be the Unitas and Blanda match. Following that contest, national handball champion, Paul Haber, was scheduled to play the student-faculty doubles team for a cash prize of \$1,000 (nearly \$10,000 in today's money). The winning team would receive the cash that had been secured by event organizers. As usual, Haber agreed to pay the money if he lost. Haber was crisscrossing the country at the time, playing almost anyone for \$1,000. According to legend, he had never lost. Haber played. Jacobs made the arrangements and took a cut. Haber's opponents were usually local YMCA champions. Not "contenders" in the professional handball sense.

There was to be a 30-minute break between the first exhibition match, Unitas and Blanda versus the school champion faculty and student doubles team. I mostly went to the exhibition to watch my faculty adviser and handball mentor play, so I stayed.



*Paul Haber, long-time professional handball champion*

Watching the finals of the student competition that day, I was amazed at the athletic ability of Thurmon Munson, who won easily. He was in amazing condition, had huge hands, and could put a powerful spin on his serves. I could not imagine he and my mentor/professor losing to a pair of “old” football players who were nearing the end of their careers. Unitas was in his late 30s at the time and George Blanda was 42. Ancient by pro football standards. As the match progressed, however, it became clear that the “elderly” NFL players were going to crush their opponents. The one-game match was over in less than 20 minutes with Unitas and Blanda winning by more than 10 points.

During the match, a crowd gathered near a skinny guy, wearing gym shorts and a white T-shirt. I soon learned that the mystery spectator was none other than Paul Haber, professional handball champion and infamous mercenary challenge match player. At the time, I had no idea who Haber was or what he looked like. Haber, who was scheduled to play the winners of the match, was there to watch his perspective opponents, and perhaps scout for weaknesses. Shifting closer to him, I listened as crazed fans asked questions. One query caught my attention. A spectator asked Haber if the area was known for handball. He replied in the affirmative, citing Youngstown, Ohio; Buffalo; Jamestown, New York; and Erie as hotbeds of handball. Someone asked if there was anyone in the region that he (Haber) would be reluctant to play for \$1,000? The answer shocked me. “There’s a guy in Erie that I would never play for big money,” Haber replied. “He’s a YMCA

player and old, but way too dangerous in a one-game match. His name is Lenny Tomczak.”

After the one-sided game where Unitas and Blanda destroyed the Kent State University champion doubles team, I stuck around to watch Paul Haber in the second exhibition match. After playing with my professor/adviser and watching Thurmon Munson, I could not believe that Haber would be able to compete against them in a “two versus one” game. I was so wrong. The contest began with Munson serving what seemed like an unreturnable rocket down the left wall. Haber somehow lifted the ball out of the corner and returned a lofted shot that hit the ceiling and fell into the back right corner of the court.... unretrievable. Then, taking the serve, Haber ran 10 straight points, taking advantage of the fact that his faculty-student opponents had never played together. He appeared to give away the serve at 10 to 0, after seeming to delight in toying with the hapless opponents. I could not believe that anyone could be so skillful. He then let his opponents score 5 points. The crowd became excited, thinking there might be a chance for the home team.

It was not to be. Haber had been allowing “pity points.” He was taking a break and playing to the gallery. On his second serve in a game of 15 points, Haber unleashed a stunning array of confusing shots, followed by devastating kill shots... when and if his serves were returned. The game ended at 15 to 5. It had never been in question. The exhibition had been “classic Haber.” As I was to learn later, Haber had played countless exhibition money games. Sometimes when he was in New York or Chicago, he and his “arranger,” Jimmy Jacobs, would organize three of four money matches during a single weekend. According to Haber legend, he never lost a match. Also, according to legend, Haber was a bit less than a traditionally conditioned athlete. He drank heavily, caroused during the evenings, and often missed entire nights of sleep.

In 1970, when I began teaching at Gannon University, I joined the Downtown YMCA with a double mission. I wanted to continue learning the game of handball and to watch the legendary Lenny Tomczak. My first chance was on a Saturday afternoon when he was playing one of his traditional weekly money matches. He was primarily a doubles player by that time, reigning local champion, and a national amateur doubles winner. Lenny Tomczak, the man that Paul Haber had called an old guy, was 37 at the time. Haber was only four years younger.

Lenny and his YMCA opponents always played for money, usually a dollar a point, and their games were exciting. There were often 50 or more observers crowded into the gallery and cheering for Erie’s court wizard. I watched and learned. After the games, Lenny would always talk to me in the locker room. I was surprised to learn that he seemed to know a lot about me and that he was interested in me, but I had gone to school with his brothers. He always referred to me as “Doc” when



we chatted, and he never failed to ask about my family. "Family is the most important thing in life," he once told me.

Ten years later, Lenny appeared in the gallery to watch me play. In the sauna after the game, he made a suggestion. "Doc," he said, "you should concentrate on doubles. You can be a really good doubles player." He followed that suggestion with the names of a few Erie players that I should emulate. Lenny and I continued to talk in the locker room, and he seemed interested in my education and that I was a college professor. Lenny Tomczak held education in high regard, insisting that his children go to college and continued to ask my advice regarding college for his children and potential majors.

A high point in my handball career came when I was 50. My game had advanced while Lenny's was in decline. Then one day, and unexpectedly, he invited me to play as his partner in a Saturday doubles match. I was delighted. As the game progressed, however, I was embarrassing myself. Missing easy shots, stretching to take balls that Lenny should have been shooting instead, and generally playing badly. Lenny called a time out and motioned me into the back of the court for a counseling session. I'll never forget what he said.

"Look, Doc," he began, "you're thinking too much. This is a simple game. Look at the ball, hit the ball, and don't aim or worry about where the ball is going. It will automatically go where you want if you don't think about it. Don't think!" Who knew that Lenny was a practicing Buddhist? "And one more thing," he added. "Take your left hand and stick it up your a--."

We won that game handily.

It was not the last time that we played together. When we played, my job was to run around (saving Lenny's legs), return opponent's shots, and keep volleys going until the other team made the mortal error of hitting a ball that bounced off the back wall. Lenny would then deliver devastating kill shots, the handball skill that had made him a legend.

There was another attribute that contributed to Lenny's legend at the YMCA: Smoking. He was a Camel man. No "sissy filters" for him. Even after there were strict locker room rules prohibiting the practice, Lenny continued, somehow managing to light up and sneak a quick drag inside his locker just before a match. Sometimes he paused between games to step out of the court, light up, and take few puffs. If you asked, he would tell you never to smoke, but he continued to the end.

One Saturday after we had played and won a game of doubles, Lenny stopped at my locker on his way to the sauna (he would famously sit in the sauna for extended periods after each match). My next-door locker mate and good friend, Bob "Moose" Kaczinski, was sitting on a bench next to me, commenting on the match



that he had watched from the gallery. Lenny approached us on his way to the sauna, greeted us, and shockingly invited both of us to his home for dinner the next Friday. We were stunned.

The next week, promptly at 6 p.m., we both arrived and were greeted by Lenny and his wife who had prepared a wonderful meal. Lenny introduced us as friends from the YMCA and “quality people.” He was quick to note that we were Catholics and good family men. Lenny was a devout Catholic who faithfully attended Sunday mass at Holy Trinity Parish. The meal included meat loaf, mashed potatoes, vegetables, and fresh pie for dessert.

The last time I saw Lenny was at his brother Jerry Tomczak’s funeral in 2010. Jerry was also a YMCA locker room legend. His locker was just a few feet from mine, and we had become great friends over the years. I was sad to hear of Jerry’s passing and went to the funeral home. Approaching Slomski’s, I found Lenny sitting on the front steps, smoking. It was the first time that I had seen him in several years. As I lowered myself to the steps next to Lenny, I saw that his cigarette had burned its way down to his fingers. In fact, it had begun to burn his skin. When I admonished him for burning himself, he said that he had to sneak cigarettes since he was supposed to have quit. I begged him to put that one out, but he responded, saying that he had just bummed it and was not ready to give it up.

“Lenny, please put it out, and I will get you a fresh pack,” I argued.

I loaded Lenny into my car, drove to a nearby convenience store, and purchased a new pack.

“Camels,” he said as I got out of the car.

He tucked the new pack into his pocket and as I dropped him off at Slomski’s, he said, “God bless you, Doc.”

It was the last thing that he ever said to me.

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- 1. Lenny Tomczak passed away in 2015 at the age of 82. He was at St. Mary’s Home when he finally died and a model resident who attended daily mass in the chapel. A model resident except for one issue. He was often chastised for sneaking cigarettes, which were forbidden at St. Mary’s.*
  - 2. Paul Haber eventually fell victim to his outrageous lifestyle. He stopped playing by the end of the 1970s and died at the age of 66. Near the peak of his prowess, he played an exhibition game against the national racquetball champion, defeating the squeaky-clean dentist/athlete in*

*three games. The racquetball player was allowed to use a racquet, but the game was played with a handball.*

- 3. Jimmy Jacobs slowly drifted toward boxing, ultimately becoming Mike Tyson's first manager. He died of leukemia in 1988.*
- 4. George Blanda, who credited handball with his conditioning and long football career, played until he was 48 years old. He objected to people who called him a place kicker, noting that he was a two-way player for much of his career, an offensive quarterback and defensive linebacker. At age 43, he threw several touchdown passes for the Oakland Raiders, including one to Erie's Fred Biletnikoff. He passed away in 2010.*
- 5. Johnny Unitas played 18 seasons in the NFL and won four championships, including one of the first super bowls. Despite his dominance, the most he ever made as a football player was \$250,000 per season. He passed away in 2002.*
- 6. Thermon Munson played 11 seasons with the New York Yankees and was a major league all-star. He died in 1979 in a tragic small airplane crash while practicing take-offs and landings at a small airport in Ohio.*

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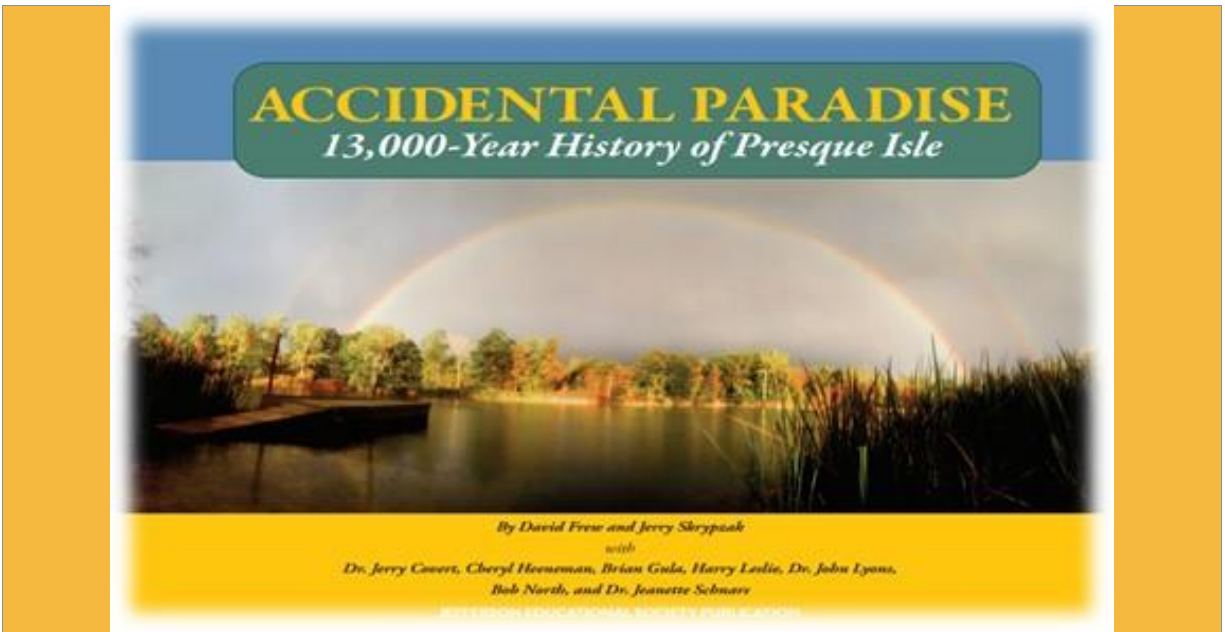
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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