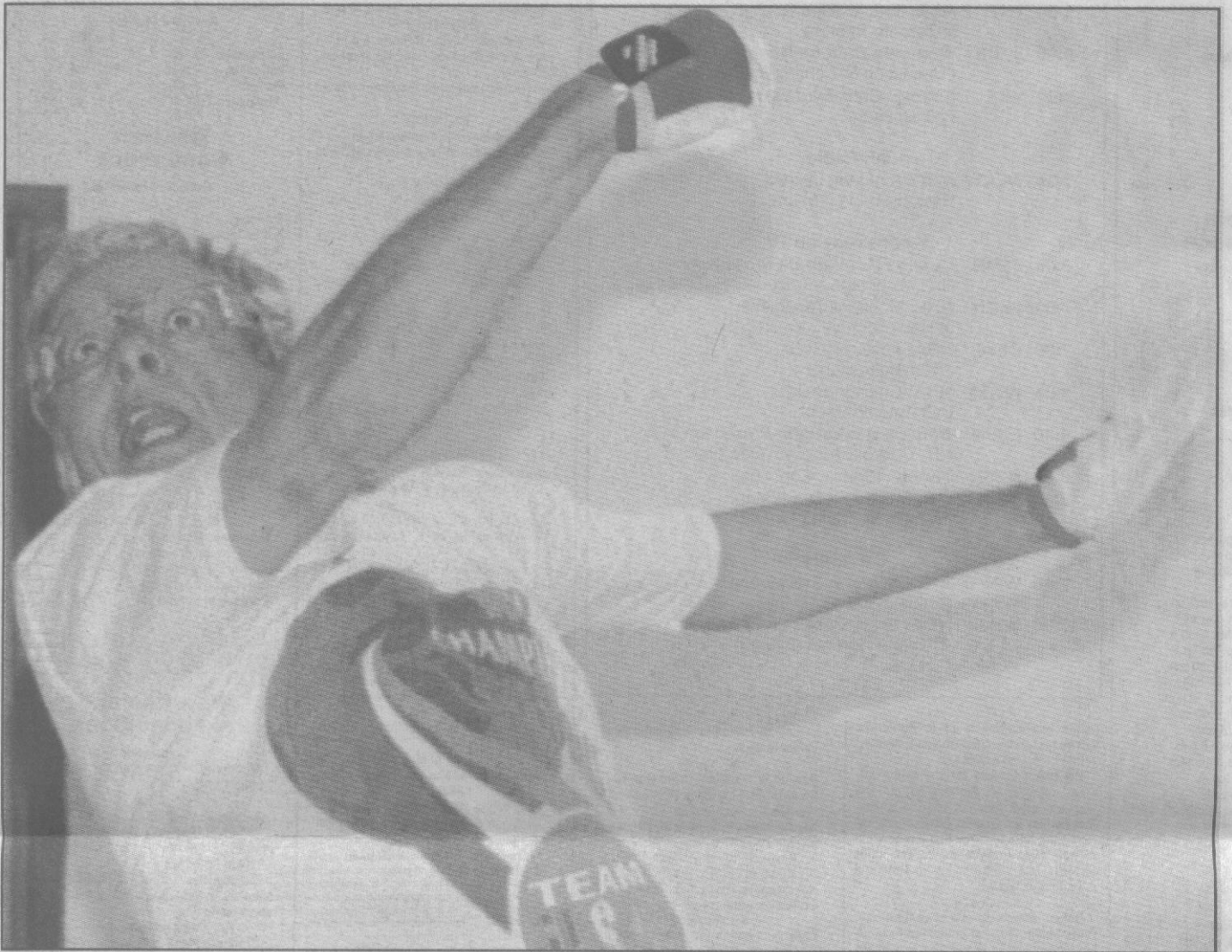


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Sports

SECTION B



David Hansen/Daily News photos

Newport's Roland Chase makes a return during a handball game at the Newport County YMCA. Chase, 61, is one of a few dedicated handball players on Aquidneck Island.

Keeping a hand in game

Local handball enthusiasts are dedicated to the sport

By Rick McGowan
Daily News staff

MIDDLETOWN — Appropriately-named Roland Chase has been following the bouncing ball for nearly half a century, from Farewell Street to the Midwest to the West Coast to Germany to upstate New York before making the carom home to Aquidneck Island.

You can find him patrolling the courts at the Newport County YMCA at 7 a.m. and at noon as many as four times a week. This Newport lawyer is the local guru of a half-dozen or so handball enthusiasts who have been competing among themselves here for more than a decade. They play singles, doubles and a version known as "cutthroat", which has the server playing against two others on a rotating-serve basis.

"We say racquetball players use our courts," says Chase with a laugh. "They're both the same size, 20-by-40 feet."

Handball, as the name implies, is played without a racquet. The ball is smaller,

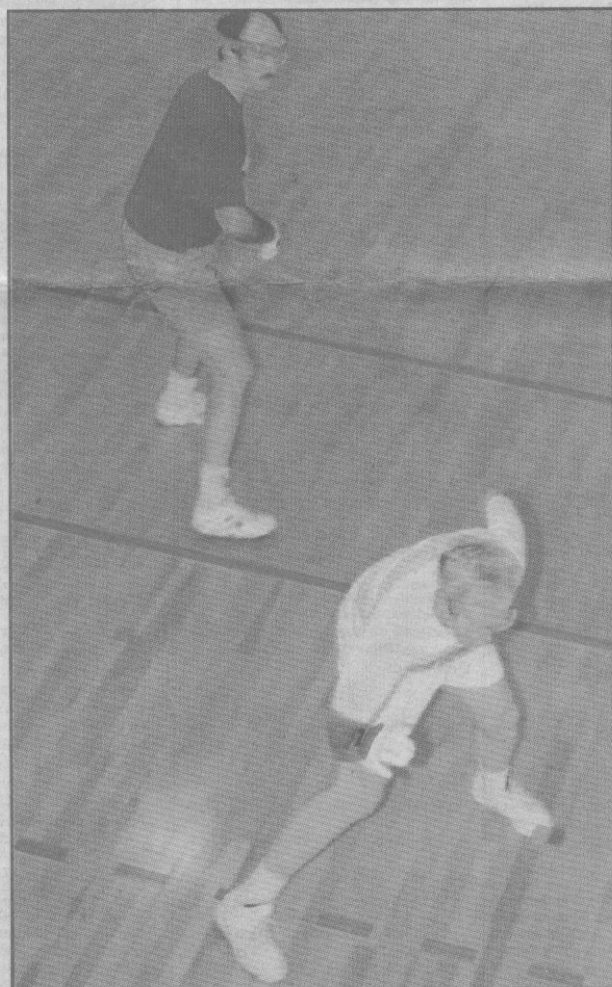
harder and heavier than the one used in racquetball. It is bigger and heavier than a squash ball.

It's a game especially popular in urban areas, where it is often played outdoors using just one wall. The game can have one, three or four walls. The four-wall game — played by the locals at the YMCA — is the most popular.

Chase learned handball at school. It wasn't part of the normal curriculum. He was a young teenager in 1947 when the old Mumford School found itself with an added bit of recreation. "Some kind soul fixed a one-wall handball court by blocking a window," recalls Chase.

One didn't have to go to school to pick up the finer points of handball around here in those days. "A lot of guys in Newport used to play," says Chase. "For a time they had handball at Easton's Beach, a one-wall court. And the old YMCA on Mary Street had tiny

HANDBALL, Page B5



Chase returns a shot while playing with John Grant, left, and Richard Updegrove, not pictured.

Handball

Continued from Page B1

indoor courts and four-wall courts outdoors with screening."

Chase continued to play in college at Wheaton in Illinois, at the University of California-Berkeley in law school and in San Diego when he was in the Navy. This native Newporter found courts in Germany and also during his seven years in Rochester, N.Y., before returning home after two decades.

"I've never not been playing for more than a year or so," he says, adding with a smile, "It's the best game. You're using both sides of your body. You don't have a club or paddle in one hand. You develop your left as well as your right side. You use all your muscles.

"I like to play games where you score points. I'm not much for walking. (Chase plays pickup basketball once a week at the Roger Williams University, where he teaches). You can get a good workout in handball in 45 minutes or an hour, where in golf or something you have to play longer.

"You have all the exercises, I think, the stretching, the running, everything you use in everything else."

Including the head. Chase loves the strategy and thinking involved. "I think it's the chess of court games," he says. "Squash is faster. You have to have better reflexes. And in racquetball you can hit the ball faster because you have a club. But you can do things in handball you can't do in racquetball and squash. You can hook the

ball to make it jump one way or the other, which introduces a whole new element into the game."

Handball also differs because of the gloves on both hands. "We don't have padded gloves," says Chase. "Most of us don't like the padding because you lose some of the feeling and touch."

Chase's gloves appear padded. "They're not," he says, peeling back the velcro patch to reveal a firm, meaty palm. "See? Just me. I've got that hard hand. My right gets a little tougher from a little more wear and tear."

He smiles again. "My wife says I have rough hands."

His foes say this 61-year-old has a polished game. "Roland's tough," says Richard Updegrave, another local lawyer moments after playing "cutthroat" with Chase and John Grant, a Naval Undersea Warfare Center employee from Jamestown. "He's probably the best. He can spin the ball off the serves. He can do everything. He's probably an A level player for his age group. He keeps us going."

Updegrave, Chase and a few others are the nucleus of a group that has been playing at the YMCA since the early 1980s. They've seen courts turned into weight rooms when the racquetball craze waned.

Updegrave is a convert from racquetball. "This is better because you get to use both hands," he says. "In racquetball you can wait, but there's really no waiting here. You have to go to the ball all the time or you miss it because it doesn't bounce as much. The learning curve is very long

because you have to use both hands. Guys who play racquetball pick it up quickly, but it still takes about a year."

Updegrave wishes the local group could increase its base. "I just wish more people would play," he says. "But our games get your heart going. Everybody knows where everybody's going to be, so the games are really very intense."

Chase estimates there are only 20 Rhode Islanders who are members of the U.S. Handball Association. "There are about 3,000 in California, maybe 8,000 or 9,000 in the country," says Chase, "but there are more than that playing."

Chase remembers when there were a dozen active local players and when three courts would be occupied. "We're at a low point now because a few players have moved away."

And others — such as lawyers Bob Silva and Joe Palumbo — have been spending more time playing "cutthroat" on other courts.

"It gets old playing the same people every week," shouts Updegrave to a spectator after a grueling point.

"Old" isn't an operative word in handball.

"The last issue of Handball Magazine had a picture of a guy 90 years old still playing," says Chase as he adjusts his eye-protection goggles before re-entering a court. "They run age-group tournaments up to 75, so I've got a long way to go."