

## Interview of “Alley Cracker – The Story of Handball” Director and Narrator – Ben Thum

The game of handball has been associated with the Elks for more than a century. . . At one time handball was a highly popular game in the United States with players numbering in the millions. Today the game is still popular in the larger population centers such as New York, Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area. One of our lodge members, filmmaker Ben Thum, is a longtime handball player and promoter of the sport. Some years back he proposed to the game’s governing body, the U.S. Handball Association, that a documentary film about the origins of the sport be produced to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its American debut. The USHA, along with Simple Green, Inc, raised the funds to make this landmark film that first aired on the ESPN sports network in 2000. A colorful poster originally created to promote the film was recently installed adjacent to the handball courts. We asked Ben to talk about his experience producing the film (which can be seen in its entirety on the Palo Alto Elks website).

Phil Palmer: What made you decide to make this film?

Ben Thum: It’s no secret that handball’s early popularity has waned in recent years. As a lifelong player who wanted to give back something to the game that has given me so much. I decided it was time to make a little noise about handball. This game has an amazing history with origins stretching back to the Greeks and Romans. I felt the story was compelling enough to interest a major sports network.

PP: So what was your first step?

BT: Convincing the U.S. Handball Association that a documentary could help them to promote the game and breathe new life into a moribund sport.

PP: How did that go?

BT: It was no slam-dunk, that’s for sure. There was surprising resistance at first. But over time I was able to advance the notion, or maybe just wore them down. They eventually provided some seed money which allowed us to begin research. To my surprise we discovered the first handball courts in America were built in 1850 or ‘51 in San Francisco and were attached to Irish pubs in and around the Market Street area.

PP: So the Irish were big handball players?

BT: Indeed. The game was very popular in Ireland for hundreds of years before coming to America possibly as early as 1849 when thousands of Irishmen migrated to California at the start of the Gold Rush. By 1851 the San Francisco Business Directory listed several Irish pubs, two of which were described as having handball courts, or handball ‘alleys’ as the Irish called them.

PP: Who worked on the film with you?

BT: Kelley Greene was an admitted co-conspirator. We became friends years ago at a summer handball camp in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Kelley later became a video editor in Austin, Texas and I knew he was an avid student of the game and its history. So when the time came to put the production team together Kelley was the first person I called. His credentials were impressive. A former standout handball player at the University of Texas, a workaholic with exceptional video editing skills, and like me, a willingness to work out of a passion for the game and its fascinating history. Handball historian Tom O’Connor of Ireland was also a key contributor.

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PP: Did you do any shooting in Ireland?

BT: It would have been impossible to do justice to the film without traveling to Ireland and capturing the spirit and passion of the players and the stone alleyways that gave birth to the modern game of handball. In the small village of Yougallara, for example, we came across a very old and deserted 30X60 court literally sunk into a graveyard next to the ruins of a Catholic church. Our guide explained that on Sundays after services the men would wend their way through the headstones and descend down into the court where they would play for hours. We walked onto that court, closed our eyes and imagined the sound of the Alleycracker ball ricocheting off those ancient stonewalls. This was but one example of how Handball is woven into the social fabric of Ireland in a way that I have seen nowhere else.

PP: Why did they call the ball an ‘Alleycracker’ instead of a handball?

BT: In those days before rubber could be processed into a sphere, the Irish handball was similar in feel and bounce to a miniature baseball. The innards were made out of wool, short pieces of rubber, and a piece of rosewood in the center. The outer cover was usually made from goatskin and stitched a bit like a baseball. When hit against the stone alleyways it produced a cracking sound that reverberated around the walls of the court, or alley. Hence the name ‘Alley Cracker.’

PP: What surprised you most during the making of the film?

BT: There were many surprises, like the time someone walked up to me as I was watching a match at the New York Athletic Club. He asked if I was the guy making a film about handball. I said yes. He then handed me a film canister and said I would be interested in the contents. That turned out to be quite an understatement. Turns out he owned the original camera footage from the legendary ‘Hands against the Racquet’ match, a one-off event that pitted Paul Haber, the world’s top ranked handball player of that era, against the top-ranked racquetball player, Dr. Bud Muehelheisen. I had heard about this match through the handball grapevine but until then did not know the match had been filmed.

PP: So in a Hands vs. Racquet match I would imagine the racquetball player had the advantage based on the much greater speed he could put on the ball.

BT: well, let’s just say it was a most interesting match and it attracted quite a few gambling types, I’m told. My interview with Paul Haber explores that in detail. Perhaps we should leave something to the imagination for those who want to see how things played out.

PP: Fair enough. I should mention again that “Alleycracker: The Story of Handball,” can now be seen on the Palo Alto Elks website on the Physical Fitness page. So, Ben, you said there were many surprises while making the film.

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BT: One was learning about great historical figures that played The Game. There was King James The First of Scotland. Folklore has it the King was a big fan of the sport, so much so that it may have cost him his life. His private court was located in the cellar of his castle. There was a window that interfered with the ball so the king had it sealed and smoothed over to blend into the wall. A short time later, when assassins attacked him, this potential escape route was unavailable and the King was murdered in the castle cellar. Then there was a United States Senator from Illinois by the name of Abraham Lincoln. According to his law partner, William Herndon, Lincoln loved the game and was a fine player able to return balls easily due to his long legs and powerful shoulders. One of Lincoln’s handballs, discovered in a drawer at his home in Springfield, is on display at the Smithsonian museum in Washington, D.C. We also learned the original Mercury Seven astronauts all were taught the game. NASA officials insisted they learn to play as part of their physical training for the rigors of navigating outer space.

PP: Wow, that’s an impressive collection of VIP’s. I’ve heard there were a number of celebrities who played the game. Can you name a few?

BT: Sure. When Handball was at its height of popularity, from the 1920’s to the 1960’s, millions of Americans played the game regularly. Silent movie superstar Harold Lloyd built an indoor court at his Beverly Hills estate. Television personality Art Linkletter told us he would be invited to play with Lloyd and was always surprised to see a good number of Hollywood stars that came to play or watch the action, including Charlie Chaplin and W. C. Fields. Comedian Bill Cosby took up the game while attending Temple University. One of his albums features a monolog about Cosby losing to an old man who he thought would be a pushover.

PP: And didn’t Al Bundy, the star of “Married With Children” play handball?

BT: Well...in a way. You’re referring to the actor Ed O’Neil who played the character ‘Al Bundy’ on that show. Ed was a very skilled athlete and could often be seen playing three-wall handball on the courts at Venice Beach.

PP: You worked with Ed O’Neil in a Handball match made for TV. What was that like?

BT: It was a delightful experience. I was producing a pro handball match for SportsChannel America and contacted Ed in hopes he would lend a hand as an on-camera commentator. Ed was friendly with one of the players, a 17-year-old phenomenon by the name of David Chapman. This was the first time handball would be seen on a national TV network and we were fortunate to have Ed’s star power working for us.

PP: I should mention that match can be seen on the Palo Alto Elks website. So did you work for SportsChannel at the time?

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BT: No. The match came about out of a sense that professional handball players, who are among the most gifted all-around athletes, deserved to be more widely recognized for their skills. I knew many of these guys and the struggles they faced trying to make ends meet as they traveled the country on their so-called ‘Pro Tour.’ Here you had first-rate athletic talent performing for peanuts. If you won a pro tournament you might make 3 or 4 grand. After expenses and taxes you were looking at more like a thousand bucks or so. If you finished out of the top two or three you often wound up with a financial loss just to be in the tournament. Meanwhile, a pro baseball or football player of strictly average ability would pocket more than ten times that amount in one game with all expenses picked up by the team owners. It really fried my bacon that no one was looking out for our pro players. These are the guys who inspire young kids to take up the game. They deserve better.

PP: So how much prize money was on the line in this match, and where did it come from?

BT: The total was \$7,500. Five thousand for the winner and \$2,500 for second place; the money was put up by Chatten Hayes, a great handball ambassador, and myself. It may not sound like much but it was the biggest pro handball payday for a single match up to that time. The players were thrilled with the purse and the chance to show their stuff on prime time network TV. Sports Channel executives claimed we had a reach of more than 20 million households.

PP: So were there other televised matches after this one?

BT: Yes, but it’s a long story best told over a pitcher of beer in the Elks lounge, which I hope we’ll be getting to very shortly.

PP: I’m sure we will, but back to the documentary for a minute. Since the game is less popular today than in the past did you find it difficult getting a television network to air a film about handball?

BT: Well, let’s just say it was not an easy sell. We shopped it around to several sports networks and when a glimmer of interest appeared at ESPN we established a dialog with their programming guys and eventually convinced them that having the world premiere of one of the world’s oldest ball games on their network would be a good thing.

PP: How did you become a filmmaker?

BT: My background was in radio and television broadcasting, originally as a music radio personality in New York and San Francisco, later switching to television news as a feature reporter for the NBC affiliate in L.A. I began to do side work as a voice-over actor and was hired by producers to narrate films. That’s when America learned about the process of telling stories through film and began to feel this was a career path I wanted to pursue.

PP: Are you working on a film project at the moment?

BT: My Company, Aurora Filmworks, is currently developing a storyline for a film about the impact Jewish comedians and comedy writers have had on the face of American comedy. The idea was sparked by an article I read in Time about how Jewish Americans account for less than 2% of the U.S. population and yet they comprise 80% of the comedy industry. What’s the deal with that, I wondered.

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PP: That’s a pretty intriguing statistic. Have you come up with any answers yet?

BT: Still working on it. But the aim is not to be preachy. We want to develop some ideas on the phenomenon of Jewish comedians and then let the audience decide for themselves.

PP: Have you talked with any of the great Jewish comedy figures yet?

BT: Indeed we have. Thanks to a grant from Steven Spielberg we were able to film interviews with about twenty comedians and writers who were quite articulate and opinionated on the subject.

PP: Who are some of the people you’ve interviewed?

BT: They range from actors and comedians like Carl Reiner, Sid Caesar, Jerry Stiller and Shelley Berman to writers like Larry Gelbart, (M\*A\*S\*H\*, Tootsie, etc.) Marshall Brickman, (‘Annie Hall’) and a bunch of other comedy standouts. Dick Van Dyke, who is not Jewish, had some very interesting thoughts on the subject, as did CBS News correspondent Mike Wallace. Their comments will likely make the final cut.

PP: When do you expect we can see this film?

BT: Probably not for another year or two. This is a large undertaking that spans more than 100 years of American history. More research needs to be done, more interviews need to be filmed, and more investors need to be acquired.

PP: If our members want to know more about the project is there a web site you can direct them to?

BT: We’ve created an entertaining website at [www.agiftforlaughter.com](http://www.agiftforlaughter.com) which includes a demo trailer explaining how the story will be told.

PP: Excellent. Are there any other film projects in mind once this film is completed?

BT: I’ve been thinking about a documentary exploring the rich and colorful origins of Elks in America; not those found in the wild, but the kind found at our bar, bistro and handball courts.

PP: No kidding? Now that’s a film I would definitely go to see.

BT: Me too! And hopefully a million or so Elks just like us. But that’s a project down the road a ways, whereas the Jolly Corks Lounge is just around the corner, correct?

PP: I get your drift, Ben, and thanks very much for the interview. Let me buy the first round.

BT: OK. But only because you insist, and also because you are such a jolly fellow! You don’t look Jewish but sometimes it’s hard to tell.