

BY **DAN LEVIN**

Originally Posted: **February 7, 1972**

It was a sporting first, the match they played last week in Memphis; as one excited Memphian observed the day before, "This is like Joe Frazier fighting Terry Daniels—except this time Daniels has a 17-inch nightstick." The stick he spoke of was a racquet, the kind used in racquetball, and its owner was the game's best player, a 40-year-old San Diego dentist named E.F. (Bud) Muehleisen, who kept saying—he really did—things like, "My big vice is ice cream. My friends call me Straight Arrow." The Frazier figure was Chicago's Paul Haber, a man who takes a drink or eight, has been known to wink at a girl and is the world's best handball player.

Thus the Muehleisen-Haber match was important on several levels; symbolically, for instance, it was Mr. Clean meets the Devil. "Hands Against the Racquet," it was more tamely billed, but it was indeed a first. There hadn't been anything remotely comparable in, say, a millennium or two, at least not since Spartacus and the slaves made it nets and tridents against swords and shields. Games got a little specialized after that, what with franchises and baskets and goalies, so that was about it for intrasports rivalry, except for an occasional boxer-wrestler freak show. Haber-Muehleisen was another story, a roughly equal test of different skills in two similar sports. Mr. Clean and the Devil represented games as much alike as any two could be, both played in the same little rectangular room by virtually the same rules, but one man was going to have a racquet and the other two gloved hands.

As the week progressed, bets began to come into Memphis from San Diego and Chicago, and it soon became evident that each set of backers knew the obvious: There was no way its man could lose. The big technical imponderable was the question of the ball. Muehleisen had the racquet's reach, it had been reasoned, so Haber was allowed his higher-bouncing handball. Otherwise, with the softer, larger racquetball, he would be as helpless as an empty-handed tennis player. No one argued the point, and this left each man with one seemingly overwhelming advantage: the 35-year-old Haber's 28 years' experience with the handball and the crazy spinning bounces he could impart to it against the dentist's added leverage, reach and extra power.

Muehleisen said, "My strongest point is the ball speed I can attain with the racquet, and Haber doesn't understand my ability to control the handball." He had played a few times recently with some fair handball men. "But they weren't Haber," the handball people kept saying. There was another thing: Haber's very real aura of invincibility. He had lost to a lot of handball players, having come drunk to the court or playing halfheartedly, but he had never lost a really big match. Jimmy Jacobs, six times national four-wall champion, said, "Haber doesn't have a racquet, but the ball determines the game, and you never try to beat a man at his own game. Muehleisen may hit that ball 200 miles an hour, but Paul will just step aside and pick it off the back wall."

The man who brought the match to Tennessee was DeWitt Shy, the wealthy 49-year-old president of the Memphis Racquetball Association.

"Hi. I'm DeWitt Shy," he would say, all pinstripes and big bills, and then he would proceed to drawl on about why Muehleisen couldn't lose. "Haber's experience with the handball would be a factor if Doctor Bud had never played with it, but he has. And he can move it twice as fast as Haber can. Why, he can knock that little ball through the wall."

Haber himself was not about to become bashful after all these years. "Muehleisen may have developed a wicked, low, bulletlike serve and volley," he said, "but they'll be straight as arrows. And if he thinks he can read my hops, well, he's just got another think coming."

"If he ever gets to hop it, that is," Muehleisen said. "Haber will be put on the defensive. The pace of play will be extremely new to him. He may be in better shape than me, and at 35 he's younger"—all the Haber people mentioned that—"but the racquet requires minimal effort to propel the ball, and I can conserve energy while he's running all over the court."

Ultimately Haber and Muehleisen began to wind up their little speeches with a prediction—first from Haber and then, with two or three days to go, from Muehleisen, too. "When I get through with him," Haber said, "he'll be happy to crawl back to San Diego and stay with his one-handed game and the soft ball."

This kind of thing embarrassed Muehleisen, and as the days passed, word of the stepped-up betting bothered him even more. He would say, "I don't care if they don't bet cent one on this thing. I just want to promote my sport." And though he knew it sounded pompous, he added, sincerely enough, "You must understand, in the world of racquetball I'm thought of as the white knight, the epitome of sportsmanship and manners." But finally he couldn't resist. He pulled out four sheets of paper he had covered in longhand, containing his analysis of the match. In 20 categories he had rated himself and his opponent with point values from 1 to 10, and the totals gave him a 154-134 edge. At the bottom of one sheet he had written this all-encompassing goal: "To defeat, destroy, annihilate and possibly even humiliate Paul Haber and thereby end the hands-over-racquet myth." Then he added, "I'm not a cocky type like Haber, but I'm gonna blow him off the court."

All of these Haber-Muehleisen exchanges were delivered second hand. Muehleisen wanted it that way, and Haber had no choice, since he didn't know where Muehleisen was. Muehleisen, on arrival in Memphis, had temporarily changed his name to Frank Jones, registered that way at his motel and sworn everyone to secrecy. "Haber's liable to keep me up all night before the match," he explained. "I don't usually do things like this, but when you've been around Haber as I have been...."

Last July, when Haber was coming to San Diego for an exhibition, he called Muehleisen—collect—to suggest a handball-racquetball match that weekend, to be played for money. Muehleisen said no, but in San Diego, he says, "Haber was telling people that when we played I wouldn't get five points." Once back in Chicago, after he had all but taken apart a San Diego nightclub and had been escorted to his seat by the police, Haber began telling people to get their money together, that he would double it for them. He called Muehleisen again about a match. At last Muehleisen agreed, "mainly for the exposure of racquetball," he said, but there were those who thought Mr. Clean had been shamed into it.

In Memphis, with three days to go, Haber was acting oddly. He hadn't had a hard drink in a week, and he was gulping coffee. "I'm really on edge for this one," he said. "I've never played for bigger money."

As for Muehleisen, either he knew something or he was popping Valium. With 48 hours to go, he went off for the day with a long-lost Memphis uncle. They

drove around Elvis Presley's house and Muehleisen bought a picture of it for 50¢, after which he asked to be driven by Marguerite Piazza's place. That evening, however, he took a pair of dental forceps from his drawer. "If Haber pulls anything," he said, "I'll take these out and say, 'Paul, if you get in my way these are to extract the ball from your head.' " (At last year's handball nationals, Muehleisen knew, Haber had placed two doughnuts outside his court before the finals. "Those'll be your scores," he told his opponent, "and you can eat them for lunch.")

Then there was no time left. More than \$30,000 was reportedly on the line. Haber was saying, "I'd love to arrange to make it close and maybe get a rematch in San Diego, but it's unthinkable. If I ever lost that way, I'd probably wind up in the morgue." And DeWitt Shy was crooning, "You all are gonna be viewing one of the most historic events ever to take place in sports."

Paul Haber was chewing gum wildly. Bud Muehleisen was as grim as an executioner. Neither had said much of anything to anyone since breakfast. Oblivious to friends, to each other, alone, they crouched through the low door, and behind the court's glass walls heartbeats were suddenly audible in 350 pairs of ears.

Thunk. Muehleisen's serve shot out low and hard. One, two, three, four quick ones for as many points. He was serving deliberately, almost jerkily, setting his feet and the arc of his racquet as if he had programmed every move. Haber chewed faster. "He's uptight," someone said after the first rally had ended with a kill shot of a ceiling ball, Haber's best shot, for Muehleisen's fifth straight point. Six, seven it went. Would Haber even get a chance? Eight, nine—the carefully chosen words came back, "My secret weapon is my serve. Ideally executed, it's unreturnable." Was this how it would end? Would Haber do anything? One of his backers said, "He's like a batter getting adjusted to the fastball," but his adjustment in game one ended with point 10, against 21 for Muehleisen, who had predicted 21-14. Muehleisen shrugged and smiled knowingly toward a group of his California friends.

After the two-minute break Haber came back arrogantly with a cool sneer and an order for the referee. "I want everyone down in the gallery or I don't play." When the spectators finally sat and play began, Muehleisen's serves were a trifle high. The difference between his "ideally executed" serve and a weak one was a matter of perhaps two degrees in the angle of the racquet,

but now Haber was hitting that fastball some. And it was the kind of ball he had played with all his life. He was perceptibly gaining the offensive, and his serves came off the wall enticingly. They were slower than Muehleisen's, but they hit the floor and lurched upward at Silly Putty angles. Muehleisen returned them, but too carefully, defensively and weakly.

For a long scoreless stretch at 16-15, Haber's lead, they countered each other's strengths, Haber's hopping ball against the Californian's quick one and his reach. Haber was having to run more than Muehleisen—twice he fell to the floor—and he seemed the more tired, but Muehleisen's backhand game had all but collapsed. He was missing the ceiling shots he had murdered in Game One, and Haber evened the series 21-15. "Remember, whoever controls the ball..." Muehleisen had repeated all week, but his control was paper thin; it was intelligently planned, but planning had begun little more than a month before. Muehleisen's game was growing shoddy; Haber, on the other hand, could hardly move. There seemed no way either man could win the rubber game. Later, as he sat with a bleeding knee, Haber would call it "maybe the most exciting game ever played on a handball court."

At the start of the final game Muehleisen seemed to fall apart. There was no kind of easy shot he didn't miss—sure kills with Haber out of position, simple backhands, overhands off the wall—and soon he was all but dead and buried, 17 points to none. It was a sad thing to watch. Maybe it was the lights, but his hairline appeared to be receding minute by minute. He held on, though, and then he won two points. Haber just couldn't handle that, and he went into his act designed to harass, infuriate and intimidate both his opponent and the referee, but basically to stall for time. With what Haber had left, two points was a juggernaut rolling toward victory, and he started off with his ball routine. There was something wrong with the ball, he wasn't sure what, so he let the ref have a look, a good one. They played catch for a while, giving the ball a thorough five- or six-minute inspection before Haber decided it looked fine after all.

Meanwhile, Muehleisen was digging back into 40 years of clean living and coming up with hidden reserves. Haber made it 18-2 after resting the ball, but then Mr. Clean won the serve and made it 18-3, 18-4, 18-5, 18-6—Haber's eyes were rolling—18-7, 18-8, 18-9, 18-10, 18-11. Haber called time out, huddled fetally on the floor and came up with—ripped glove? Of course, he had to leave the court for a new pair. He closed the door and collapsed on the

floor outside for a minute or two. Back inside, he seemed hardly able to get the gloves on, they were so small; he showed the ref how much trouble he was having, and that took another minute or two. When play resumed he made it 19-11, lost the serve and punched the wall, after which Muehleisen scored two points.

One hopes the television crew on hand filmed the next sequence. Handball players everywhere should see it, as well as acrobats, gymnasts, Ripley and President Nixon. Four times Muehleisen hit shots that were clearly beyond any mortal's ability to come near, and four times Haber dived, gyrated and flipped to return them. Muehleisen served again, and it was 19-14, 19-15, and Haber was arguing again with the referee. The ball had hit the recessed door handle, he shouted, but it was explained to Haber, who had played handball before, that there had been no decision about "court hinders" made before the match.

Haber served, and it was 20-15. Then Muehleisen got it up to 20-16, and Haber shouted that he had hit him with his racquet. The referee looked inquiringly at Muehleisen, the latter nodded yes, he had, and the point was taken away. Now it was Haber's serve. As the ball was volleyed back to Haber, Muehleisen, caught flatfooted and disoriented, couldn't get out of his way, and the referee called an "avoidable hinder," giving Haber point 21—game, match and the pent-up antipathy of at least the racquetball people present. A few of them wept, and even Haber's followers hated to see it end that way.

Outside, Haber talked about "the rematch, for six figures, in San Diego." He said that physically this had been the toughest day of his career and that no other handball player alive could beat Muehleisen. Then someone mentioned the Frazier, Daniels, nightstick line.

"Yes," Haber said, "if he'd used the racquet as a nightstick I might have been in trouble."