

How I Didn't Become a Priest—Playing (a) Sport in the Seminary
by
Bill Batkay

I hate sports.

My attitude derived from an incident in my childhood involving a baseball bat. Still, my father went to great lengths to get me onto a court, field or track, with a notable lack of success.

All the more unexpected, then, that my two years at Glen Ellyn served as the arena in which I discovered the joy of playing sports; or, rather, a single minor sport, handball. As I had anticipated during my first interview for admittance to the seminary, there were boys—mostly shorter, smaller boys—who tried to lure me onto the football field or the basketball court. I successfully resisted. Yet, desperately wanting to be “one of the guys,” I looked for some team sport that I could tolerate and that would get my classmates off my back.

Handball fit the bill.

Maryknoll had a set of contiguous cement handball courts, with a common back wall divided into four individual playing spaces by partial triangular side walls. These courts were set off by themselves in the field, framed by a stand of fir trees behind the main building. The game itself, similar to racquetball but without rackets, was played either one-on-one, or doubles. The first I found too exhausting; the latter much less so, since one had to do only half the work. Still, the need to coordinate one's play with one's partner in a very

small space could be quite challenging. I discovered that I was good at team play, a brand-new experience for me, who had always been something of a loner growing up.

What was the attraction of handball specifically? I suspect it was the endorphin-fueled rush of a hard fought game, as well as the peculiar camaraderie we enjoyed as players of a niche sport. The courts were about a third the size of a tennis court, so avoiding crashing into the other players was a constant anxiety. The ball was a hard blue rubber sphere, about twice the size of a golf ball. Most of us learned pretty quickly that smacking it with the palm of the hand hurt much less when we wore special soft suede gloves.

This ball made a distinctive sharp THWUPPP when slammed against the front wall by the server. He stood behind a red stripe at the back of the floor. The play was lightening-fast, demanding the ability to pivot sharply and suddenly, as well as a high level of hand-eye coordination. And stamina, a lot of stamina: a game could last a half hour of non-stop all-out exertion.

I played almost every weekend in warm weather, and I loved it. Not knowing who I was going to play with on a given day was, I think, part of the excitement. I was pleased when I had a skilled partner whom I also liked, less so when paired with a less-skilled one or with somebody whose company I enjoyed less. Still, for perhaps the first time in my life, I felt that I belonged, that I was good at something other than academics, a more "guy" thing. I relished that very fine feeling.