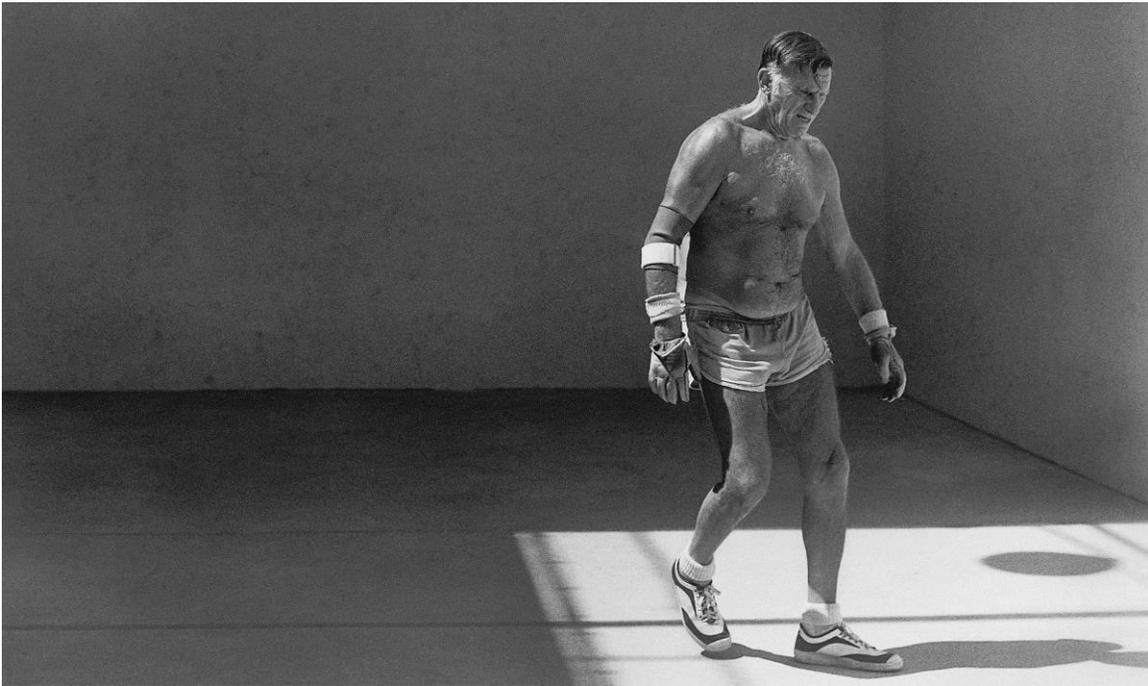


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TENNIS FOR SAVAGES

By Bud Schmeling & Rachel Liebling

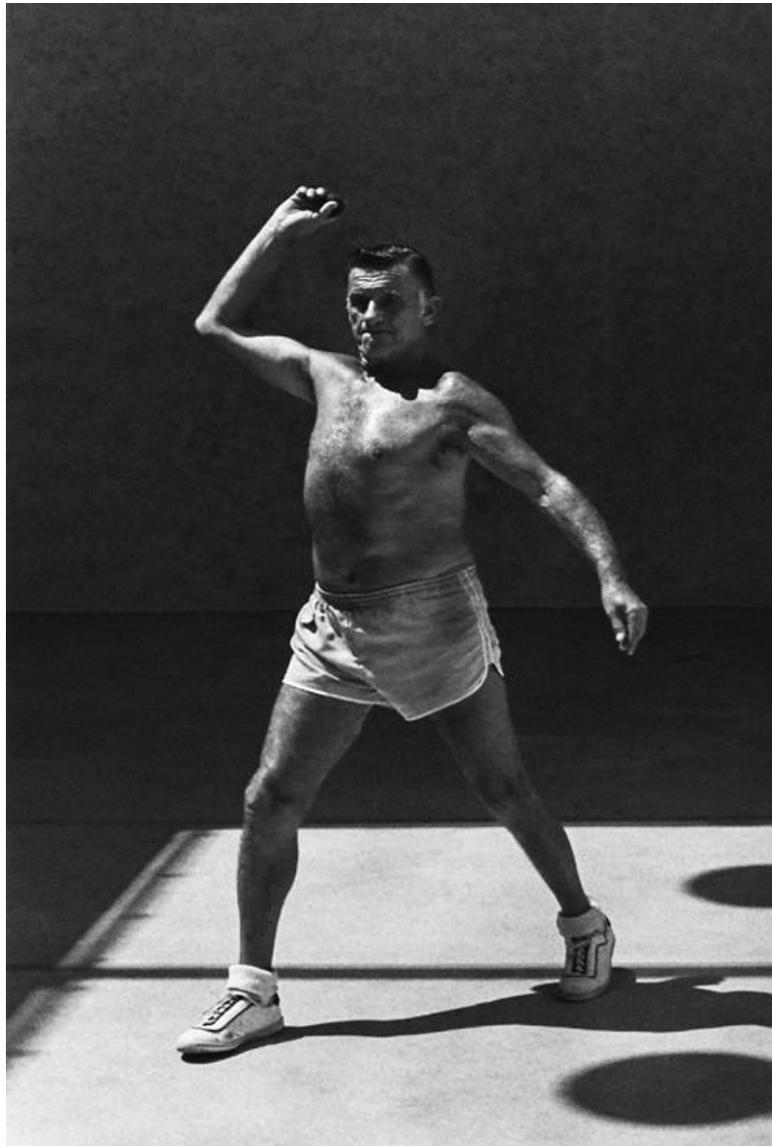
All photos by Jerome Liebling, courtesy of Steven Kasher Gallery

*“O'er the green mead the sporting virgins play, their shining veils unbound along the skies,
tossed and re-tossed, the ball incessant flies.” - Homer*

According to Tom O'Connor's *History of Handball*, the earliest mention of the game can be found as far back as 2000 BC in Egypt. The priests of the Temple of Osiris in Thebes were depicted on the tombs, striking the ball with the hand. The game meandered to Europe, before Alexander the Great spread it around the Greek Colonies and the Apennine peninsula (Italy). Accounts of handball are found in Scotland in 1427, where King James was a known fanatic, amongst the aristocracy of 18th Century London, and finally, in its most reliable depiction, the United States where it was introduced by Irish

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immigrants in the waning years of the 19th Century. The game eventually settled in Brooklyn where it made it's way into the DNA of an adolescent Jerome Liebling.



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Since Liebling's passing in July 2011, there have been copious obituaries and tributes to the pioneering American photographer, ruminations on the enduring legacy of his work. Former student, Ken Burns remembers "Jerry" as "a fierce warrior, insisting on a kind of justice, a kind of truth and an utterly American vitality. He saw in every individual his or her own worth." *New York Times* photographer, James Estrin contends, "his images were always more than what was in front of the camera—they were about life, death and the underlying meaning of being human."

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Liebling was duly recognized for his poignant and unflinching portraits of American citizenry busied in the mundane and the brutal. He never passed judgment or pandered, but by simply training his camera (more than likely, his trusted twin lens Rolleiflex) on subjects, he let the truth rise to the surface. Whether he was engaging with blood-soaked workers in a Minnesota slaughterhouse or with mental patients in a state hospital, cadavers or politicians, Liebling artfully traversed a gorge of emotions at once visceral and unnerving, poetic and revealing, doing so with a deft mastery of light and space. According to his daughter Rachel, what is constant in Jerome's work is "his concern with capturing the heroism of ordinary people. 'I was interested in the so-called common human enterprise' he said, 'that which is closest to us – which is the everyday, the ordinary.'"

During World War II, the young Liebling did a tour with the 82nd airborne (where his experience helped foster a strong anti-war sentiment) and upon returning home, studied art at Brooklyn College under the GI Bill. In 1948 he joined the Photo League, a socially minded photographers cooperative, where, along with Paul Strand and W. Eugene Smith, he took to the streets to focus his lens on the theretofore undocumented corners of urban life. But perhaps the most edifying tenets of his education were born on the Depression-era streets of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, where alongside baseball and stickball, handball was king in the insulated Jewish and Italian enclave.

In his book, *The People, Yes*, Liebling floats a theory as to the fanatical hold the sport had on its devotees, and the reason for its enduring popularity among the working class denizens of the crowded city streets: "At the beginning of the century, all you needed to play handball were a rubber ball, a street and a wall; the mastery of technique and the pleasure were free."

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New York handball, the quintessential modern representation of the sport, was born on the beaches of south Brooklyn, a stone's throw from where Liebling grew up. According to historian Mickey Blechman, these beaches had "long, fairly high wooden jetties to prevent erosion. Bathers at low tide used the jetty sides as walls to hit a 'bald' tennis ball with open hand against them." Areas were marked off in the sand and single-wall handball was born. In 1909, the manager of the Parkway Baths, Charles Keene built a handball court on his property; it was such a success that many more courts followed. By the 1930s, the NYC parks department had erected one-wall courts all over the city, where during the warmer months tournaments would take place almost weekly. The game was an instant smash with the city's Jewish population; the names Vic Hershkowitz, Moe Orenstein and Steve Sandler carrying the same weight in the handball world as Willie, Mickey and the Duke did on the baseball diamond. Today there are over 2000 courts throughout New York's five boroughs, from Liberty Park in Jamaica to Seaside Courts in Coney Island, Bailey Avenue in the Bronx and West 4th in Manhattan. Go to any of these on a summer afternoon, and you're sure to find a cadre of shirtless, sweating maniacs, crushing a little blue ball against a stark white wall. You might even find Joe Durso, the sport's modern day king and self-appointed poet laureate, who'd tell you that "handball is like the shadow world of Plato. There's somewhere an idea of the sublime volley. I try to reveal that. Ballet is supposed to be visual poetry, the visual beauty is pretty and I try to be physically graceful."

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In the 1970's, Liebling and his family would frequently take trips to visit his elderly mother in Miami Beach, and would often stay on Ocean Drive, at a rundown efficiency hotel favored by the rapidly diminishing population of retirees from New York. The Casa Casuarina was once an opulent palace erected by an heir to the Standard Oil fortune, modeled on Christopher Columbus' son's 16th-century castle; by the time of the Nixon administration, it was a set of residential apartments, little more than a lugubrious totem harkening to an era when Sinatra and the Rat Pack were still crooning in the ballrooms of The Fontainebleau and The Deauville. (Gianni Versace, the flamboyant grand poobah of fashion who years later helped transform the city once more, would be murdered under the Moorish arch of that same Casa, having lovingly and extravagantly renovated it in the '90s.)

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The Miami Beach that the Liebling clan encountered was ensnared in a dramatic transition, an evolution launched by a variety of circumstances. There was damage from devastating hurricanes, the polarizing influx of Cuban and Haitian immigrants, an aging population, a shifting of cultural values, and, perhaps most significantly, the arrival of the “Cocaine Cowboys,” the notorious band of Colombian drug traffickers that terrorized South Florida for more than a decade. With his camera at the ready—and occasionally, in

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need of being snatched back from a would-be thief—Liebling set out on a city that was no longer the glitzy playground of carefree jetsetters, with their Daiquiris, polka dot bikinis and the cha-cha, but rather an imploding and menacing outpost of drugs, crime and urban blight.

Just west of the Casa apartments was Flamingo Park, a recreation area built in 1950 which served as an oasis for a tight-knit group of senior citizens who played handball everyday at its enclosed aqua-green painted courts. Rachel Liebling remembers “watching these remarkable elderly athletes, ensconced in the strenuous game through a thick, filthy plexiglass window [which] made the scene appear strangely dreamlike to me—like gazing at sharks in a tank.” Her father would return year after year to photograph these same players, always fascinated by their strength, tenacity and the ritual of the game. Jerome said, “My friend ‘Fast Eddie’ Libman played handball all his life—he was still playing vigorously when he was in his eighties. The men in these photographs still wear their bumper sneakers and handmade gloves. The finesse, comradeship and joy of the game are still very much there for them. They have become gladiators of a sort, embodying all the valor that a life of physical movement, sweat and great savvy bring to age.”

Writing about that period of time and those images, Rachel is thoughtful in her reflection: “My father was in his fifties when he first photographed the handball players. He was in his prime— still invincible, not yet contending with physical ordeals that age would bring. He was rapt by the strength of these athletic men, a generation older than himself, who defied the inexorable march of time by outsmarting it on the handball courts. The elderly players kept mortality at bay by physically wrestling against it. My dad kept mortality at bay by grappling with it through his camera lens.”

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According to photography historian, Dr. Estelle Jussim, “these handball players will stand as Liebling’s most consistently noble achievement. He has managed by some telling combination of light, form, stopped motion, and significant shadow to make heroic figures out of retired salesmen, clothiers and waiters.” Jussim saw them not as prosaic figures but as “half-naked septuagenarians who stride toward us with such nobility and dignity that they are the equals of classic Greek statues.”

Some of Liebling’s handball photos are included in the exhibit *Jerome Liebling: Brooklyn and Other Boroughs, 1946–1996*, on display at New York’s Steven Kasher Gallery, April 24 through June 6, 2015.

All photographs © Jerome Liebling photography.

