

Howie Rankin

And he told us how a couple of ex-handball players from Edmonton managed to parry their love of racquetball into a multi-million dollar marketing and construction business.



If anyone can be called the "fathers of racquetball" in Canada, Howie Rankin and his partner Ken Wilson probably deserve the title. Back in 1969 as the game was first making inroads from the western United States to western Canada, Rankin and Wilson, both of Edmonton, started promoting it vociferously.

Their two-man campaign began when they imported a few racquets and balls from Chicago, selling them to friends at Edmonton's West End YMCA. Soon Wilson's basement was full of mail-order equipment and the handball community of Edmonton was fast on its way to being converted to racquetball.

Using some of their profits from the tiny distributorship they had set up, Wilson and Rankin formed and funded the Canadian Racquetball Association. Since that time, of course, the CRA has spread across the country, today boasting over 9,000 members, and thanks to government funding it stands independently as a non-profit organization with Sports Canada in Ottawa.

For their part, Wilson and Rankin left the CRA to its own means, left their

jobs in the construction industry, and built Canadian Racquet Sports Equipment Ltd. During the early seventies the company, then under Wilson full-time and Rankin part-time, increased its equipment sales from \$50,000 annually to over \$3/4 million. After Rankin came in as vice-president, CRS diversified into the court construction business, tackling club projects across Canada with specialized crews and court-building systems. Today CRS is a business worth over \$2 million per year with 17 full-time employees, and offices in both Edmonton and Toronto.

As western Canada's foremost court builder and equipment distributor, Rankin is on the road these days more than he anticipated. He not only travels to construction sites, supervising CRS installations, but he frequently makes buying trips to the Orient, where CRS equipment is designed and manufactured.

Racquetball Canada met with Howie Rankin just prior to his departure for a two-week trip through Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. We asked him about the first days of racquetball in Canada, the CRA, and about his various business ventures. This is what he had to say:

RC: Probably the best way to start is with a question about your racquetball roots. When and where did you discover the game?

Rankin: It goes back at least twelve years to the West End YMCA in Edmonton where I was originally playing handball. A couple of American football players from Chicago came to Edmonton to play for the Eskimos and they brought with them a game called paddleball. It was played with a wooden paddle that had holes drilled through its face and a pink ball called the Pensey Pinky ball. From that point on a lot of us started playing paddleball.

RC: Where did you get the paddleball racquets at that time?

Rankin: At first we had no trouble getting the balls but a hell of a lot of trouble locating racquets. So we had a fellow by the name of Johnny Lachomber, retired, start making paddles out of wood and punching the holes in them. They broke regularly and he couldn't make them fast enough. Another thing we tried was a sawed-off tennis racquet. The pro at the Royal Glenora Club cut the racquets down for us but those didn't work too well with the pink ball, which was smaller and heavier than today's racquetball.

Eventually, we looked through some magazines and spotted a Chicago racquetball racquet that was small like today's racquets, silver in color, and strung with gut. We also spotted an advertisement for a ball called the Seamco Black Ball.

Ken Wilson and I phoned Chicago and ordered 24 racquets and 36 balls. We sold them to our friends at the YMCA. I think we bought them for \$5 each and sold them for \$8 or \$9 to cover expenses.

The game started getting more and more popular as it spread from the Y to the Royal Glenora Club, then to the university, all by word of mouth. It was being played in handball courts at that time.

RC: To what do you attribute the popularity of the game in those earlier days? Were squash and handball players a little restless about this new upstart?

Rankin: The game's greatest virtue was that older fellas — even 65 and 70-year-old guys who'd had heart attacks — and younger fellas alike could pick up racquets, hit that little black ball, work up a sweat and have fun doing it. And it wasn't limited just to men. Girls picked it up just as fast and the whole thing just started to mushroom.

It worked on a one-to-one basis at first. I started playing, then Ken Wilson began, John Kempo started playing and we passed on the things we learned about the game as time went on.

"Most handball players didn't like us playing racquetball in their courts"

Most of the handball players didn't like us playing racquetball on their courts because we were eating up all their court time and the racquetball racquets damaged the walls. Today, of course, you'll find handball being played 10 percent of the time and racquetball being played the other 90 percent.

RC: Was Edmonton one of the first Canadian cities that took to racquetball?

Rankin: That's right. Racquetball made its way up the coast from its original home in San Diego and hit Edmonton and Vancouver at about the same time. If you look at Edmonton — within the next two to three months you'll see in excess of 330 courts. I would estimate that at least five percent of the Edmonton population plays racquetball.

We talked to...

There aren't even 330 courts in Montreal and Ontario combined at this point, although they aren't far behind. They're both taking off like wildfire.

We now have an office in Toronto and since it was set up three months ago we've been getting enquiries like mad for racquetball courts in Ontario alone. We're just starting to think about Quebec now.

RC: When did the groups in Edmonton and Vancouver start broadening into an association?

Rankin: The Canadian Racquetball Association was founded in 1969-70. There was John Kempo, Ken Wilson, and myself. We started the CRA, registered with Ottawa, and began importing more equipment into Canada. At that time we imported racquets and balls and used the money from the sale of the equipment to fund the CRA. We used Ken Wilson's basement to sell the stuff.

Eventually the government got involved and started giving the CRA grant money for junior development and getting players to tournaments — things like that. Since federal funds were being spent, the government insisted that our free enterprise approach to the CRA be halted. So we settled up with the CRA and took on the business ourselves. We could see a great potential out there so we just kept on distributing out of Ken's basement. This goes back to 1973.

RC: What were the original goals of the Association?

Rankin: To get racquetball started in Canada, both in the provinces and at a national level, and to get tournaments started.

We have a tournament here in Edmonton, that has been running since those days, called the Klondike Open. It's gotta be one of the most popular racquetball events in the country. People from the States still come up for the Klondike like they did when it first started. In my travels to the U.S. I'm always running across older players

who will ask "How's that Klondike tournament going? I just love it. It's gotta be one of the originals." And it was. It was one of the first big tournaments on the continent.

"It all comes back to the fact that the more glass you've got in a court, the more people see the game."

The tournament is still really a social affair as much as anything; a fun event. The Canadian Nationals is more of a competitive tournament where everyone is attempting to up their ranking at a particular level, but the Klondike is more relaxed. There are parties — one huge one in particular, held each year in the backyard of Edmonton lawyer John Kempo, who's also our partner here at CRA. Kempo hosts a couple of hundred people and brings in hips of beef, salads, beer, wine, you name it, it's there.

It's a great chance for the CRA members to meet and let their hair down. I have a chance to get together with old friends like Murdoch Cranston of the Maritimes. Now there's a guy who likes to enjoy himself. He's a serious competitor, but we always have a lot of fun at the Klondike. Or Teddy Smith from Vancouver. I call him "Big Ted." He calls me "Hinderball" — a name that is not deserved, I might add. I don't even know what a hinderball is. I've never gotten in anyone's way in my life.

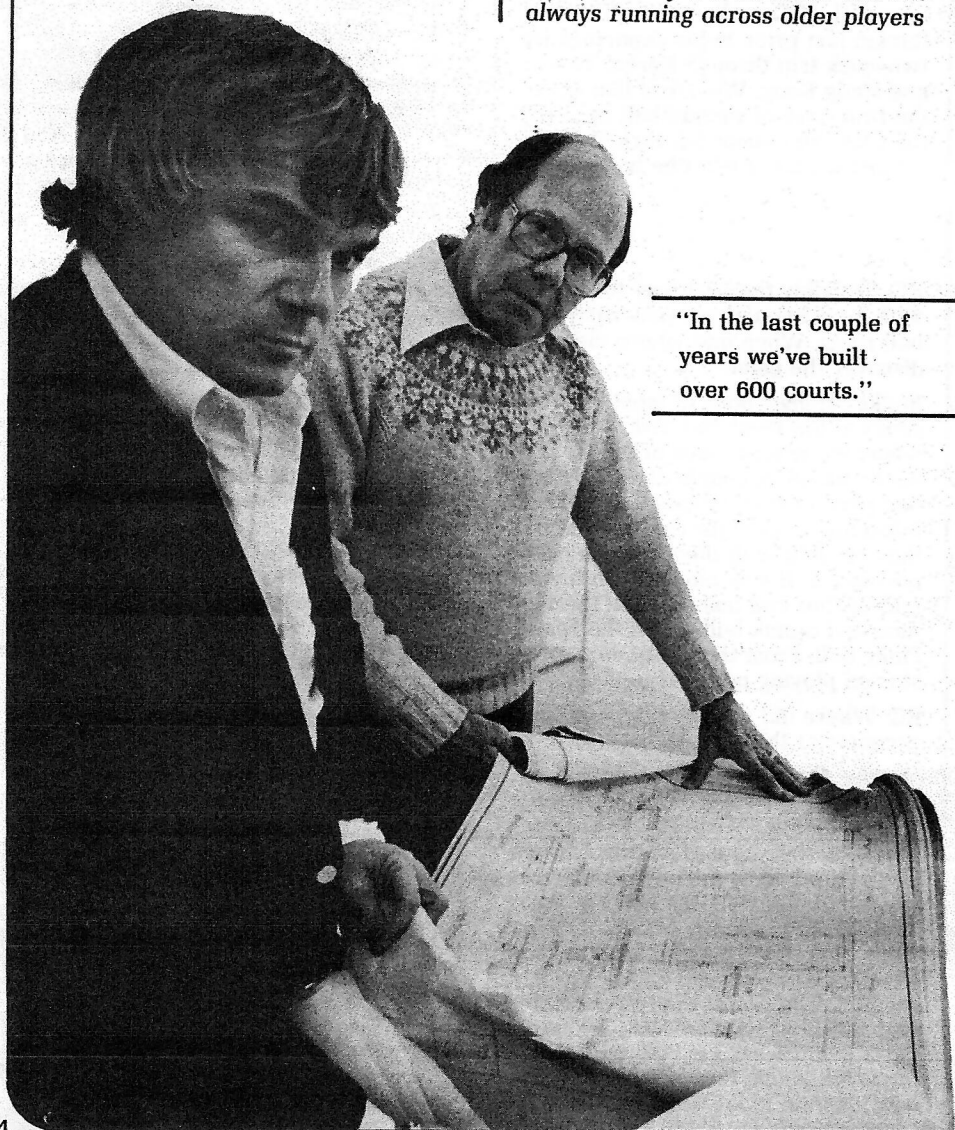
RC: Do you still enjoy the game as much as you did 12 years ago?

Rankin: Well, one of the problems I have today is that I can only play twice a week or so. I used to compete a lot in the United States and across Canada but being in the wholesale racquetball equipment business now and the business of court construction, I travel from the east to the west coast of Canada and abroad all the time. I just don't have the time to play the game as much as I'd like.

We've done court installations in Halifax, St. John's, Vancouver, Yellowknife, Red Deer, Thornhill, Ontario — the list goes on and on.

We design courts, we change them, we go in and install complete interiors from floor to ceiling, to walls, to lights, to glass back walls — we put them all in. We have our own crew who does nothing but go right across the country putting up racquetball courts. In the last couple of years we've built over 600 courts.

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RC: How long does it take your crew to put a court in?

Rankin: It depends on how much glass there is and what kind of fixtures will be put on the ceilings, and then there are the sidewalls to consider if there's glass there. We can put the interior of a court up in four or five days. It depends on all the options, from floor to ceiling.

The cost is also hinged on the amount of glass or number of view windows used. It runs from about \$20,000 to \$30,000 per court interior. If you want just fourwalls and no windows — what we call a box — it's cheaper. But what's the attraction there? How do you sell the sport without high visibility?

We were the first group to build racquetball courts in Canada and in our first installation we put in eight glass backwalls. People said we were crazy. We're not so crazy today. It was the best move we ever made.

You know, people often come to a club to play racquetball and bring along a friend who has never played before. If there are no windows in the court, the friend just gets bored waiting. If he can watch the other guys playing, he'll usually end up sneaking onto the court in his bare feet. That's the difference glass makes.

RC: When did racquetball become your full-time business?

Rankin: About three years ago, I was in the construction business with Cleaver-Brooks for 20 years before that. Ken Wilson was also in construction with Canadian Pittsburg Industries and he'd been at his job for 30 years.

It was a flip of the coin that determined which of us would leave his job first. Ken resigned and before you know it we went from selling \$40,000 or \$50,000 worth of equipment out of a basement to operating a \$750,000 business. That's when I decided to get in and start going at it.

RC: Is your upcoming trip to the Orient a purchasing trip?

Rankin: Yes, and also a chance to recommend changes in the design of a few of our racquets. There's no question about it, manufacturers in the Orient are the best at what they do. No one can touch them. They've got the technology, the efficient labor, and the know-how. We've been dealing over there for a number of years and they've been great to do business with.

I'm not saying the very best racquets are from the Orient. A hell of a lot of good racquets come from the United

States. AMF Voit, for instance, produces excellent equipment as far as I'm concerned. We distribute Voit in western Canada.

But by and large you'll find the majority of racquetball companies buy from the Orient — be it Spalding, Penn, whoever.

RC: Can you give us a rough figure on what your yearly sales are today?

Rankin: It's gone crazy. Our sales are over \$2 million.



RC: Are you aggressively pursuing the growth of the game in eastern Canada?

Rankin: That's exactly why we opened our office in Toronto three months ago. It's run by a man named John Goram, an ex-architect who got into the business the same way we did. He owned a racquetball court that has been very very successful. From all the reports I've gotten, it seems his club, the Gateway Club in Mississauga, is always jam-packed. He wants to build three or four more clubs.

RC: What's the probability of racquetball catching on in Europe? Is there a market for you there?

Rankin: The probability is certainly there. As a matter of fact, we're looking at it right now in countries like France,

Germany, England, and Scandinavia. A company that we are associated with in the States has signed up buyers for over 200 courts in Europe already, mostly in Germany. We're going to be involved at some point.

RC: Do you see any future for the sport on television?

Rankin: Definitely. It's coming. There's a development out of New York called Twin-Vu Glass which we handle up here as agents. It's essentially one-way glass that's covered with thousands of white dimpled dots on the inside. From the outside it looks transparent, yet the players on the inside are presented with an opaque surface so they don't lose track of the ball like you do on ordinary clear glass.

There's a portable glass court made of this material in New York right now and I believe it's for sale. You could set it up in any big theatre or arena. They're looking for a sponsor willing to pay \$1.25 million for the complete setup including the glass, the truck to carry it, all the flooring, the ceiling — everything. It will provide excellent exposure for pro racquetball. This glass has been specifically designed for television.

We're working on a couple of jobs now, in Vancouver, that are definitely looking at using Twin-Vu glass. Already a few clubs in the States have the glass and the club owners I've talked to just love it. Exposure like that is fabulous. It all comes back to the fact that the more glass you've got in a court, the more people see the game.

RC: Exactly how would a club use the new glass?

Rankin: Within six months the Richmond Country Club in Richmond, B.C. will have a 15-court complex with one tournament court made completely of Twin-Vu glass, except for the front wall. It's being done with the intention of having television and pro tour stops come to the club. They'll also be able to seat two to three thousand spectators in the area around the court.

If you took a court like that and put it in a big arena with glass on all four walls, you could probably seat 16,000 people around it.

RC: Is there any way that the televising of racquetball might dilute the sport as we know it?

Rankin: No way. It'll only expand it. Look what it's done to every other sport. Just look at television commercials. You used to see them featuring tennis, football and golf in things like deodorant commercials. What do you see today? Racquetball

and squash. The racquet sports are being exposed everywhere.

RC: Do you find that there are many people who, having played other racquet sports for a while, drop their game and start playing racquetball?

Rankin: I don't think anybody is dropping their other racquet sport. It's just that those who have never played tennis or squash are coming along, picking up a racquetball racquet and having a good time at it right away. I think we're introducing a lot more people to the racquet sports generally via racquetball. It's a great "entry sport", if you will.

RC: Do you find that racquetball players go on and play other racquet sports?

Rankin: Most definitely.

RC: Has racquetball peaked in Edmonton?

Rankin: It's peaking in Edmonton, but people are still building racquetball courts. People are still playing as much as ever. Try and get a court.

RC: Is there a "post-racquetball" period coming in Edmonton when the thrill of the sport passes and people move on to something else? Will these racquetball courts you're building be turned into squash courts in a couple of years?

Rankin: No, I don't think so. You might find the odd one turned into a squash court because of supply and demand, but racquetball is still going to be there. It's a game for everybody. You can't hand a tennis racquet to someone who has never really played sports in his life and expect him to enjoy himself. Yet I've seen thousands of people take that quickly to racquetball.

RC: How do Canadian racquetball players compare to Americans generally?

Rankin: It was unheard of at one time for a Canadian to go down to the United States and come out on top in a competition. That's changed today with players like Lindsay Myers and Ross Harvey living and playing in the States. They do really well and there's every reason to believe Canadian players will just keep getting better. Much of it has to do with the money the federal government and other groups are putting into racquetball.

Despite what some people might say, I don't believe that racquetball has reached its peak in the States and it certainly hasn't even come close here in Canada.

It's interesting to note that in the Toronto area, where squash has been played for a long time, racquetball is

now coming on very strong. And squash is starting to catch on out here. In the construction end of things we see more and more squash courts being built in the west.

A lot of people will get into squash because they can't get a racquetball court. They'll see an empty squash court in the same complex and say to themselves, "Hey I'm going to go and buy a squash racquet for \$15 and play this game."

And then there's handball. It's a game that's starting to make a comeback. They have a new, very soft, ball, called the "family ball". At the Court Club on Saturday I walked in just as they were starting to promote handball a little, and there were about 16 ladies, from 16 to 35, all playing handball. This used to be a game only men played because it was so physically punishing.

RC: Why are Canadians doing so well at racquetball?

Rankin: It's simply the numbers who are playing. There are hundreds of thousands of Canadians playing racquetball,

many of them travelling to play in tournaments, going to the States, and generally getting exposed to the excellent competition.

RC: You are certainly convinced of the game's future, and presently it seems to be taking care of you financially. What about on a personal level?

"I used to have high blood pressure and was out of shape to the point that I couldn't get an insurance policy. That's what got me into racquetball."

Rankin: Aside from the fact that I love the game — it's my hobby and my job — it's kept me in shape. It's a great game for dropping calories. I used to weigh 255 pounds before I started to play racquetball. I'm around 180 pounds now. I used to have high blood pressure and was out of shape to the point that I couldn't even get an insurance policy. That's what got me into playing racquetball. And you can bet I'll be involved with this game for a long time to come.



Rankin and Wilson along with Edmonton lawyer John Kempo, were the founders of the Canadian Racquetball Association. When the government began funding the CRA, Rankin and Wilson became large-scale distributors of equipment. Wilson's basement was their first warehouse.