

# What YOU Can Do For Handball!

## *A Glass Half-Full Article*

*Handball is an individual sport, but we are all on the same team with our desire to grow and promote the Perfect Game. In this article, we explore how we can work together to help the game we love while staying positive about handball's future.*

By Sam Esser and Martin Mulkerrins

Handball is a game for life, and many of us handball players have spent decade after decade playing the sport. There is a reason we refer to it as “The Perfect Game.” Our love for the sport runs deep, and it’s a big part of who we are. It’s given us memories we’ll have forever, and introduced us to a community of people that is unlike any other.

However, it is no secret that overall membership and participation has been in decline for quite some time here in the United States. There are many contributing factors, including but not limited to, players aging out, courts being demolished/converted, and competition from other sports, and in some cases “easier sports” become more appealing. In recent times it has become increasingly common to hear pessimistic remarks from both handball players and supporters around the country about the state of handball in their area.

This negativity, in some ways understandable, often permeates how we feel about the direction handball is going. And although we no doubt face great challenges, there are still many things handball has going for it that are positive and encouraging.

There are junior handball coaches around the country who introduce new kids to handball all the time. The Fred Lewis Foundation in Tucson has been around for decades, and continues to introduce and develop new junior players every year. Recently, in Arvada, CO, a new summer junior program was started with support from Colorado Costigan Youth Handball, that has been an instant success. The program recently brought eight players to three-wall junior nationals.

The Collegiate Handball tournament is one of the biggest tournaments of the year, and something that inspires young people to keep playing. There has been progress in developing and growing collegiate programs the last few years. There are as many young collegiate coaches in the game as there have been in quite some time, and their passion for the game is evident. Anyone who has participated in this tournament can attest to the levels of enthusiasm evident in each match.

At the adult level, local and regional tournaments are held almost every weekend throughout the country, and many have been going on for 50, 60 and in some cases 70 plus years! Handball communities everywhere take pride in their tournaments and their tradition. The Race48 Pro Handball Tour has been successful in providing a platform for our elite players, while also exposing the game of Handball on Watch ESPN and ESPN+ to be viewed around the world.

*Despite the many positives, there is no doubt an we face an uphill battle as a handball community. That said, we believe that there is something we can all do to help. We challenge each other to see the glass as being half-full and to consider trying new ways to grow the game in our areas. As the saying goes,- “where there’s a will, there’s a way”.*

### **WIN – What’s Important Now?**

Reversing the current trend and increasing participation numbers does not have a single or simple solution. But we must remain united, positive and focused on solutions. The remainder of this article

outlines available resources and some suggestions to help you and your club to introduce new players to the game.

### **Resources**

The United States Handball Association’s First Ace program has many resources to help get you get a program started, including free equipment and teaching materials you can use to begin to show new players the game. There is also a certification process you can go through to become a USHA Certified Instructor.

In addition, a development grant is available at the beginning of each year to programs. The grant funding can be used to recruit new players and to develop current players. Please do not hesitate to contact us for more details.

Martin Mulkerrins, who has co-authored this article, teaches and coaches Handball at Texas A&M University. In the past year he has performed clinics at the University of Texas, Utah State University and at a tournament in Bowling Green, Ohio. Martin, and several other players, may be able to assist you if you reach out to them. We recommend you try to have junior players, collegiate players and/or new players in attendance when exploring this option.

There are several ways you can use the resources mentioned above to introduce players to the game, and we recommend teaming up with your local handball buddies to make this easier and more fun! Here are a few ideas you can try:

- Ask the ownership at your local athletic club if they have a youth program. If they do, ask if you can introduce those youngsters to handball. You’ll provide the equipment

## FIRST ACE: WHAT YOU CAN DO...

through our First Ace program, and you and your handball buddies can teach the participants. It's no extra cost to the athletic club and a way they can keep youngsters busy, it should be a no brainer for them to say yes!

- Go to the city and see if you can get involved in a city kids camp or program. Almost all cities provide these for youth, particularly after school or in the summer. What better sport to get them involved in than handball, a lifetime sport that develops both sides of the body and is an all-around workout. Again, if you provide the equipment from the USHA and are a certified instructor who can teach them, the city should be very interested.

- Offer free handball lessons in a newsletter. It's likely you receive some sort of newsletter from your athletic club, your neighborhood, or city. Ask if you can have a little space in it to offer free handball lessons to anyone interested. Talk about the benefits of the sport and how much fun it is, and that you are never too old to start playing! The USHA can help design this if needed as it will need to be appealing to draw interest from potential players.



**One-wall is a great way to introduce players to handball, as it is easy to pick up and requires less infrastructure—all one needs is a wall and a ball! This version is played widely around the world, including in Uganda, where Martin Mulkerriins introduced the game to some locals a few years ago.**

*USHA reminds players and instructors to wear required eye protection on the courts, even during warm-ups, drills, etc.*

- Get involved with local schools. Make contact with the physical educators. It's very easy to set up one-wall courts in school with some tape in the gym or off an outside wall. With all of the sports benefits, it can be

a great activity for an afterschool program that develops both sides of the brain and body. One-Wall is also easy to setup off of a park or community wall, and is much easier to learn. It has grown and continues to grow over in Europe, and is played in several other countries, such as Uganda pictured above.

- Have a connection at a collegiate university? Most universities have courts on campus, and working with the school to increase usage can be beneficial for everyone. A handball class is taught at many universities across the country. If not teaching, beginning a club team is a great option, and something with proven success. The USHA can help you become a certified instructor, which will help you get involved with university officials.

- Organize a play day where every player in your handball community brings at least one new player to introduce to the game. Show them the rules, and have them play fun games like short court. Be sure to use “friendly” handball equipment such as softer balls (big ball), and of course, eye protection. Provide some pizza and beverages after.



**University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee was a new school represented at the 2023 Collegiate Nationals that shows promise of growth. They are led by new head coach and USHA Board Member Ben Van Arsdale.**



**Handball is fun, and that is the way it is meant to be taught! Just ask some of the many youngsters Don Quinlan has introduced over the years in Chicago.**

- For those of you comfortable with social media, creating a page to promote your club and keeping it up to date with appealing content and upcoming events can be hugely beneficial. Searching for existing social media pages and seeing what they do well is a good starting point! If you have no experience in this, don't hesitate to ask for help from either the USHA or a younger player in your handball group!

- We often hear "it is so hard to get new players". Sometimes the best starting point can be to ask friends, family and co-workers. Having that initial connection can be key and over time others will join. You never fail until you stop trying! If at first there is no interest, try again. Don't be afraid to start small with 1, 2 or 3 new players. Keep it simple and manageable. Again, use equipment appropriate for novice learners. You never know who might fall in love with the perfect game!

An important consideration when introducing any new player to Handball is to consider some of the challenges they

may experience. The speed of the ball, physical pain from hitting it, or having to use the non-dominant side of the body. Using a big ball can help alleviate some of these problems initially and players can transition to the red and white ace as they progress. Additionally, research suggests that youngsters quit sport activities because they are no longer fun. When they are asked what would entice them return to the sport, their response indicates if the sport became more fun they would continue. The clear take away is make it fun for new learners!

A lot of this may sound like work and an extra time commitment, but giving back to the game can be fun and rewarding, and you might change someone's life, like it did for me!

I was fortunate enough that my dad played handball and brought me to a youth handball program in Kansas City. A couple of local players took the time every week to teach new players and young players the game. Because of their commitment, I fell in love with the sport, and went to Missouri State to continue playing and still play to this day. It has certainly changed my life.

The sport has introduced me to several of my best friends, and has given me so many memories over the years, like it has for so many others.

Sometimes all it takes is just asking that first question at your local athletic club about starting a program, or seeing if you can have space in that newsletter, or asking your friend at work if they want to give it a try.

Yes, it can take some work, and it can be a bit of a time commitment, but for the sport we all love, it's something more than worthy of doing. Handball players are at no loss for words when you ask them what handball has done for them over the years. **Now, it's time to give back.**

*So let's be optimistic about growing our sport, and try new things in your area to promote the game. We have the resources to help at the USHA, we just need your enthusiasm and efforts. We're all on a team to grow the game. Please reach out to [handball@ushandball.org](mailto:handball@ushandball.org) for help getting started.*