

*By Bill Foley of The Montana Standard*

APRIL 2001 - When I took up the sport a little more than a year ago, I quickly learned that handball is a very humbling game.

You've got to take a lot of beatings before you start collecting victories.

But what happened to me last Friday at the state tournament in Missoula is much more than I bargained for when I first stepped into a court.

I got beat by a ... gulp ... girl.

Yes, a female handball player made one of my worst nightmares - since I first played kickball during kindergarten recess at the Blaine School - come true.

And she didn't just beat me. She schooled me like Yoda humbling a cocky young Jedi.

While hardly breaking a sweat, Roberta Chapman ran me all over the court with that little blue ball just out of my reach.

In short, I got smoked. I don't remember what the exact scores were - honestly - but I know I never scored in double digits in either game to 21.

Before you write me off as a horrible handball player, understand this: Mrs. Chapman is a pretty good player. She plays in the men's league in Missoula and I was told she more than holds her own.

In fact, just hearing the last name of my first-round opponent scared me half to death before I realized the Court House Sports and Fitness employee said Roberta, not Robert.

David Chapman, the world handball champ, is Roberta's son, as Montana handball legend Bill Peoples tells me as he introduces the two of us.

No kidding. I couldn't even make that up. I've got to play the mother of the best handball player in the world.

"She's not his real mom, she's his stepmom," Todd Ericson tells me later, grinning ear to ear.

"I heard his real mom is better," some other comedian adds.

Hey, I don't care. As far as I know, she's the reason David is so good, I answer. Someone had to teach him.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

But, especially hanging out with the Butte handball guys, it doesn't matter if she can beat David. You can't lose to a girl and not take some grief, no matter how good she is. So I braced myself for a long weekend.

Most didn't have to say a word, their little smirks said it all. But many didn't hold back.

My brother Donny joined Ericson, Neil Bolton, Butch Starin, Pat Huff, Trent Gardner, Brett and John Badovinac, Scott "Bean" Lewis, Chris "Squeak" McVeigh and several others as those who poked fun at me Friday night. That's right, I got made fun of by guys named Squeak and Bean. That's how bad it was.

Even guys from out of town threw in their two cents. People weren't all pointing and laughing at me like I just peed my pants or anything. But it sure felt like it.

Going in, I thought I was prepared for the worst. I knew it was a lose-lose situation.

It was a similar situation that my uncle Al Hansen faced, as Tom Morris told me, when he had to play a woman in a tournament many years ago.

Tom said that every time he hit a shot past the lady the crowd would boo and hiss. When she did something good, they'd cheer and laugh at Al.

I didn't have any smartys in the gallery, but at least Al won. It makes it much easier to deal with the remarks when you win.

At least that's what I thought after I lost. I thought that until Saturday night.

When I looked to see whom I had to play in the consolation bracket, I notice I was paired against Traci Horton.

I quickly realized that guys don't usually spell their name with an "I."

I had to play another ... gulp ... girl. What rotten thing to do to a guy.

That's right, I faced the possibility of going two and out - commonly known as two and a barbecue - without facing a single guy. So the pressure I felt the day before was doubled.

Saturday I won the match and realized that when you beat a woman in handball you get teased more than if you get beat - even by other women. And, again, it doesn't matter how good she is.

I didn't feel like a winner. I felt like a jerk picking on a girl. It was the ultimate catch 22.

"You should have to shower in there," Brett Badovinac jokes while pointing to the women's locker room.

"Billy! Billy!" John Badovinac chants sarcastically after the match.

And this is when I "win."

When I finally played against a guy, Lee Anderson from Kalispell, I got beat in the C consolation championship match.

I lost, but I felt pretty good because I played hard and I played pretty well.

I felt good, that is, until Donny tallied up my tournament record and pointed out I was 1-1 vs. women and 0-1 vs. men.

"Hey," my brother says. "You got second in the women's C."

But it could be worse, I guess. I could have been playing racquetball.