

*By Bill Foley - 05/01/2009*

Thirty-five years ago last month, Bill Peoples achieved greatness on a national stage.

In April 1974, Peoples led the University of Montana handball team to the national collegiate championship in Knoxville, Tenn.

Peoples was one of three Butte guys to make up that four-man championship team. His brother Bob and Butte's Tom Zderick were also on the team along with Tim Boland of Great Falls.

"Three quarters of the team was from Butte, which really said a lot about the handball in Butte, going up against those big schools," Bill Peoples said.

Now that The Mining City native is back in town to stay, Peoples wants to do what he can to get Butte handball back to that level.

"Missoula right now has more players than Butte," said Peoples, who just moved back to The Mining City after living three years in Las Vegas and many more in Missoula and Yakima, Wash. "I want to change that.

"The sport is dying out a little bit, so I'm going to try to give it a little boost." Peoples, 58, wants to use his knowledge that won him 15 Montana state singles handball titles into building the next generation of handball players. He plans to put on clinics at the courts at the Elks Lodge and at East Middle School to plant the seed.

"I think we can get something started with the kids to get handball a power in Butte again," Peoples said. "I think we can, we just have to get them started young." Peoples said getting players in the court is the key. It's also the hard part.

"It's not like the old days. The kids don't seem too eager to hit their hand on the hard ball and use their left hand and say 'This is fun,'" Peoples said. "It becomes fun once you start playing.

"It's a hard game. It's the most addicting sport in the world —even more than golf." Since he just moved back to Butte, Peoples said his work is just in the planning stages. He doesn't have anything definite lined up just yet. But he will.

Peoples' college handball coach, Jud Heathcote, said he doesn't doubt that the handball great can revive the game in The Mining City.

"If anyone can do it, Billy can," said Heathcote, who lives in Spokane.

Heathcote, who coached Magic Johnson and Michigan State to the 1979 national basketball championship, coached basketball and handball at Montana before heading east.

"What I did was kind of organize practice time. Usually it was early in the morning," Heathcote said. "They played each other a lot of times." Peoples gave Heathcote more credit.

"He was really good to his kids," Peoples said of the coach. "He helped us with problems with school or whatever. He's really a prince of a guy." Heathcote played handball with the guys.

"I played a lot," he said. "I even took a game off Billy one time down at the old laundry. He was a cut above the rest of the guys." Peoples won the individual national title in 1974. He did it the next year, too.

"None of those other guys could give him a game," Heathcote said of Peoples' UM teammates. "They'd give him a workout, but they couldn't beat him.

"Billy kind of lived for handball for a number of years. He devoted hours for practicing and improving his game.

"Bill was very talented. He proved he was one of the best players in the country at that time." Bob Peoples said his brother's competitiveness was a key to success.

"His competitive drive was unmatched," Bob Peoples said. "He'd rather die on the court than lose." Bill Peoples won eight straight Montana state open titles from 1971. That started a streak of Butte players winning state titles that lasted until Helena's Ryan Spotorno won in 2000.

Other Butte players to win the state open crown in that time were Steve Stanisich (eight times), Justin Balkenbush (three), Butch Starin (two) and Tom Pomroy (one).

Balkenbush, a Conrad native, was a Montana Tech student when he won three titles in the 1990s. He credited his playing at the Butte Elks for turning him into a champion.

Balkenbush has since won four state titles while living in Billings.

Only Great Falls' Jim Ritter, who claimed 19 state titles from 1947 to 1969, won more in Montana than Bill Peoples.

"In his day, he was the best," Bob Peoples said of his brother.

Bill Peoples hasn't played competitively since 2000, when he lost to Spotorno in the semifinals. He fell 21-20 in his last game.

Peoples had a series of knee injuries he says were brought on partly because he had the "running bug" and ran competitive road races.

"You put 40 years on the tire it's going to wear out," he said.

Peoples, though says he isn't done. He plans to make a comeback to competitive handball.

He's going to stick with doubles, though, where he teamed with Butte's Mike McLaughlin and with Missoula's Robin Peters to win a total of eight state titles.

"My knee problems are pretty much over," Peoples said. "I've been really concentrating on working the muscles around the leg and and keeping them supportive. I've also dropped some weight." Peoples' long résumé of success also includes four Washington State singles titles, three Washington doubles crowns, a national YMCA open singles title, two Canadian national masters doubles titles, one Canadian national open singles title, one Canadian national masters singles title, seven U.S. national masters doubles titles, one U.S. national masters singles title and three Pacific Northwest Open titles.

He played three years on the United States Handball Association Pro Tour.

Peoples, who was named the University of Montana's Most Outstanding Athlete in 1975, was inducted into the Butte Sports Hall of Fame in 1996. He was ranked No. 76 on the Missoulian's top Montana athletes of the 20th Century.

Bob Peoples, 56, gave up handball in 1983. But he isn't surprised his brother is still hanging on to his love.

"He's diehard handball," Bob Peoples said, "right 'til the end."