

*By Bill Foley – March 2005*

Great Falls handball legend remembered fondly in Mining City.

Jim Ritter dominated the Montana handball scene so much, the rest of the pack had to come up with a separate trophy.

“We had a trophy one year to see who could get the most points off Ritter,” long-time Butte handball player Jack Cavanaugh remembers. “I think the most anyone got on him was six or seven. I know it wasn’t very many.”

If Ritter, who died March 17 at 83, doesn’t go down as the greatest handball player in the state, he’ll certainly go down as the most decorated one.

The Great Falls insurance agent won all of his 19 state open championships in a 23-year span. He won 13 straight from 1951 through ’63.

Five of his titles were won in The Mining City.

As the six-inch consolation trophy indicates, Ritter also made it look easy.

“He didn’t waste any time,” Cavanaugh, 76, says. “He beat me 21-2 and 21-1 a lot.”

Rocky Williams, another long-time Butte player, remembers playing Ritter twice in the early rounds of the state tournaments.

He says that while Ritter could have easily gave him a donut, he never did.

“Ritter always gave me five or six points,” Williams, 71, says. “He was just a wonderful guy, and he was the greatest player I’ve ever seen.”

Perhaps the best thing that can be said about Ritter’s handball days is his nickname.

“He was known as ‘Gentleman Jim’ because he was a gentleman in the court and out of the court,” Cavanaugh says.

Williams says Ritter was a sportsman who should serve as an example for the players of today.

“Jim Ritter was a wonderful person. He was a credit to the game,” Williams says. “He never argued a call. He never questioned a double bounce — none of that stuff you see today.

“Of all the guys I ever met playing handball, he was the top of the ladder.”

‘Like a cat in the court’

The reason Ritter is a legend in the handball court is his state titles. No player has won more.

Ritter could have easily added to his state titles list, Cavanaugh says, but he rarely played doubles at state. His 1947 doubles title with Great Falls’ Harry Wallace was Ritter’s only one.

Nobody knew more about playing Ritter in championship match than Cavanaugh, who dropped the chipper to “Gentleman Jim” six times.

“Ritter was like a cat in the court,” Cavanaugh says. “He never hit a ceiling shot that I can remember. They were all down low, and they were all rolling out.”

Ritter won his first title in 1947 at the age of 25. His last came in 1969 when he was 47 and beat a much younger Norm Gray, of Helena, 21-19, in the third game of the championship match.

Tie-breakers to 11 weren't commonplace until a few years later.

Gray, who won the state title in 1968 and '67 and Great Falls' Nick Kalafat, who won in '50 and '64, were the only other state champs between '47 and '69.

Ritter never played in the open division after '69, but he played in the masters and golden masters divisions several times.

Ritter's brother, Jack, 79, who still plays a little handball in Great Falls, says Jim played up until about two years ago — even after undergoing two hip-replacement surgeries.

Ritter also won handfuls of Great Falls city singles and doubles titles. He played doubles with his brother Jack in the city tournaments.

Butte native Bill Peoples, who lives in Missoula, is second on the Montana all-time list to Ritter.

Peoples, 53, who is battling knee problems in his quest to get back in the court, holds 15 state open titles to go along with eight open doubles crowns and four Washington state titles.

His last open title came in 1999, and Peoples says his days in the open division are over.

Peoples arrived on the scene just at the end of Ritter's amazing run, and idolized the legendary player.

In many ways, Peoples says he mirrored Ritter' style.

"Jim was not a severe-and-shoot type," Peoples says. "He was a control, get the guy out of position type of player. He had great ball control.

"He played the corners remarkably well. He wasn't a straight-on shooter. That's the way handball should be played."

Cavanaugh echoed Peoples.

"Ritter was just accurate," Cavanaugh says. "His best shot was side wall-front wall, and with either hand."

'He was feared'

Ritter, who Cavanaugh says was about 5-foot-10, 180-pounds in his prime, never won a national tournament like Butte's Bob Brady. He could also never beat Butte's Ray Gallant, who won at least seven titles before Ritter's run. (The list of state champions, which can be found at [www.montanahandball.com](http://www.montanahandball.com), doesn't list winners in 1936 or 1943-45.)

But Cavanaugh said the name Ritter was known outside Montana.

"We went to a few Northwest tournaments," Cavanaugh says. "I talked to some guys and they said the first thing they looked at was where Ritter was. He was feared."

While Cavanaugh says Ritter displayed cat-like quickness, Peoples said his movement was deceptive.

“Ritter wasn’t extraordinary on his feet,” Peoples says. “He was bowlegged. But he had great anticipation skills that gave him a jump to where the ball was.”

Another strength Ritter possessed was a strong will to win, Peoples says.

“Jim was a fierce competitor,” Peoples says. “If you beat him, you really had to beat him. Not too many beat him.”

Jack Ritter says hard work and tons of court time were big parts of his brother’s success.

“We played every night, practically,” says Jack, who won a state doubles title with Great Falls’ Jay Rydell in 1962. “At 5 p.m. after work, that’s where you’d find us.”

So why didn’t Ritter ever win a national title?

Williams says it has something to do with the small YMCA courts where Ritter played.

Williams says the old Great Falls YMCA courts were similar to the courts in the basement at the old Butte Central, where many of Mining City greats got their start. Those courts were much smaller than regulation size.

“Ritter was at a real disadvantage going into the (regulation-size) courts,” Williams says.

In March 1954, Ritter dropped a 21-10, 21-16 decision to eventual third-place finisher Jim Jacobs in the first round of the national tournament in Chicago.

After that tournament, the chamber of commerce in Great Falls received a letter proclaiming Ritter one of the top 10 handball players in the country.

The letter, which was written by top handball Robert W. Schoning and had parts of it printed in the Aug. 13, 1954 Great Falls Leader, completely backs up Williams’ claim about the small courts.

The letter also said Ritter arrived late in Chicago and didn’t have time to practice.

“I had the opportunity to chat with several of the top players regarding Jim’s play,” Schoning wrote. “Some thought he would have beaten Jacobs if he had had the opportunity to become familiar with the court.”

Ritter proved the letter writer true by beating then-national champion Jacobs, 21-20, three years later in an exhibition in Great Falls. According to a news report, it was his first loss in a month of touring.

‘Unbelievable’ legacy

The fact that Ritter never won a national tournament, however, doesn’t take anything away from Ritter’s career, Williams says.

“He had shots that were unbelievable,” Williams says of Ritter. “There isn’t anybody playing now, in my opinion, that could beat him.”

For 23 remarkable years, anyway, no Montana player was better than Ritter. Not even close.

“Gentleman Jim” gave the rest of the state very little hope of holding a trophy at the end of any tournament.

Well, except for that little one, that is.

“You wouldn’t get a first-place trophy if Jim Ritter was in the tournament,” Cavanaugh says. “That’s for sure.”

So long, ‘Gentleman Jim’