

## **Growing the game through initiatives and teamwork.** The FRA interviews Rod Van Dyke

**(FRA):** When did you first get involved in running programs at the Ocala YMCA & how were the courts being used prior to that?

**(Van Dyke):** I started playing at the Ocala YMCA in the summer of 2006. They had the only 2 indoor cement courts in good condition in Ocala. The biggest problem with the court set-up at the time was that there were no windows to watch any matches. It resembled a "dungeon" back there. Since the courts were so isolated, the Y was constantly dealing with issues of vandalism and miss-use of the courts.

**(FRA):** Can you summarize how racquetball evolved as you became more involved?

**(Van Dyke):** Here in Ocala, I saw an incredible amount of potential for racquetball. There was a core of tournament players here already who played several times a week at another facility. As I got to know all of them, I realized that starting a league here would not be that hard. I have been running leagues at Gold's Gym in Winter Haven for the past 4 years, so I knew this would work. I spoke with the Executive Director and offered my services of starting a league as long as they installed windows on both courts. In December 2006, windows were cut out and installed.

**(FRA):** What was the effect of the glass panels in growing participation?

**(Van Dyke):** As soon as the windows went in, the attention the courts got was profound. The "dungeon" stigma was immediately gone. The issues with vandalism and miss-use of courts were virtually eliminated because everyone can now see what was going on in the courts. Since the Y followed through on their commitment on installing windows, the 1st league started in January 2007.

**(FRA):** How many people are playing on the league?

**(Van Dyke):** The 1st league, we started with 40 competitors. We are about to enter our 5th league and we are up to 60 competitors on 2 courts! We have 3 Divisions on Tuesday nights, 2 Divisions play on Thursday nights. I know it sounds crazy, but it does work out.

**(FRA):** Please summarize the success of your recent tournament.

**(Van Dyke):** The Board members asked me to be a Division Leader for their Youth Scholarship Fundraiser. The goal was to put a team together and raise \$5,000. The only reason I took on the challenge is because they agreed to let me run a small local tournament. I surrounded myself with an incredible team of league players with diverse backgrounds and assigned tasks out to each of them and it all came together so well. In addition to the tournament, we had a raffle and silent auction. The results just came in and our team raised a little over \$8,000 towards the campaign.

**(FRA):** Overall what factors were key in growing racquetball at this location & what advice do you have for others that wish to grow the sport?

**(Van Dyke):** The first factor is getting to know the leadership staff at the YMCA. They could see that the racquetball group (I call us "junkies") are passionate about the sport and want to grow it. They listened and have followed through on their promises. What the Y gets out of it are more members, excitement about a sport, membership retention, and a healthy environment for the members and their families. The next key is involving your tournament players, especially the sponsored players. There is no way I could do all this by myself. My family is first, work, then racquetball. All I have done is paved the way and help keep us going in the right direction. I have to especially thank Ernie Macias for helping me start the momentum. He had the same "vision" for where we were and where we need to be. Again, surround yourself with good people and this is not a lot of work.

**(FRA):** At your tournament I met some seasoned players and newcomers to racquetball and all were very excited about your program there. It would help to have some of their names for reference.

**(Van Dyke):** We have a great group of seasoned and tournament players here, I will mention some of the key ones, but I bet I will leave some out and I am sure I will hear about it. Seasoned players: Ernie Macias, Bruce Hawk, The Riddle family, Lori Pizzini, John Johnston, Steve Johnson, Thomas Consolato, Kevin & BJ Donnelly, Greg Anderson, Doug Yonts. Newcomers: John Peloso, Kevin Potapow, Scott Keifer, Huey Zirkle, Chip Dixon, Jamie Mark, John Dunn ...and more. All have contributed in many ways...

**(FRA):** What are the plans for the future?

**(VanDyke):** Talk of adding 2 additional courts is still going on. Just like any expansion at a YMCA, there are a lot of issues you have to deal with because every program is begging for money. Right now, I am trying to balance family, work, and my love for the game, and keep this momentum going here in Ocala. Don't be surprised if in the near future, Ocala becomes a HOT tournament spot.....

**Interviewer comments:** In addition to the interview questions, I spent the tournament day at the Ocala YMCA to observe and talk to members, guests and the Y management. The new players were especially excited about racquetball and their first tournament. All other comments were positive and everyone was thankful for the efforts put forth by Rod and his team of peers. Turning the “dungeon” into a ground swell of demand will certainly help with acquiring the funding to add the additional courts. For questions Rod can be reached on his cell phone at (863-651-4058). I am also available for questions and/or comments, Andy Pawlowski, FRA Executive VP (mobile 386-679-8368) andypaw@attglobal.net

\*\*\*\*\* see photos below \*\*\*\*\*

Before windows were installed



After windows installed on this and the other court

