



## THE ADVENT OF THE IRT PRO OUTDOORS

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In 1995, over 200 spectators watched Cliff Swain play a semi-final in Huntington Beach. His opponent was playing in what was his last Outdoor Nationals. At the top of his game, Brian Hawkes and his mastery of the massive 3 wall courts was on full display for the privileged crowd on the grounds of Golden West College.

It was an important moment in what would be a progressive shift in the world of outdoor racquetball. That year, Brian Hawkes, who had dominated the Outdoor Nationals for 20 years, was swan songing his way past Cliff Swain, followed by a dominating performance in a final against current 5 time Outdoor National Champion Rocky Carson. What made the moment pivotal, beyond the historic implications, was the witnessing of what the true possibilities were when Cliff Swain, having relatively little time on those courts, applied his skill set and athleticism to the outdoor game. Incredibly fast and powerful, he asserted his right to be on that court at that particular time. His ability to get low and drive the ball as he was pushed to the limit of possibility by Hawkes, uniformly grabbed all who watched.

That year, at the WOR Outdoor Nationals, Hawaii, New York and Florida all had visible contingencies. Though the Outdoor Nationals had always had out-of-state participants, that year, the lead up buzz featured these groups prominently. First time event participants and new players to the WOR scene joined veterans like the McDonalds of Florida, who to date, hold an incredible run of well over 20 years in attendance and numerous divisional national championship victories. The Outdoor Nationals, now

officially known as the Racquetball Warehouse WOR Championships, has grown to a significantly large event that spans 4 days and offers 37 divisions.

Over the past 5 years, there has been an interesting assortment of IRT players that have competed at the WOR Championships and have had successful runs. Notably, they include players Jack Huczeck, Jason Mannino, Chris Crowther and Andy Hawthorne. Some other IRT players have come to call this event a mainstay in their itineraries. That list includes, Rocky Carson, Alvaro Beltran, Ben Croft and Jose Rojas. Notable in this mix is John Ellis, who one year served as tournament director.

There has always been talk about how well the pros would fair against outdoor's best players, without a back wall and ceiling and where players learn that "Out-the-door" has significant meaning during rallies, not after. Prior to facing Brian Hawkes in the 1995 semi-final, Cliff Swain had to play an early round match that found him facing a teenager. That match drew crowd attention because it was the very first time spectators in California had the chance to see Swain on those big outdoor courts. It became very interesting when Greg Solis, one of California's best players, sat to view the match. In the world of California outdoor racquetball, smack talk is an art form and Solis wasted no time in laying some out for Swain and the crowd. Cliff, much to his credit because some of it was pretty harsh, showed little reaction beyond a small smile and a head nod. He chose to wait for a later opportunity to let his play deal with the smack. Swain was matched with Solis later

in the draw and picked Greg apart. Smack talk answered. Well. The crowd had gathered heavily to that match because it promised a glimpse of how IRT pros would do against the outdoor elite.

Greg Solis would serve as a similar litmus test a couple of years later, in a semi-final match at the 1997 championships. Solis found himself playing former IRT Champion Jack Huczeck. Solis, an impressive figure on a big three-wall racquetball court, relies heavily on his athleticism. He's frequently seen making diving plays and 45ft rollouts. It was in the technical application of that pro quality athleticism that made the difference in that match. Technically, IRT players are just more dynamic. Similar to the 1995 semi-final scenerio, Huczeck breezed by Solis to face Rocky Carson in that year's final, where he lost Jack went on to loss decisively to the defending champ Rocky Carson. Rocky, a top IRT Player and former IRT Tour Champion himself, has for the last four years, been the WOR National Champion. But Rocky can be considered the first true hybrid player, translating outdoor technical skill liberally onto his indoor game, sometimes bypassing traditional play in favor of cut-offs and overhands. Any talk of professional racquetball players should always include players like Rocky, Marty Hogan and Ruben Gonzalez, who have had history throughout their careers competing outdoors in some form. Note, though Hogan has had numerous outdoor championships many years ago, this particular point in WOR history is witnessing a shift that at this time is truly transformative for racquetball as we know it.

Back to Cliff. What makes him so



interesting is this pivotal time of growth in which WOR has been in the process of laying out over the past 5 years. In 2004, WOR officials Hank Marcus and Robert Martinez held what they called the 2004 WOR One Wall Nationals. The thought was to build interest nationally by choosing a site with its own history outside California that could yield potential new players. Whether or not that indeed was the intent of the event's local patron, it was smart. The event attracted Cliff who played with Marty Hogan and other future Racquetball hall of famers Sudsy Monchik and Jason Maninno. The format was One Wall thus drawing players from New York and Hawaii. At the time, Florida did not have the organization it does today but it was that tournament that sparked what can be seen today as Florida's very hefty presence within WOR. As in 1995, Swain found himself in a late round match that put his dynamic play on full display. One Wall racquetball is technically different from 3 wall and indoor racquetball in both with the rules and style of play, requiring huge adjustments for traditional racquetball players. Swain, was better able at the time to adjust as needed during his matches and sparked a buzz about what indoor pros could do outdoors. Cliff exhibited professional level athleticism with graciousness that won over outdoor players and spectators alike.

Swain continues today to play outdoor tournaments. As then, he has experienced success in the sun. He made the finals of the 1996 WOR Championship and he won the first ever Pro Kennex U.S. Championships held in 2008 at Tropical Park in Miami, Florida. His presence at these events has been important to the growth of WOR and should not be overlooked. Not because he is an indoor pro. Indoor pros like Ben Croft and Alvaro Beltran show to the WOR Championships and contribute themselves in the same manner. Both these players display amazing skill and a dynamic presence in their own ways. But Cliff, in this current time of aggregation between racquetball communities proved the advent of this particular time where the professional racquetball player is now a staple to the outdoor scene. He is a treat to watch. Cliff walks deliberately and quietly through the event and in his matches. He is as serious and as cut throat as he needs to be while playing, all the while being amicable and approachable, such an important thing in the recipe that serves up WOR's growth.

Major WOR tournaments offer a fantastic opportunity for anyone with an interest in racquetball to witness the IRT's top players in the fresh air and sun. Manufacturers are rightly recognizing the amount of players that call outdoor racquetball their main form of the sport, encouraging their sponsored players to participate in these events. To talk about top IRT professionals playing outdoors and not mention Kane Wasellenchuck, one would be leaving out a major topic circulating in the world of outdoor racquetball. Anyone having seen his play and knowing just how his dominance impacts the IRT Tour knows what Kane's presence would mean outdoors. To date, Mr. Wasellenchuck has not been interested. He has shown what could be argued as borderline contempt towards outdoor racquetball while contributing online commentary during IRT play. This may just be attributed to his lack of interest because at the moment, outdoor racquetball offered no monetary gain for him. But for some outdoor enthusiasts, it smacks as slight.

Players like Rocky Carson, Marty Hogan and Ruben Gonzalez have been participating in racquetball while wearing sunblock for years. Newer IRT players make these discussions about how successful they will be outdoors truly valid. Cliff Swain could very well represent the guy that opened the floodgates. It has already begun. Something big is on its way.