

Horseshoes May 2023

I recently joined a horseshoes league in Portage, Wisconsin. I had not played league horseshoes since my days in West Concord when I pitched from 1976 to 1982. Surprisingly I could still throw a few ringers and my team won 3 of 4 games. The interest in horseshoe pitching is very much alive in certain parts of the country especially in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the game, it started to become popular in the early 1900's. The horseshoes were typically used shoes that the horses had worn down. The center stake started out being just 2 inches above the ground. Of course, people were free to do whatever they wanted but eventually rules were standardized in 1925. It started out that a ringer was worth 5 points, a leaner 3 points and if you were just close you'd get a point. How close varied. Today it's usually if your shoe is within 6 inches of the stake is worth one point. Ringers today are three points and in league play leaners as they're called because they end up leaning against the stake are only one point for being close. Friendly games at family outings or anywhere that you set your own rules, you can count two points for a leaner.

The center stake is now 14 inches above the ground. And you throw it from 40 feet away. Some junior leagues and women's league use 30 feet as the throwing distance. That horseshoe court of your uncle at the lake you can throw from 1 foot to 40 feet.

The old West Concord horseshoe courts that I threw on were under the water tower. Every Tuesday night in the summer we'd be throwing horseshoes. There were some pretty good horseshoe pitchers in and around West Concord. Some of the better ones that I played against include Glen Johnson, Duke Olness, Alvin Blakstad and Harold Vangness. My dad Elmer, was a pretty good pitcher too. For several years, Glen Johnson was the best of them though. In our league back then, we had 8 teams of 2 players. A game would consist of 3 games of each player throwing 50 shoes per game, 150 shoes for the night. There were nights when Glen would be close to 50% ringers. The league average was around 12-14%.

On his farm, Glen had a horseshoe court that was parallel to his driveway. When he would walk out to go get the mail at the end of the driveway, he would pitch 4 shoes to the other end, then get the mail and then as he returned to the house, he'd pitch the 4 shoes back to the other end. I'm pretty sure though, that he practiced a bit more than just when he got the mail. His son Lonnie was a pretty good horseshoe pitcher too. Like was the case for me, my dad needed someone to throw them back so we started young and eventually over time, we got better. Gene and Mel Froehlich were good horseshoe pitchers. Gene, Lonnie and myself started our horseshoe career as the kid who threw them back hoping not to hurt anyone or hurt the dog in the process.

I do have two horseshoe trophies in my workshop. They were from a tournament at the Cuming County Fair in West Point, Nebraska when I was the farm director at KTIC Radio. I think I surprised a few onlookers when I actually knew what I was doing. I ended up getting 2nd place in the singles matches and first place in the doubles matches.

You've maybe heard the saying 'close only counts in horseshoes'. That's what makes it a fun sport; you don't have to be accurate all the time. You just have to be closer more times than your opponent.

Here's a box score of our WC Horseshoe League from the West Concord Enterprise. Glen and Lonnie eventually got to first place to win the league that year.

West Concord Horseshoe League

The Horseshoe League competes on Tuesday nights in West Concord. Competition includes pitching 50 shoes per game, with three games per match.

JULY 5, 1977

Team 8 (2) vs. Team 6 (2)

Team 8	50	63	58	171
Ray Bjugan	15	26	28	69
Marvin Hill			151	435
Total with htcp.	130	154	151	

Team 6	38	46	42	126
Roland Andrist	39	44	42	125
Roger Briggs	140	153	147	440
Total with htcp.				

Team 7 (4) vs. Team 5 (0)

Team 7	33	47	56	136
Elmer Kleven	51	40	45	136
Emery Kleven	136	139	153	428
Total with htcp.				

Team 5	56	42	61	159
Harold Vangness	27	50	36	113
Clair Dutton	126	135	140	401
Total with htcp.				

Team 1 (3) vs. Team 4 (1)

Team 1	75	77	66	218
Glen Johnson	57	45	38	140
Lonnie Johnson	164	154	136	454
Total with htcp.				

Team 4	72	67	69	208
Alvin Blakstad	18	37	32	87
Norm Fredrickson	131	145	142	418
Total with htcp.				

Team 3 (4) vs. Team 2 (0)

Team 3	44	48	46	138
Mel Froehlich	60	66	65	191
Gene Froehlich	157	167	164	488
Total with htcp.				

Team 2	53	64	56	173
Duke Olness	33	36	48	117
Orville Finne	138	152	156	446
Total with htcp.				

Top Ringers

Glen Johnson--56
 Alvin Blakstad--52
 Ray Bjugan--42
 Gene Froehlich--41
 Harold Vangness--36

Standings

Team 7: 9-3
 Team 5: 8-4
 Team 1: 7-5
 Team 3: 7-5
 Team 2: 6-6
 Team 4: 4-8
 Team 6: 4-8
 Team 8: 3-9

Here's a picture from August, 2023 of my friend Jim pitching horseshoes in a town tournament in Doylestown, Wisconsin. I was one of 30 players who pitched in this fundraiser for the Doylestown Fire Department. I think I tied for 27th place if memory serves. I'm trying to forget how poorly I pitched that day. In our league in Portage, my pitching partner Tony and I ended the season with a 38-10 record. That along with \$3 got us a cold beer.

