



Frank B. Contessa:  
**THE FORGOTTEN MAN  
OF PADDLE TENNIS**

**T**he Reverend "Doc" Beal might jump for joy in his grave if he knew that platform tennis courts had been built on the roof of the New York University Library, overlooking the site of the very first outdoor paddle tennis court which Beal constructed beneath the arch in Washington Square.

He would not be so happy to know that the City of Elizabeth in New Jersey has four platform tennis courts, installed by the broad-thinking recreation director of the "urban" area, which go totally unused.

And it may not be coincidence that this summer saw the publication of "Big Bill Tilden", a book about the man who dominated tennis in America in the Twenties; and insufferable snob who was finally made to play paddle tennis when a net was lowered onto the ballroom of the Plaza Hotel and a paddle handed to him.

The history of paddle and platform tennis may have come full circle, for the game which Blanchard and Cogswell raised above ground level, in more ways than one, was the same game that "Doc" Beal developed to be playable on any surface with a minimum of cheap equipment, accessible specifically to those who could not afford the regular game of tennis. And it is platform tennis which is now attempting to break beyond the boundaries of the elite.

The "missing link", as John Ware (Blanchard's son-in-law, platform tennis historian, and President of Fox Meadow Tennis Club) describes him excitedly, between the game of paddle tennis and the game of platform tennis is Frank Contessa, who developed, manufactured and promoted the paddle tennis racket, net and balls which Blanchard and Cogswell bought in a New York store.

Contessa resurfaced recently, after the publication of an article by John Ware in *Travel and Leisure*. He is a much-travelled man of many endeavours who lives at the moment, and works still, in Connecticut between his home in Lebanon and an office he maintains at the Holiday Inn in

## New York Boys' Week

April 27th to May 3rd, 1924



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"Boys—A Nation's Greatest Asset"

## PADDLE TENNIS TOURNAMENT

ON  
**BOYS' DAY**  
IN  
ATHLETICS and ENTERTAINMENT  
AT  
WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK  
**3:30 P. M.**  
NO FUNDS SOLICITED

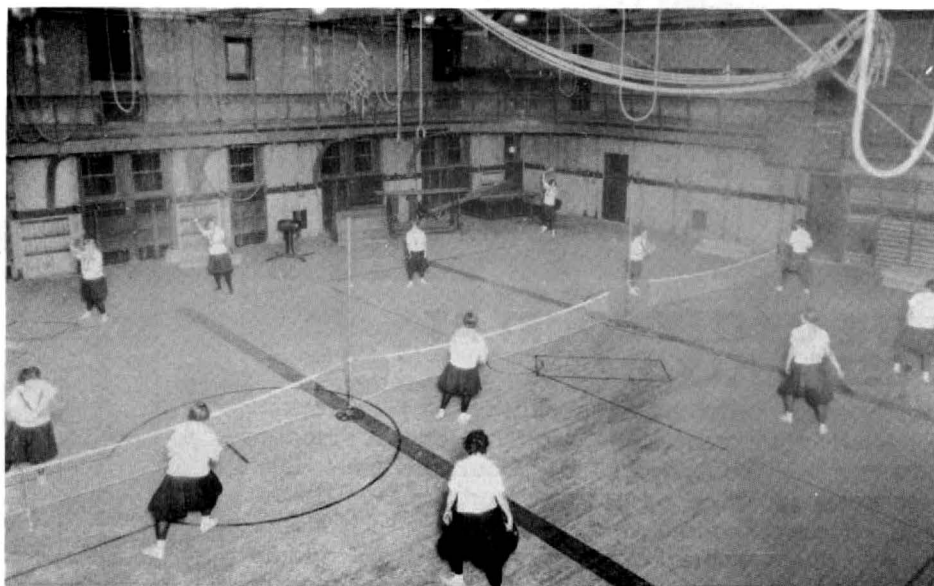
Cover of a four-page brochure issued to promote New York Boy's Week, April 27th to May 3rd, 1924. The back of the brochure mentions: "The **BOY PROBLEM** is an **ECONOMIC** problem as well as a social one . . . 95% of all male criminals and delinquents sowed the seed in their **BOYHOOD**".

had forgotten him.

Which oversight is understandable: he does not appear in early photographs, and his name is missing from much of the early literature, even from the sales material of the company he founded to manufacture the equipment. Talking to him one realizes that he is, and probably was then also, a very private and reticent man for whom paddle was one recurring theme in a complex and roving life.

Frank Basily Contessa was born, the fifth in a family of 10, the first in America, of an Italian father and En-

From Contessa's scrapbook of memorabilia comes this gem, taken at Teacher's College, Columbia University. Future teachers are learning the game so they can teach others. Date is unknown.



Meriden. Over the years (and he is, I estimate, roughly the same age as the century) since he singlehandedly took on the task of promoting paddle, he has lost touch with both the original game and its offshoot of platform tennis. But he has never forgotten the game, although it is true to say that for many years paddle and platform tennis

glish mother in Sullivan Street, Greenwich Village, which was, he says, "Hell's kitchen, a jungle". He went to work young as an office boy on Wall Street and rose quickly under the mentorship of his employer, a British financial entrepreneur named George Lamb (who was, recalls Contessa, black-

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## The Forgotten Man

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balled at one stage in his career for making J. P. Morgan account on the witness stand for his financial machinations).

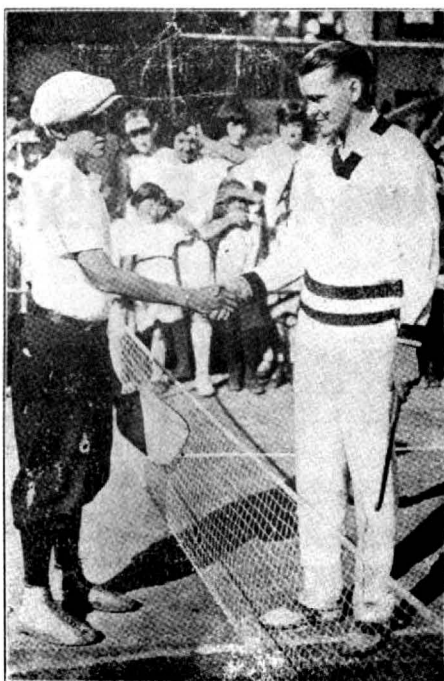
Through his church activities, he met Beal whose boys were playing street paddle with crude saw-cut bats, and in 1922 Contessa left his Wall Street career to form with Beal, the American Paddle Tennis Assoc. with the aim of marketing the game and equipment specifically for underprivileged youth.

### \$ Backing

Contessa began with the financial backing of Wall Street colleagues, and space donated by his brother Joseph in the basement of a yarn warehouse at 131 Spring St. (in what is now called SoHo, Manhattan). The first equipment consisted of a carrying case, nets, stanchions, paddles and balls for two or four players: "A Complete Outfit at the Cost of One Standard Tennis Racquet: \$10.00". A later version included tape and staples to mark out the court. In designing the equipment, Contessa gave primary consideration to cost, portability, and flexibility. The stanchions for netposts were made especially to be collapsible and the "airball" (sponge rubber) was designed to bounce on an irregular surface, large enough so that a child would see it coming over the net easily. The paddles were made of plywood.

Over the period between 1922 and 1926, Contessa set about marketing the game in a systematic fashion. "I thought it would take two years," he says, "but it took four."

"This was the basic plan I had in mind. Because Doc Beal's uppermost thought was for common youth, my first efforts were centered on introducing the game to public parks, playgrounds and other recreational centers. As a very beginning, I was able to have paddle tennis adopted by the parks and playgrounds of New York City and Brooklyn, and also the Public Schools Athletic League of New York, then Teachers College of Columbia University and Springfield College of Massachusetts which trained Y.M.C.A. athletic directors. Both these latter institutions made paddle tennis part of their teaching curricula. I had in mind, of course, that these teachers would be going back to their respective communities and by doing so would spread the playing of paddle tennis."



Vincent Richards, Olympic tennis champion, and Dalio Santini, 1924 Metropolitan Paddle Tennis Champion greeting after a match in one of New York City's playgrounds.

Contessa applied a seemingly limitless energy and resourcefulness to the campaign. He travelled to Atlantic City to demonstrate paddle at a convention of recreation directors, and persuaded Dr. A. K. Aldinger, Director of Physical Training for the Board of Education of New York to become a director of the American Paddle Tennis Assoc. He apparently gatecrashed — "I can't remember how I got in" — the frolicking of society's 200 at Newport, R.I., where Consuelo Vanderbilt bought the first set of equipment after his demonstration. Contessa's theory was that if influential socialites took up the sport, it would spread all the more quickly.

"The next step was to bring about the interest of sports-loving adults in the game. I first became acquainted with Vincent Richards who was next to Bill Tilden in tennis stature. 'Vinnie' became seriously interested due, I imagine, to the fact that as a poor boy he started in tennis with a paddle bat and a chicken wire net. Vinnie would at times alert me to championship tennis tournaments he would attend at private clubs and I would arrange to

have a paddle tennis court made ready on the premises. After the matches, Vinnie would play the game with a partner as a demonstration to the on-lookers."

But Tilden was a greater challenge. "He would brook no intrusion on the regular game of tennis and made this quite clear." Thus Contessa arranged through a friend at the Plaza Hotel to have the court ready at the ball after the Indoor Tennis Championships one year. In full evening dress, when paddles were handed to Tilden and the French team of Cochet and Brugnan, he could not refuse.

### Offering

In 1926, the G. Lynn Sumner Co., a Madison Avenue advertising company, offered to buy the Paddle Tennis Co., and the directors, including Doc Beal, agreed. Frank Contessa was outvoted. His concern was that the new owners would up the price of the equipment and redirect it to the more wealthy set. He left the world of paddle tennis and went onto other ventures. But his predictions were correct. Not only did the equipment become more and more costly, but the game was taken up by two Scarsdale players named Blanchard and Cogswell who, not satisfied with playing the game just anywhere, and with the resources to develop a more sophisticated game, built a platform and had the idea of playing the ball off the wires.

Though his direct involvement was ended, Contessa stayed abreast of developments in paddle tennis, keeping a scrapbook of news and articles. But his interest in promoting the sport among the less privileged was not over, and to that end, while living in Louisville, Ky. after the war, he came up with plans and specifications for a new kind of paddle that would be cheap and accessible to all.

"There came to my mind the design of a revolutionary new paddle, that would be the better of present paddles, based upon a unique principle. I made patent application, but the attorneys discovered that the principle had already been patented by a Frenchman. They advised me to keep the plans and specifications until the patent expired. This I have done, and the patent expired about 10 years ago. I registered a company, The Paddle Tennis Development Associates, as a form of record until the time was right to project the new concept."

"I am a patient man and have been

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## European Championships Scheduled In Amsterdam

*European Championships will be conducted Nov. 12, 13, 14 outside of Amsterdam, Holland.*

*Sixteen teams will be competing in men's and mixed tournaments. Anyone wishing further information is asked to contact Art Houlihan, 83 Katonah Ave., Katonah, N.Y. 10537; telephone 914/232-5007.*

waiting to find the right company that could finance and market the paddle. I did make one attempt with the Chairman of the Board, an avid platform tennis player, of a large company in Connecticut, who offered to put his research and development facilities to work on it. But then he resigned, and we lost track of one another.

"But the plans are still there, stashed away in my treasure chest, and one day I will find the right company that will be able to capture the market with this paddle."

Contessa has lived for many years the nomad life of the loner, driven by the spirit of the inventor. He has travelled extensively throughout the United States and Canada, fulfilling various projects in product development, selling and marketing for private industry and government. And he continues to work and keep up an active correspondence, writing often until 5 in the morning, charting the economy on the wall of his office.

### Swimming is a vice

In the trunk of his car, he keeps paddle and tennis rackets, although his main exercise these days is swimming which he does nearly every day, nine months of the year. "It's a vice," he says, "A compulsion, like alcoholism. I even have a black book of waterholes, so that wherever I am I can swim. Anything will do, a lake, a pond, or a puddle. I even have a list of private estates that will let me in. And over the years I have been in many perilous situations in water, in rushing rivers, in the ocean. For golf or tennis, you need a partner, but swimming you can do alone."

Frank Contessa does not disguise a certain disappointment with the way things have turned out, feeling that he is due acknowledgement for his achievement of putting the game of paddle tennis before the public eye in only four years. "There are few," he says, "who have the guts and foresight to pioneer, and they deserve recognition."



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