

No Hustler, Pop Johnson slings a mean shoe

Pop Johnson, at 64, admits that he is "definitely over the hill" as a horseshoe pitcher.

So he felt very good the other day when a friend asked him if he wanted to pick up some extra money by hustling at horseshoes.

"POP", said the friend, "There's this guy at a saloon who keeps talking about how great a pitcher he is.

"I've hustled him for just about all I can get. Now it's your turn."

Pop Johnson was flattered, but turned down the offer.

"I could have taken that guy, no doubt in my mind about it", said Johnson as he eased back in the living room chair at his Pippin road home. "It would have been just like taking candy from a baby.

"BUT I just don't go in for that kind of stuff."

Certain bars and saloons in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky have always been hang-outs for horseshoe pitchers. After a couple of beers and shot chasers, guys would step out back to settle an issue on the home-made horseshoe court.

"You'd be surprised, how many good throwers you find in bars," says Johnson. "But they just don't care enough to ever get out of their own back yards. All they want to play for is that half barrel of beer"

Pop says that he has just "never gone that route". He is a gentleman horseshoe pitcher.

"I've never really done much pitching in them saloons." He admits a bit abashed. "I've always gone in for the organized tournaments, where the good competition is."

The biggest meet of them



all, the World Tournament, in Eureka, Cal. begins next week and brings together pitchers from the United States, Canada, and even South Africa. Johnson is going but will wait until he gets there before deciding to compete.

"IT'S BEING held indoors this year", says Johnson. "If the building is air-conditioned, I just might.

"But if it's hot, you can bet I won't. I just can't take it anymore. You know, 35 games in five days, that takes more endurance than I got.

You can't blame Pop Johnson

for being a little low on endurance these days. "He's been pitching horseshoes for more than 50 years and has won enough tournaments to have his scrapbooks and trophies.

Johnson took fifth in the World Tournament when it was held in Murray Utah in 1952. Those were the days when he was "The King" in the region. He had won the Kentucky State championship in '48 and hung on to it for four years. Nearly 80 per cent of his shots were ringers then and he couldn't have hustled even if he wanted to.

Then bittersweet days set in. In 1955, he had to have a hunk of his stomach cut out because of ulcers. He said that they may or not have been caused by the almost constant pressure a horseshoe pitcher lives with when he is competing. "It's like having a big putt in a golf tournament almost every time you step up there to throw." Johnson says. (He laid out for almost five years after the operation.)

THEN IN 1967 he filled out his retirement papers as a post office worker, a deteriorating disc in his back had become so painful. Horseshoes were the last thing on his mind. With no end to his good luck, Johnson broke his leg the next year, slipping on a patch of ice on the front porch of his home.

One thing led to another. The cast on his leg stretched the nerves that had been strained because of the bad disc, and Pop Johnson, thanks to a broken leg, was back pitching horseshoes within a year.

Then last year he came back to take a fifth in the Ohio State Tournament in Greenville.

"I've just about had it now though," Johnson admits.

"BUT I don't feel bad about it. I still get some kicks. I still like to get 'up' for a game. But I just don't have the real desire anymore.

"I CAN beat any one of them guys I'll be up against in Eureka at the World Tournament." Johnson says with aged confidence, but I can't beat 'em all."

So Pop Johnson, who has been pitching horseshoes for more than half a century, on the eve of the biggest tourney of them all, thinks not so much about winning it, but about just playing in it.

Note: James "Pop" Johnson did attend the 1973 World Tournament in Eureka California. Pop finished 6th in the Intermediate Men's Championship Class, going 2-5 with an average of 67.7%. He would rebound to win the Men's Intermediate World Title the following year in 1974.