

Entertainment

Dad, son don't play same old ball game

Like Pop, like son. That's Popp, as in Dale, 42, and his son Erik, 14. Jai alai runs through their veins. Dale, a former player, is assistant general manager at Ocala Jai-Alai. Young Erik, a ninth-grader at North Marion High School, is a jai alai wunderkind, having competed this month in the world amateur championship at Club Espana in Mexico City.



EARL WATSON
ABOUT TOWN

"Erik is probably the youngest player ever to represent the United States in the games," noted Dale Popp, pointing out that his son qualified for the U.S. Olympic Team in a tournament at Fort Pierce.

"Fact is, almost all the international players in the competition were in their 20s and 30s," he said.

For Erik, taking part in the prestigious world event is a step toward his lifelong dream of playing professional jai alai.

"I was 3 years old when I first stepped onto the court," he said. He had been given a miniature cesta, (a glove-like, scoop-shaped wicker basket strapped to a player's wrist) and began lobbing the ball against the wall. He began playing regularly at age 9.

"Sure, I want to play professionally. I've pursued it so long that it would be unfulfilling not to try," Erik said, noting that he has an eye to attending either the University of Florida or the University of Miami, where he can play jai alai on the side while enrolled in classes.

Jai alai has its roots with the Basques in northern Spain, but as Dale Popp explained, it's becoming Americanized. The first fronton in the United States opened in Miami in 1926 and for years all the players were from Spain or Cuba.

"Now many of the athletes are home-grown," said Dale Popp, an Indiana native who was a professional player for 8½ years before "retiring" to take a front office job at Ocala Jai-Alai in 1994.

Meanwhile, it's last call. Saturday is closing day at the Ocala fronton with a 13-game program at noon and 7 p.m. Admission is \$1, with the matinee free to seniors. Besides jai alai, there are grey-



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Family sport. Dale Popp (right) first strapped a cesta on son Erik's wrist when he was 3 years old.

hound and horse racing simulcasts to wager on.

The 176-foot-long, three-wall fronton remains open in the off-season for practice.

"We have a dozen or so players practicing here on Thursday and Sunday evenings. The court is also available for private rental," Popp said. The fronton is on County Road 318 in Orange Lake, a half-mile east of U.S. Highway 441 and two miles east of Interstate 75, Exit 72.

Erik, who also plays football and baseball at North Marion, is a front-courter in jai alai. He teamed with back-courter Mike Valanzano, 19, the ballboy at Dania Jai-Alai in Miami, in doubles competition at Mexico City, which was won by France.

Father and son both agree that jai alai is a most challenging sport.

"The pelota [ball] has been clocked at 187 mph," Dale Popp said.

Wow, 187 mph! Remember folks, this is "Spanish handball," not the Daytona 500.

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Waitress of the Week: Mary Jo Rowe at Cafe Nino in Lady Lake. An efficient server with a pleasing, even bubbly personality, Mary Jo adds meaning to the phrase "fine dining" at one of The Villages' most popular eateries.

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Quote of Note: Don't know who said it, but my favorite definition of a politician is one who gets money from the rich and votes from the poor to protect them from each other.

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Ghost Story: Long before Hillary Clinton had her daily tete-a-tete with Eleanor Roosevelt, our family experienced encounters of an eerie kind that took place more than 30 years ago.

Here's the story, in the spirit of Halloween. It begins when Dad was courting Mom. One of the gifts he gave her was a music box, which would remain one of her cherished possessions for the rest of her life. I remember the music box sat on Mom's bureau top for years. As a kid,

I'd sneak into her bedroom to play the music, which was easily triggered by lifting the lid.

It was a fragile device that eventually broke down. Years passed and there sat the music box on the bureau, but it remained silent.

Alas, Dad passed away suddenly of a heart attack 35 years ago. Mom was alone in the old homestead.

The summer following Dad's death, Mom took a trip abroad. When she arrived home, the entire family was there to greet her. It was a welcome back fete without Dad's presence, of course.

Amid the jubilation, the music box began to play. We all stood up in stunned silence. How could that be? It hadn't played in years. What's more, no one was upstairs to trigger the device. And the lid was still in place.

The music box again fell silent until Thanksgiving, another occasion that brought the family together. When we were all seated around the dinner table, the soft strains of a minuet were heard from upstairs. It was the music box.

Could it have been telling us that Dad was there, too?