

Saturday, July 4, 2009

On the ball

In class and out, Huczek's always created quite a racquet

By Alice Rhein

His fellow business students suspected there was something odd about Jack Huczek, MBA '08, SBA '05. He was unable to work on group projects on weekends, and often found ways to gear assignments to the subject of fitness.

If any were too timid to approach the affable Rochester native and ask, a quick Google search would have revealed that their classmate was, and is, a professional racquetball player currently neck and neck with the world's No. 1 player, Rocky Carson.

Having won his first professional victory in 2002 against Cliff Swain at the champion's home club in Boston, Mass., Huczek has forged a career for himself that includes sponsorships, product development and now, armed with an MBA in marketing and entrepreneurship, an edge into the business side of racquetball's burgeoning market.

"There's an increase in courts being built, with the major change coming into the health club industry. They are recognizing that racquetball is an important part of the facility. It is our job as players and ambassadors to take it to the next level through advertising and exposure," says Huczek, who turned 26 in January.

Have game, will travel

And if new portable courts are any indication, the sport is heading to a venue near you.

Last year, the courts appeared in Denver, Colo., with an audience of thousands on hand. This Mother's Day weekend, the Pro Nationals were in Chicago, Ill., and the portable courts were at Navy Pier. "It's pretty cool. We have the ability to put the court virtually anywhere," says Huczek, who'd like to see the sport at festivals and even major malls.

The idea is that once you've seen a game live, you're hooked.

"One of the highlights of my career has been to compete in front of people who have never experienced the game before at its highest level," says Huczek, who adds that racquetball is not a global sport, nor an Olympic sport, but it is very popular in Central and South American countries.

"There's that innocence factor where people have the jaw drop. It's times like that where I have to pinch myself and say this is what it's really about — influencing people and putting a smile on their face."

You could say racquetball is in Huczek's blood, since his mother, Sharon Huczek, MAT '79, was a racquetball champion herself and got him hooked at the ripe age of 2. By 3, he was competing in tournaments, and by 8, he had gone national. Huczek's dad, John, is the "silent champion in the family."

He means business

"He's not a racquetball player but he has traveled to hundreds of events with me over the years," says Huczek. "He's been instrumental in making me the person I am." Traveling goes with the territory, and during the International Racquetball Tour (IRT) season, tournaments fall on weekends. Huczek credits Oakland with giving students the flexibility to schedule classes Monday through Wednesday.

"That really speaks volumes to the credibility of the university. I was able to do two things that I love for the past seven years: playing racquetball full time and getting my education. Any other place, I wouldn't have been able to do that," he says.

Huczek still counts his education as being his proudest accomplishment, despite dominating wins on the court against players he once emulated using a forehand that sports announcers have dubbed "nasty and thunderous."

Since graduating, Huczek and his girlfriend, Christie Van Hees, a top-ranked Canadian racquetball player he met while on tour in the Dominican Republic, have moved to Dallas, where Van Hees works for an oil and gas company. "Texas has always been a big racquetball state, and there are former pros and high level amateur players to spar with and work on my game," says Huczek, who plays squash to cross-train and works on his golf game during the off-season.

While he plans to remain on the professional circuit for as long as he can be competitive, Huczek estimates that 35 is a typical retirement age in pro racquetball. Therefore, he's already using his degrees to explore business careers post-racquetball. "The more people that are playing racquetball, the more marketability the sport has," says Huczek, who is working with his sponsors, Head/Penn, Ashaway and Python to refine racquets, strings and grips. "From a player's perspective, more players make racquetball a better sport to play."

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SUMMARY

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