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Late start doesn't hamper squash champion

BY PAUL LUNGEN
 Staff Reporter

TORONTO — For someone who's won his fair share of gold, silver and bronze medals, Robbie Osher got a fairly late start at the great game of squash.

It wasn't until he was 31 that he first picked up a racket in his hometown of Johannesburg, South Africa but by age 34, he was making a name for himself in squash circles across the country, representing the province of Transvaal in national competitions.

Back in those heady days, he could be counted on to finish in the top 10 in "open" events, often competing against players 10 to 15 years his junior.

He's still taking on youngsters, although the age gap might be closer to 35 years these days. Truth be told, the 59-year-old Osher finds it hard to find a good game from those in his age group. He finds most men his age have gone "a little soft" — in their games that is, so he calls upon younger players to get a good match. You can see him at the Northridge Club, his home turf, teaching some young whippersnapper the finer points of the game that come

with years of excellence and experience.

But those health club "friendlies" are only tune-up matches for the big games he plays during the season.

At the Canadian Open in Calgary recently, Osher was top Canadian, losing in the final to the U.S. champion. He's ranked as the top Canadian in the +55 category and he won the Ontario +55 title in 1997 and again in '98.

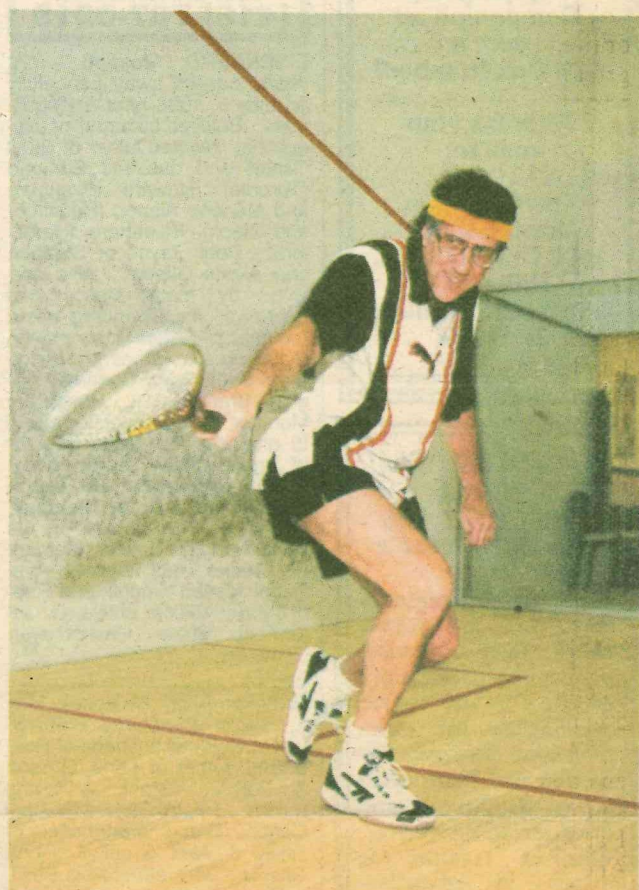
Before he moved to Canada permanently two years ago, Osher won many South African provincial and national titles in the +45, +50 and +55 age groups.

He was voted Provincial Veteran Squash Player of the Year in South Africa in 1994 and won all provincial matches from 1986 to 1994.

The son of Lithuanian immigrants, Osher represented South Africa at the Maccabiah Games in Israel on three occasions, winning individual bronze and team gold in 1985, silver in '89 and silver again in 1993.

Determination more than raw talent is the key to his success, Osher says.

"I'm a very unorthodox player. I play very unorthodox shots. I



Robbie Osher shows the form that's made him a top squash player. [Barry Shainbaum photos]

delay my shots. I've got a very strong wrist and can delay it right to the end," he says.

With his delay shots, Osher can get younger, more inexperienced opponents to commit themselves in anticipation of his next shot — and then put the ball where they ain't. In addition, Osher says, "I play a very lethal "boost," a side-wall shot that I can play from anywhere on the court. And I hit the ball fairly hard, compared to the older players."

When you combine all that with his veteran experience, it's no wonder he's tough to beat.

An all-round athlete, Osher has been a runner, a tennis player, a golfer and he's enjoyed swimming

and hiking as well. But even he has had to adapt to advancing years.

"Up to my early 30s, I was a runner and no shot could pass me. As I got older, I had to develop racquet skills," he says.

With the summer upon us, Osher, a management consultant, has cut back his matches to two a week. When he kicks it up to four times per week, you'll know summer is over and he's gearing up for another round of tournaments.

After all, he'll be turning 60 soon and that opens up a new category (+60) he hasn't won yet.

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Henrich a likely first-round pick

By PAUL LUNGEN
 Staff Reporter

TORONTO — The upcoming NHL draft has never been so interesting for those who follow Jewish athletes.

The reason is simple. For the first time in more than a dozen years, a Jewish junior has the chance to be selected early in the first round.

Toronto-born Michael Henrich, a power forward for the Barrie Colts, is rated by NHL

Central Scouting as fifth overall among North American skaters. While that rating does not include goalies and Europeans, there's a good chance Henrich will be picked in the top 10.

The last time a Jewish player was considered so highly was in 1984 when Toronto native Brian Wilks was chosen by Los Angeles early in the second round. With the addition of more NHL teams, that selection would have made him a late first round pick if the draft were held today.