

2014 Wisconsin Hall of Fame Inductee Eugene Mason



Years ago, two men put iron in Gene Mason's hands. The first one was his Norwegian grandfather, who attended college in Northfield, Minnesota. He was the first person at the seminary to pound stakes in the ground and get a game of horseshoes going. The second was Gene's father. He lived in Antigo, and back in 1947, when Gene was 13 years old, his father pounded two stakes in the ground. Along with his dad, Gene and his friends pitched many games at those stakes. Before he tried his hand at horseshoes, Gene was already a competitor and a natural with his honing his aim. In 1946, he won the City Marble Championship in Antigo. He went on to compete at the District level in Wausau for a chance to play in Milwaukee for a new bicycle.

Gene and his family moved to Appleton in 1951. He pitched a short time at Appleton High School. Then on December 7, 1952, he joined the Navy. During his enlistment, he did two tours. One was during the Korean conflict and the other was in peace time. His first assignment was on a LST with 130 men. He was later stationed on an aircraft carrier that housed 5,100 men. What a big adjustment! Gene was discharged on November 24, 1956.

One day in 1957, as Gene was walking around at the State Fairgrounds in West Allis, he heard that sound. You know that sound - a piece of cold steel striking an iron stake. Sure enough, the State Horseshoe Pitching Tournament was being held. Gene ended up speaking to a gentleman there from Little Chute. The man said that he pitched at Weines Bar on Pine Street in Little Chute on Saturdays. Gene decided to drive over there and check it out. They had two courts and played for beer. It was a fun time.

The next year Gene pitched in the State Tournament and took 2nd place in Class C. He was awarded a ribbon and was hooked for good! It was exciting to watch the people throw ringers. At one point, Swen Bowman brought up the idea for the tournament to be held in cities all over Wisconsin. The first city to host the tournament outside of the State Fairgrounds was Kamp's Bar in Combined Locks. Kamp's was where Gene pitched on Monday and Wednesday evenings for many years. Through the years more men joined their group and the courts at Kamp's had to be enlarged and updated. Kamp's Bar was lucky to host the State Tournament several times. Gene has been a club history buff and has a scrap book dating back to 1968. Included in that history is the record for shortage league game, 22 ringers out of 24 shoes, 92.2%. The record was set on August 22, 1989 and the owner of that record is Mr. Horseshoes, Gene Mason.

The trophy display on Gene's basement wall tells the story of years of pitching. Gene had the opportunity to pitch in 5 World Tournaments and compete with world champions such as Curt Day, Danny Kuchinski, and Walter Ray "Deadeye" Williams. Gene's best day on the courts was at the 2007 State Tournament in Arena where he won against Clayton Gage. After the win, both of them laid on the grass because it was so hot. This was a highlight of 44 State Tournaments that Gene has participated in. Over the years he has played in many tournaments and is very thankful for the support his wife and family have shown him as they have sat in the stands and cheered him on.