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CASEY JONES

by Glen Portt

One of the greatest pitchers ever...never won a world tournament.

Whenever we hear or see the name 'Casey', most of us think of 'Casey at the Bat'...which first appeared over 100 years ago in the San Francisco Examiner. This classic has been republished yearly. Critics are not able to account for its persistent life and have spent over a century pondering it. We all know the story. With two out and a man on second and third, Casey, mighty Casey, was at bat. The last stanza tells it all...

*Oh, somewhere in this favored land
the sun is shining bright,
The band is playing somewhere,
and somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing,
and somewhere children shout,
But there is no joy in Mudville—Mighty
Casey has struck out.*

Wisconsin's Casey Jones "struck out" several times in his quest for the World's Horseshoe Championship...but, he will go down in our history as the greatest pitcher who ever lived *who never won a world tournament*. He quit pitching when he was in his prime...only 36 years old. Why? Let's start at the beginning.

As early as 1930, the people of Waukesha knew they had a "comer." Young 12-year-old Casey Jones, pitching from 37' was ringing the stake with amazing accuracy. He was just a tousled hair kid, all 80 pounds of him, soaking wet. He was so small he was described as "pint size"...and had to wriggle all over and throw a high shoe in order to reach the stake. He took an extraor-

inary high back swing and a long step. As he grew older, he never broke the habit. It was often said of him..."Casey is the most consistent ringer man in the world *in quiet air*...but the higher the wind, the lower his percentage".

Many of the old timers laughed when they watched him, but it wasn't long before they were saying, "That Jones kid really has it!" Because of his age, Casey was not allowed to pitch in the Wisconsin's Men's State Championships...even though at age 14 he was throwing from 40'.

Casey developed rapidly. At age 16, he entered the Midwest Tournament at Des Moines and as old timers will tell you, *the competition there was as good as the World at that time*. Casey, the kid, won 31 straight games in qualifying and defeated C.C. Davis and Guy Zimmerman along the way while taking 3rd place...no easy feat.

1935 was a year to remember for young Casey. *First*, the Wisconsin HPA voted to let him compete in the State Championship. He won...and repeated this for a total of 19 times. In 1948, he threw a record 93.0% ringers...a mark which still stands. *Second*, he competed in his first World Tournament, placing 5th. *Third*, Ted Allen came to town! Ted Allen! Age 27, winner of the '33, '34 and '35 World Championships! Ted Allen, the unbeatable...and Casey was chosen to pitch against him. The old timers said, "Hey, the kid is good...but he won't be able to stand

the pressure Ted will put on him. Ted has ice water in *his* veins...no way will Casey beat him."

The Waukesha Journal reported the match held before 5000 spectators..."Ted Allen, World Champion horseshoe pitcher, caught a tatter Sunday at the Auer Avenue playground in young Casey Jones who hung on 80% ringers to win the first match 50-42. The champion, however, put on the pressure to take the next two, 50-37 and 50-43." (The old timers were right...but not by much...as the scores show.)

From 1936-39, there were no World Tournaments. As Gary Kline relates in *The Official NHPA History of the World Tournament 1908-1980*... "The Midwest National Tournament was held during those years and featured all the great stars of the game." Casey competed in '39 placing 3rd with an 81.0% average. In 1940, the World Tournaments started again and Casey was there with an 80.5 and a 4th place finish; in '41, he placed 3rd with 79.8.

At the outbreak of WWII Casey, now 24, immediately enlisted and saw action in the South Pacific as a Navy Aviation Ordinance Specialist...serving until discharged in 1945. In 1946, he returned to W.T. horseshoe pitching...the first time a W.T. had been held since '41.

From 1946 through 1948, Casey Jones pitched about as good as any human can pitch...*yet he failed to win a World Championship*...losing by one game each year...even in 1948, the year he set the world record of 87.5% for an entire world tournament. It was no wonder the top players referred to him as 'Hard Luck Casey'. Let's take a look at those 3 heartbreaking years.

1946. Ted Allen and Casey were tied in games won and lost, 21-1... with one game to go...*the game which would determine the World Championship*. In one of the great games of all time, a game that went 158 shoes, Ted, the ice man, had 139 ringers for 87.9%; Casey...137 for 86.7%...with Allen winning 50-44. *Records show that Casey had 911 ringers out of his last 1000 shoes!*

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1947. Casey again finished second with a 33-2 record and an 83.0%. In the next to last game, he had to fight it out with the incomparable Ted...to determine 2nd place. This time he won with a 90.1% for 142 shoes. As he later remarked, "Ted's always tough...even when one is lucky enough to beat him." In this '47 event, Casey had 7 games over 90% and 8 over 85%.

1948. *Heartbreak alley!* Casey set a world record of 87.5%...but lost the tournament to Fernando Isais by one point. This is the way Casey remembers it..."We were 49-49 and threw 6 four deads. Fernando had a ringer and a shoe touching the peg. My first shoe was perfect. My second... 1/32nd of an inch short...which meant the championship. Both of us had over 87% ringers for 136 shoes."

I wanted to know more about Casey Jones...a man who (like Curt Day) has never been given enough recognition in our horseshoe world. I asked him several questions.

Casey, your W.T. career spanned a time period of 1940 thru 1954. In '54, you were only 36 years old. You had a wonderful record. Why did you decide to give up pitching in the World Tournaments?

I had to make a living. I gave up horseshoes for bowling because I was in the bowling business and could not do both. I had to put in exceedingly long hours. I just didn't have the time to pitch.

You were, without doubt, the greatest horseshoe player who never won a world tournament. How do you feel about this? Is there any one or possibly more than one tournament which you feel you could have won?

Well, I could have won all 3 years...'46, '47 and '48...but I didn't. Ted Allen and Fernando Isais were two of the greatest. They beat me when the chips were down...even tho' I shot 86.7% against Allen in '46 and over 87% against Fernando in '48. Yes, I'd liked to have won a world championship. Who wouldn't?

Of all the pitchers in your era, who would you rate the toughest to beat? Why?

Fernando Isais was the toughest...always 85% or better against me. It seemed that he could always win the big one when he had to and that's

what makes a champion.

What brand of horseshoes did you use? Could you get shoes in dead soft at that time?

I threw Ohio shoes and I always used dead soft.

In recent years, only one or two of our top players broke the 80% barrier. In your 11 years of W.T. play, it averaged over 3.36 players who did. Can you think of any reason why the "Old Timers", as a whole, were better?

I played against Isais, Allen and Zimmerman for about 10 years. They were all above 80%. The tougher the competition is, the better one has to pitch. Perhaps that is the answer.

Casey, in addition to being a great horseshoe pitcher, you were also a great bowler. You may have more, but at one time you had thirteen 300 games and several 800 series. Do you still bowl? If so, at age 70, what average to you carry?

I haven't bowled since '82 when I hurt my knee and had to quit.

What was your best season's average? Do you still own and operate Casey Jones Lanes and Pro Shop?

My best average was 233 for 81 games. I also averaged 231 for 51 games while bowling on Green Bay Television in a "King of the Hill" show. Mary and I sold our bowling lanes to our daughter and her husband and we retired in '81.

Do you remember any special thing which happened in your career that you might tell us...humorous or otherwise?

On the humorous side, in the 1949 W.T., Ted and I tied for 2nd place. Ted wanted to play another game for the \$50 difference in prize money. We were 47-47 when just as Ted threw a shoe, someone yelled 'miss' real loud. Everyone laughed... because the playoff was kind of a fun thing and some of the people were rooting for Ted and some for me. Ted missed the stake completely. He asked me to let him throw the shoe over. I did and he threw a ringer. However, I won the game a few pitches later. This may be the only time a player threw a shoe over at a W.T. after the tournament was over. On the tragic side, Mary and I lost our 19-year-old son, Chuck, in an auto accident. It was very hard for

both of us.

Is there anything else our readers might find interesting in the life of Casey Jones? Do you still play horseshoes?

Once in a while...just for exercise. I play a lot of golf and have been playing close to par. We live in Apache Junction, Arizona six months of the year and the other six months in Wisconsin.

Casey, in eleven W.T.'s, you finished 2nd four times, 3rd four times, 4th, 6th, and 10th against some of the best pitchers the world has ever known. You had an overall ringer percentage of 80.4 and a winning percentage of 82.96, placing you 5th in both categories on the all-time list. That's a record of which you can really be proud. But you called it quits at age 36! Carl Steinfeldt, the oldest to win a W.T., was 58 years 10 months old when he won; Elmer Hohl won 6 championships between age 46 and 58; Curt Day won 3 between age 49 and 57. I can only speculate on "what might have been" if you'd pitched another 20-25 years. Almost certainly you'd have won at least once in that period. You may have "struck out" in your quest for a world championship...but each time you went down swinging. You had regrets...but no excuses...the mark of a true champion. There are not many who can claim a place among our greatest. You can!

The author wishes to acknowledge with thanks the research and the information provided to him by Susie Pritzlaff, Wisconsin's HPA historian.

LATE BULLETIN

On October 14, while traveling to a horseshoe event, NHPA Secretary/Treasurer, Donnie Roberts, suffered a heart attack. Fortunately, Donnie recognized the oncoming attack and had enough time to get off the road and find the nearest hospital. He was airlifted to Kettering Medical Center near Dayton.

I am pleased to report that Donnie is rapidly recovering and should be back to a modified work schedule by early November. It should be noted that some of his normal NHPA workload will perhaps be delayed during his recovery period. All Charter secretaries could greatly assist Donnie by doing their utmost to be timely and complete with their year end reports. Your patience and understanding during the next few months will be greatly appreciated.

Thank you.—Dwight Locks, NHPA President.