

Where Have All the Frontons Gone? The End of Newport Grand Jai Alai

The *pelota* hurling players are long gone, as is the jai alai arena itself, its massive granite wall demolished to make room for an additional 835 video lottery terminals (VLTs). The new VLTs join the more than 1,000 whirring and beeping machines already in place at Newport Grand, a slot parlor whose exterior resembles a supersized budget motel.

Thirty years ago, the 3,000 seat Newport Grand Jai Alai fronton was packed with fans who came to wager on the legendary Saez and other uni-monikered players. The athletes, mostly Spanish Basques, wore brightly colored uniforms and employed claw-like *cestas* in order to catch and fire rock-hard *pelotas* at speeds reaching 150 mph. Jai alai, a sport imported from Spain by way of Florida, was an exotic thrill and a hit, particularly in an era when there were no slots, Connecticut casinos or Internet wagering.

That time has passed. The Newport fronton, which used to have the words “Hi-Li” written on its exterior, and whose seating area featured bull fighting murals designed by RISD students, limped along with sparse crowds during the 1990s and early 00s. It finally closed in July 2003. Lobbying on the part of Newport Grand produced legislation that prohibited jai alai from being played in Rhode Island, thereby enabling Newport Grand to concentrate on the more lucrative VLTs. Following the fronton’s shuttering, a few of the players stayed in the area, a handful found work in Florida, but most returned home to Spain or elsewhere.

Jai alai can still be seen at Newport Grand, but only in the “simulcast theater,” where matches from Florida are broadcast for a few hours on weekends. “We’re definitely in the minority,” says Tom Risso, installed at a carrel on a Saturday afternoon watching the jai alai feed on a small monitor. At Risso’s side is fellow Middletown retiree Herb Spence, who, like his friend, sports a tall can of Narragansett next to his score sheet. Monitors in the surrounding carrels are tuned to horse and dog races, as are the big screens.

“It’s dwindling,” says Risso of jai alai, “I think it’s on its way out.”

According to Risso, the “handle,” or amount wagered, used to reach \$200,000 per night at Newport in the late 1970s when big crowds were common. “You had to make reservations for a Saturday night,” says Spence, recalling Newport Grand’s heyday, and describing the final years as “sad to see.” By the early 00s, meager crowds of as few as 50 to 100 spectators made for a somber atmosphere. Still, at least live matches were being played. “You don’t get the feel just watching on the screen,” laments Risso, who, along with Spence, makes it to Newport Grand most Saturday afternoons for the simulcast.

Jai alai was introduced to the Americas in 1898 in Cuba, and the first permanent US fronton opened in Miami in 1924. The game came to Rhode Island in 1976 when Arthur Sylvester, who owned the West Palm Beach, Florida fronton, expanded north. Newport Grand Jai Alai capitalized on the game’s sub tropical Havana-Miami cocktail allure.

“It was part of a night on the town,” says veteran *Newport Daily News* sports reporter Rick

McGowan. A jai alai match was considered ideal for a first date -- it was lively and exciting, and the downtime between games allowed space for conversation.

Jai alai's claim to being a bona fide sport, spectacle and tourist draw (and not just a gambling vehicle) is what prompted the state legislature to green light its opening in the first place. Connecticut had the same idea, and in the mid 1970s frontons debuted in Hartford, Bridgeport and Milford. Like Newport Grand, these operations also hit hard times in the 1990s, and by 2001 all three had also closed. In hindsight, the demise of the New England frontons appears inevitable, yet not so many years ago, jai alai seemed poised to take off. "Jai alai has begun a guerilla assault on the nation," announced *Sports Illustrated* in a 1975 feature story, and the sport was a prominent part of the opening credits for the 1980s detective show *Miami Vice*.

In the 1970s jai alai developed a loyal local following, and Rhode Island youngsters even took up the sport. Teenagers honed their game against the back of a mall on West Main Road in Middletown. "Before you knew it," says Newport musician Mike Warner, 51, "there was a crew of twenty kids behind the Ames store." Warner played the sport for fun as a teenager and young adult, and years later was the announcer at Newport Grand. Among other Aquidneck Islanders learning their way around a *cesta* in jai alai's early days in Rhode Island were several future pros, including Marshall Johnson, a beefy and powerful backcourter who starred at Newport and later in Florida in the 1980s.

Jai alai, which means "merry festival" in Basque, was developed several hundred years ago in the eponymous mountain region straddling Spain and France. Derived from handball, it is played on a cavernous three-sided court with a *pelota* (ball) that is smaller than a baseball, but harder and bouncier. The *cesta* (Spanish for basket) is only 3.5 inches wide, and features a woven reed over the frame and ribs. The ball typically arrives with plentiful spin on it, making jai alai's looping all-in-one catching and hurling motion difficult to execute. "Athletically, there's a lot to it," says the *Daily News's* McGowan, citing the coordination and concentration required to play the game well.

Jai alai's defining feature is its speed, and according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, in 1979 a Newport player was clocked hurling a ball at 188 mph. A good major league baseball fastball is in the mid 90s, and the hardest NHL slap shot rarely tops 100 mph. Not surprisingly, jai alai can be dangerous – players wear helmets, but can easily wind up with a shattered jaw or cheek bone from a rocketing *pelota* if they're not careful.

Outside of the Basque Country, jai alai has served almost exclusively as a gambling activity. Wagering on jai alai is as complex as bettors want to make it. Some pick a number, a shirt color or a particular player and then place a win, place or show bet as in horse racing. Others, including jai alai website host Ralph Butts, and Steve Skiena, Ph.D., a computer science professor at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, employ algorithms that factor in jai alai's scoring system, a player or team's position in the one to eight playing queue, and previous results to generate predictions. Employing "Monte Carlo simulations" (a computer aided statistical method) increases a bettor's odds dramatically; although Butts notes that the substantial house take makes winning money over time "an enormous amount of work," and very difficult. Skiena even wrote a book entitled *Calculated Bets* (Cambridge University Press,

2001) which is devoted to predicting jai alai outcomes, and uses the game as spring board to discuss a range of statistical and mathematical topics.

Gambling and jai alai are inextricably linked, so it's not surprising the sport has suffered from the taint of corruption -- a sore point in the jai alai community. Chip Young covered Newport Grand's 1976 opening for a local paper, and says that before being introduced to the players, "I was told: 'Don't mention anything about fixing matches.'" Young, co-author of the *Providence Phoenix's* Philippe and Jorge's "Cool Cool World" column, says that even if the Newport matches weren't actually rigged, "the aura of corruption was always there."

Predictably, jai alai's (and Rhode Island's) reputation for crookedness had fans screaming "fix" every time a player dropped one. "People would accuse me of knowing the outcome [and] working from a script," laughs former Newport announcer Mike Warner. Warner attests that the games were on the level, "They have a lot of love and pride in the game," he says of the mostly Basque players, doubting that they would compromise their national sport. Ralph Butts similarly dismisses the talk of match fixing as "a common misconception," often borne out of frustration when a player a bettor has wagered on muffs a seemingly routine play. "It's an incredibly difficult game to play," says Butts, "and you can't see that from the audience." Jai alai enthusiasts grant that occasionally a player might slack off on a point to help a fellow competitor down on his luck, but that appeared to be the extent of local match rigging.

In the fronton's final days, questions about the game's integrity became moot as fixing a match became pointless. Jai alai is a parimutuel wagering sport: The total money bet is pooled, the house takes a cut, and the remainder is disbursed to bettors depending on the type and success of their wager. As the pools diminished to pitiful amounts, a gambler who sought to influence the outcome by offering a bribe might barely net three figures, not enough to pay off the players, and certainly a miserable return for committing a crime. In the fronton's latter years, betting had declined so precipitously that Young recalls matches in which there was no payout for a given number as nobody had bet on it.

Serious problems in the economics of jai alai became apparent in the 1990s. A three-year industry-wide players' strike began in 1988 and had a devastating impact on the sport. Replacement players were brought in, the quality of play declined, and attendance dipped. There were also stories of poor behavior by disgruntled striking players toward those who did attend matches. "It was a very unpleasant time," says Butts, "a lot of people went away and never came back."

With jai alai reeling in the strike's aftermath, the opening of the Connecticut casinos at Foxwoods in 1992 and Mohegan Sun in 1996 proved a near knockout blow. New England gamblers could drive to the big time and didn't need jai alai anymore. Video lottery terminals (VLTs) were approved for Newport in 1992 in order to bolster revenues. The virtual slots were permitted without a local referendum as they piggybacked on jai alai's existing gambling license. Once in place, the VLTs began to devour their sponsor as patrons parked themselves in front of the machines, leaving the players a near deserted arena in which to hurl their *pelotas*. "Real bettors and gamblers are not exactly sentimentalists," notes Chip Young.

Slots promise instant gratification – push a button or pull a handle and you’re done. There is no figuring out who to wager on, nor must one stand at windows or machines to place bets, and then return later to collect winnings. “It was a way of life,” says McGowan of jai alai, “that was getting outmoded.” In the video age, the world’s fastest game seemed downright sluggish.

Once VLTs began subsidizing jai alai, it became clear that Newport Grand would be more profitable without its original *raison d’etre*. Jai alai is expensive to run: the rosters number 35 players or more, and the *pelotas* and *cestas*, which are handmade on the premises, aren’t cheap. Moreover, unlike jai alai players, slots never get injured, and don’t require work visas or salaries.

Jai alai, once an asset, had become a liability that Newport Grand was keen to dispense with. Not only Newport Grand, but also the state of Rhode Island had incentive to be rid of the game. The state was capturing ever larger amounts of money from VLTs; killing jai alai and increasing the number of slots would be an easy way of padding state coffers. “They [Newport management] were waiting for the day,” says Mike Warner, “when the state would be in a financial crunch and would want slot revenues.” Critics accuse owner Diane Hurley (daughter of founder Arthur Sylvester), of trying to bump jai alai off by making it sufficiently unprofitable that the state would sanction its abolition.

“Maybe she’s right not to promote it if it’s losing money, I don’t know,” says former Newport player Miguel Fernandez. There is little doubt that jai alai was in the red, although Warner calls Hurley’s 2003 claim that the fronton would lose 2.5 million dollars that year wildly inflated. Moreover, Warner contends that Hurley’s then proposal to turn the fronton space into a performing arts venue was pure fantasy designed to curry favor with legislators and pave the way for jai alai’s elimination.

In the wake of Hurley’s 2002 testimony before the Rhode Island Special House Commission to Study Gaming, it was clear jai alai was on shaky ground. The players were well aware of the dire situation and demonstrated in uniform on the State House steps in June 2003 in an ultimately fruitless effort to save their jobs. “Business is business,” grants Warner, “but the way they [Newport management] did it was pretty underhanded,” citing the eleventh hour amendment to the budget that killed jai alai in Rhode Island. In short, as former player Miguel Fernandez puts it, “The owner got with the government to take off the law that kept the jai alai.”

According to Warner, players were watching the budget debate on television while a match was being played. At half-time, one passed by him and made the throat slashing gesture to indicate that it was game over in Newport. The players were paid for the remainder of the season, and Warner says he was offered a position, which he declined, selling T-shirts in the gift shop for \$7.50 an hour, a fraction of what he had earned previously. “I’ve never set foot in the place since,” says the Newport drummer and guitarist. According to Warner, who fronts the band Dogie & the Cowpie Poachers, “I won’t even play a gig there.”

Miguel Fernandez, who now plays in Dania, Florida, has fond memories of his six years in Rhode Island, particularly the city of Newport. Fernandez lived on Thames Street and says he enjoyed running on the beaches in winter. “I didn’t want to move,” says the Tijuana, Mexico-raised Fernandez, but found he had no choice if he wanted to keep competing. Fernandez says

playing, and winning, is what he treasures from his time in Newport, “When you win a couple of tournaments and the people are screaming and telling you ‘you are the best.’”

While dim, the Southern New England jai alai flame has not been completely extinguished. Ralph Butts, a management consultant from Pomfret, Connecticut (40 miles west of Providence), keeps it alive with his [Tiger's Jai Alai Heaven](#) website and discussion forum. Butts is a long time jai alai fan, handicapper and computer buff, and his site is loaded with facts and lore. The “Chalk Talk” forum attracts gamblers, statistics geeks, and jai alai nuts of all stripes, who post on topics ranging from betting strategies, to news from the Florida frontons, to stories about players from decades past. Butts laments jai alai’s decline, but likens it to horse racing, “there’s a lot of beauty in the sport itself,” he says.

The former Newport fronton has been obliterated and the new VLTs, housed on two floors in the fronton’s old space, will bring the total number of Newport Grand machines to more than 2,000. Diane Hurley remains at the helm as 2007 agreement to sell Newport Grand to Cranston real estate moguls The Procaccianti Group fell through.

Whether Newport and its Lincoln counterpart, Twin River, will morph into full-blown casinos, or be challenged by a gambling establishment on Narragansett land or elsewhere, will continue to be the subject of fierce jockeying in the years to come. One thing is certain, however, whatever gambling’s future is in Rhode Island, it won’t involve a *cesta*, a *pelota* or a fronton.

This article can also be found on the [Quahog.org](#) website, and a much shorter version also appeared in the [Providence Phoenix](#) July 11, 2008.