History of Hooverball

It was once the most popular sport at the White House, played by the President, Supreme Court justices, Cabinet members and other high government officials. When Herbert Hoover left the presidency in 1933, Hoover-ball vanished. But it returned to West Branch, and another generation is having a ball.

Hoover-ball was invented, developed and perfected by White House physician Admiral Joel T. Boone to keep Hoover physically fit. It is a combination of tennis, volleyball and medicine ball. Teams of up to five people play on a court 66 feet by 30 feet with an 8 foot volleyball net. A 4 or 6 pound medicine ball is used and scoring is exactly like tennis.

"It required less skill than tennis, was faster and more vigorous, and therefore gave more exercise in a short time," Hoover wrote in his Memoirs.

"It is more strenuous than either boxing, wrestling or football," wrote Will Irwin, a friend of Hoovers, in a 1931 article "The President Watches His Waistline" in Physical Culture magazine. "It has the virtue of getting at nearly every muscle in the body."

The sport was without a name until New York Times Magazine reporter William Atherton DuPuy christened the game "Hoover-ball" for his 1931 article "At the White House at 7 a.m."

Hoover-ball was played by teams of 2-4 players with a six-pound medicine ball over a net eight feet high on a court similar to one used for tennis. The game was scored exactly like tennis, and played in similar fashion. The server throws the ball. The opponent must catch it on the fly and immediately return it, attempting to put it where it cannot be reached and returned. The side that misses the ball or throws it out of bounds loses the point.

"It is a distinctly strenuous affair, best understood as exactly like tennis except that the net is eight feet high, there are no rackets and the ball is a hefty medicine ball weighing six pounds." - The New York Times

"Stopping a six-pound ball with steam back of it, returning it with similar steam, is not pink-tea stuff," DuPuy wrote. "Dr. Boone estimates that as much beneficial exercise is obtained from half an hour of it (Hoover-ball) as from three times as much tennis or six times as much golf."

The sport originated in 1928, when shortly after his election Hoover took a goodwill trip to South America. While aboard the battleship Utah on his return, he watched a game of "bull-in-the-ring," a medicine ball game that was popular on naval ships. A soft nine-pound medicine ball was thrown from one to another of the players standing in a circle as the "bull" in the center tried to intercept it. During the trip, the president-elect played and enjoyed the game, which was the inspiration for Hoover-ball.

Hoover was not fond of formal exercise, but had kept active during his youth and as a mining engineer to keep physically fit. However, political life in Washington had pushed the 5-foot-11 Hoovers weight to 210 pounds just before the start of his term as president.

Hoover-ball was credited with bringing the president's weight down to 185 pounds during his term. It also helped in his remarkable record of not having missed a day of work because of illness while president.

"Getting daily exercise to keep physically fit is always a problem for Presidents," Hoover wrote. "Once the day's work starts there is little chance to walk, to ride or to take part in a game. Taking walks or rides early in the morning is a lonesome business, and the inevitable secret service guard when the President leaves the White House grounds is not enlivening company."

Hoover and Dr. Boone then hit upon the idea of morning medicine-ball workouts. Dr. Boone adapted "bull-in-the-ring" to Hoover-ball to help the president slim down. Four days after Hoover's inauguration the games began. The players experimented with medicine balls of different weights -- the nine-pound ball used for "bull-in-the-ring" was too heavy -- and with the net at different heights before finalizing the Hoover-ball rules.
Early each morning, from four to 18 VIPs would show up for the games on the south lawn of the White House. The participants soon became known as the "Medicine Ball Cabinet," although not all were official Cabinet members.

"At seven o'clock sharp they choose partners and begin," Irwin wrote. "A factory down by the Potomac blows a loud whistle at seven-thirty. This is the signal to quit, no matter how close the score; for the business of governing must go on. By this time, the players are usually in a reeking perspiration."

After the workouts, the players would sit down to a cup of coffee, a glance at the morning papers and humorous talk on pleasant matters.

Only once did Hoover cancel a game -- when he arose early to write a message to deliver to the Senate that day.

"Except for Sundays, we played medicine ball every morning of the week, including official holidays," Secretary of the Interior Ray Lyman Wilbur wrote in his Memoirs. "Only absence from Washington kept us away."

"We paid no attention to the weather except for a very heavy rain. We played in cold and wind, snow and rain, and in the four years we were driven indoors only two or three times, because of an unusually drenching downpour."

On those rare occasions when they were forced inside, the "Medicine Ball Cabinet" retreated to the White House basement to play their games.

The average age of the players was 53. Players would dress in flannel shirts, old trousers, sweaters or leather jackets, rubber-soled shoes, and, often, hats.

A shortstop on the freshman baseball team at Stanford before a dislocated finger ended his athletic career, Hoover was a "lusty" Hoover-ball player, according to one report. Irwin wrote: "The president has one special talent. He carries in his old baseball arm a powerful 'forehand drive.' When he volleys at close range, his opponent must usually give ground to keep from going over on to his back. President though he be, he expects no quarter and gets none."

One of the top players was Supreme Court Justice Harlan F. Stone, a former football star at Columbia University. Stone "is the strong man of the organization," DuPuy wrote. "When he hurls them, they stay hurled."

"The effect is that of a group of travelers tossing their luggage at a boat that has just pulled away from the dock, only to have the crew toss it right back again.... Four hours of this in 90-degree temperatures is no nap in the Oval Office." - The Des Moines Register

Hoover is more widely regarded for his achievements as a mining engineer, humanitarian and statesman than as a sports pioneer. However, he was a fan of both football and baseball, and enjoyed fishing and hiking. "His idea of a happy Saturday afternoon is -- when he can -- to watch a baseball game or to wade hip-deep in the tangled seclusion of a trout stream," Edward G. Lowry wrote for The Saturday Evening Post.

During Hoover's presidency, medicine ball games enjoyed widespread popularity. "Everybody may be playing it next season," DuPuy wrote of Hoover-ball.

But the popularity of Hoover-ball lasted only as long as the presidency of Hoover. In 1932, Hoover was defeated in his bid for reelection. And the medicine ball began it's move from the prominence of the White House to the storage closets in gyms across the nation.