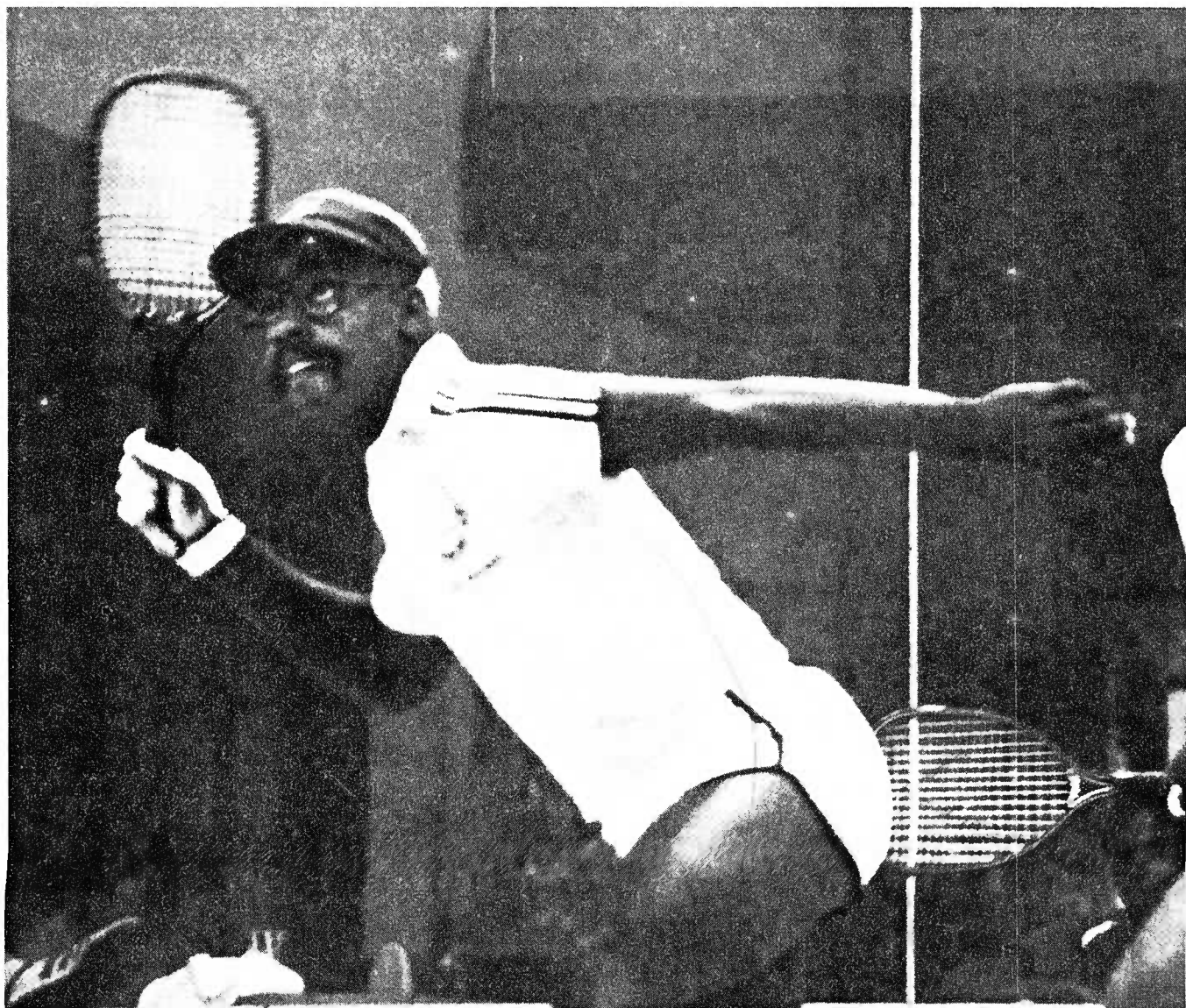


THE BLACK FLASH



Photos by Jean Krettler and Carole George

By Edward I. Placidi

Although blacks have made names for themselves as football, basketball and baseball players, there is a noticeable void in the professional racquetball ranks.

Bobby Stocker of Los Angeles is probably the best black racquetball player in the country. Although he consistently wins or places high in local tournaments, he is not ranked among the top 25 professional racquetball players. He thinks he should be.

"I figure I'm about number 16...20th at the very least. I just beat Mark Morrow who is ranked in the top 20," says Stocker, who has never been known to shy away from touting himself.

Often the only black in an open division

Bobby Stocker may be the best black player around but he says he can't get no respect.

event, Stocker is hard to miss. He sports a Yul Brynner haircut combined with a thick, long-hanging moustache and he has a muscular body. His play is aggressive. In fact, after Stocker won one tournament, a competitor said, "Stocker plays with unbelievable intensity. He stampedes his way to the championship."

Stocker, of course, will tell you how good he is. "I think I'm one of the most exciting players to watch." He will also tell you why there are

not more blacks in the pro ranks. "There haven't been many blacks because we took up the game a lot later," he says. "We didn't have access to clubs. It costs money to join and then there's monthly dues. Financial reasons kept us out. We gave our kids a football or a basketball, not a racquet."

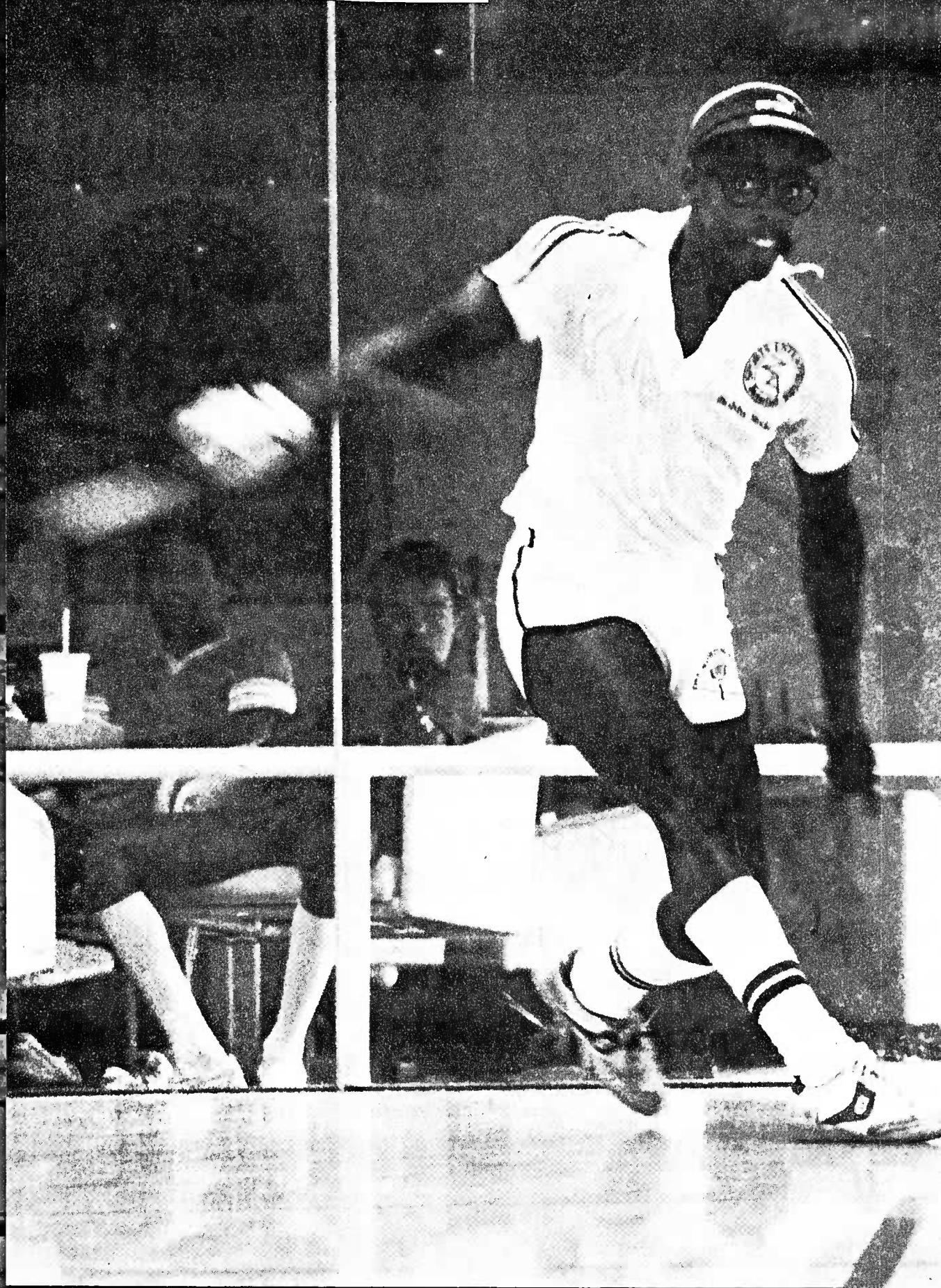
"Racquetball is derived from handball which is played in indoor clubs where you paid to play," says professional racquetball referee Larry Lee, also a black. "Blacks were excluded but it's changing now."

Perhaps, for this reason Stocker became more well known on the outdoor circuit where play time is free. He lost to Dan Southern in the finals of the Outdoor Nationals in 1980 and lost 21-20, 21-20 to eventual winner Brian Hawkes in the semifinals of this year's outdoor championships.

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"Racquetball companies should have a black on their advisory staffs endorsing their stuff," says Stocker.

Stocker says he began playing racquetball five years ago, picking it up by accident. Describing himself as a "hot tennis player around Orange County (Calif.)," Stocker wanted to try turning pro but couldn't afford to join the local clubs. Then one day, while waiting for a free tennis court at Santa Ana College, a friend asked him to play racquetball on one of the vacant outdoor courts. "He beat me bad but that was it," said Stocker. "One month later I beat him by the same score. I turned into a stone racquetball fanatic. I played six hours a day."

Within two years he had decided to make racquetball a profession, and began teaching at clubs and playing in as many tournaments as he could afford. Although many blacks are members of local racquetball clubs, Stocker sees himself as carrying the pro banner. "Most blacks are social players with no further ambitions," he says.

He also thinks he is not treated fairly by the press. "I don't know if it's because I'm black or what. I deserve the recognition many times but they won't write me up."

Generally speaking, the racquetball publications focus on the top professional players and Stocker rarely plays major pro events. Stocker does well on the local level but write-ups in local newspapers are infrequent and usually amount to brief listings of winners and scores.

Stocker also has a gripe against the racquetball manufacturers, whom he says shy away from endorsing him. "I'm disappointed," he says. "I hope they (the companies) know that blacks do play racquetball. They should have a black (he points to himself) on their advisory staffs—endorsing their stuff. I've become known by blacks around the country, mostly by word of mouth."

Although some would disagree with Stocker, he says that the racial factor has even come into play during matches. In the recent Southern California Pro-Am, Stocker defeated Morrow in the finals when Morrow walked off the court during the second game. "Morrow just didn't want to lose to a black man," says Stocker.

Morrow denies Stocker's claim. "I just think of him as another player," says Morrow. "I got

some bad calls (in that match). I've lost to him before. There's no prejudice that I know of in racquetball. Nobody gets any special treatment. The fact that he's black is not a factor. He should just be in there to play."

The pro players also deny there is any racial bias in pro racquetball. "Anything is open to anyone no matter what his ethnic background or race," says Jerry Hilecher, who finished last season ranked number four and also is without a sponsor. "A referee conceivably could be prejudiced for a point or two but that won't make a difference in who are the top players in the long run."

Stocker admits he hasn't searched high and low for a sponsor to finance his travels to pro tournaments. He says he was turned down by DP Leach and he hasn't pursued many other avenues.

"Companies are looking for images and maybe Stocker is not what they want," says Hilecher. "There's a fine line between getting and not getting sponsorship. It may be color but I hate to think that."

Pro Lynn Adams, a friend of Stocker, says she has never run across any prejudice in racquetball. She says Stocker's lack of pro victories has nothing to do with racial prejudice. "He's an excellent athlete—quicker than anyone else—who plays on a natural skill level," says Adams. "But on the pro level many players have speed and skill. Those on the top know the game better and that's the difference. He has the talent but he needs guidance to go further."

According to referee Lee, Stocker could well be one of the best amateurs in the country but "in the pro category he needs another year or two."

Currently Stocker is working as the club pro at Racquetball West in Culver City, Calif. and with Lee's help is hoping to go on an extensive tour around the country to give clinics and play in exhibitions.

Stocker admits other pro players may have better anticipation but he maintains there is no one quicker on the court. That is why they call him "Flash" or "Lightning."

"Everybody who sees me play says 'I am the quickest around,'" says Stocker. "Even the refs think I'm the fastest. I get to a lot of shots that they call two bounces on."

The question now becomes one of time. If Stocker is to make his move, he better do it soon. He is now over 25 and most of the top players are around 20. Lee thinks that it is now vital for Stocker to find a sponsor so he can travel to tournaments, and begin to seriously compete in the pro ranks.

But Stocker isn't worried. He says he is still on the rise. "A few years back blacks didn't know what the game was. If I'd been playing 10 years back I'd be phenomenal now. But I'm still improving, not like all the top white players. They've been at the same level for the last few years. I'm going to keep getting better and better."

And his goal? "I won't be satisfied," says Stocker, "until I win the indoor nationals."