

WORLD'S FASTEST SPORT!

JAI-ALAI SAY "HI-LI"

51st NIGHT
THURSDAY
February 8, 1951

48

SEASON OF 1950-51
CONDUCTED UNDER SUPERVISION OF
FLORIDA STATE RACING COMMISSION
RICHARD BERENSON
PRESIDENT & GEN. MANAGER

15¢

PROGRAM 14¢
SALES TAX 1¢

POST TIME
8:00 P. M.

BISCAYNE FRONTON
N. W. 36th Street at 37th Avenue
• M I A M I •



Words **Jake Lemkowitz**
Images Courtesy of the **Frank Lee Collection**

What happened to Jai-Alai? It used to be the most popular sport in South Florida, but today it's on the brink of extinction. During Jai-Alai's golden era between the 1950s and 1980s, fans and tourists came through the Miami *frontons* (Jai-Alai stadiums) by the thousands. Not just to watch "the fastest sport in the world," but to get in on it. Because before casinos on Indian reservations and gambling on the Internet existed, Jai-Alai was one of the only ways for Americans to get a legal gambling fix outside of Vegas and Atlantic City. Back then, the stands were packed and the players were Miami celebrities. Now they compete in total anonymity. The sport's last legitimate superstar, Michelena Arriaga, had his face blown in by a ball going 100+ miles per hour in 2001. After being released from the hospital a week later, he retired.

Jai-Alai is an ancient Basque game whose rules are similar to handball or squash, except there are no racquets. Instead, the players use long banana-shaped baskets to hurl the ball, called a *pelote*, at speeds of up to 188 mph. Jai-Alai is easy to understand and crazy to watch. The players literally scramble up walls to make returns, seamlessly catching and throwing the *pelote* in mid-air. Some claim the matches are

almost all fixed too, which adds an extra element of entertainment. The sport hasn't changed much since the first *fronton* opened in Miami in 1926. Since this is its American birthplace, it's fitting that this is where Jai-Alai is going to die.

Jai-Alai could once be found as far west as Las Vegas and as far north as Connecticut, where the sport was a hot attraction. Then it turned out that the



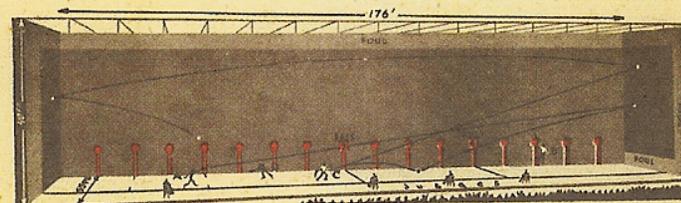
Connecticut frontons were being run by Whitey Bulger's Irish Mob. (Whitey Bulger is the real life equivalent of Frank Costello, Jack Nicholson's character in **The Departed**, and has been on the FBI's Most Wanted list for over a decade.) When someone figured out that the gang was skimming over a million dollars a year off of the Jai-Alai profits in 1978, Bulger's Winter Hill Mafia left a trail of dead Jai-Alai executives trying to cover it up. The frontons in Connecticut were never really able to fully recover. As for Jai-Alai in Vegas, the only venue there burned down in 1980.

But the sport's real death blow came in 1988, when all the Basque Jai-Alai players went on strike to protest unfair

labor practices. Since most players are Basque, play dropped dramatically. The timing couldn't have been worse. While the strike was going on, Miami got a basketball team, and new places to gamble began to crop up. By the time the strike was resolved three years later, the sport had lost its audience.

Now there are only three frontons left. Two are in Miami, and one is an hour away in Hamilton County. The vibe at these spots can be more like an AA meeting than a party, but it's still the fastest sport in the world, and it's a lot cheaper than going to see the Heat play. It might not be around for too much longer, either, so get your Jai-Alai fix now, while you still can.

JAI-ALAI



Server (A) throws to Front wall. Opponent (B) misses the ball, but his Teammate (C) takes it on bounce, returns it to front wall, causing Player (D) to get ready for a Rebote shot. Ball's speed is 100 m.p.h.

BISCAYNE JAI-ALAI FRONTON



The only Jai-Alai Fronton in the United States. It is considered the finest structure of its kind, and has one of the fastest and most perfect courts of all Frontons throughout the world.