

Racketlon ace Cleland has a deep bag of tricks

BILL HUNT
THE DAILY GLEANER

Glenn Cleland believes he still has more in that bag of tricks.

Like a magician pulling things out of a black hat, the 55-year-old professor at the University of New Brunswick unpacked a seemingly bottomless bag Wednesday. There were two table tennis paddles. Rackets for squash, tennis and badminton. Two pairs of shoes. Glasses. Wrist bands. A ping pong ball and a squash ball – all the tools of the trade required to play the sport of racketlon, which, as the name and the equipment suggest, is kind of a pentathlon of racket sports.

“I think I have some dirty laundry in there too,” he joked.

Truth be known though, Cleland left it all on the court in Birkerod, Denmark, last week. Representing Canada in senior elite (over 45) doubles competition at the world championship event, he and playing partner Dany Lessard they lost the bronze medal match to the team from the United Kingdom in the six-team world championship event.

Racketlon might have been the youngest thing in the Danish capital. Cleland did all the tourist things: the big bus tour, the canal tour, et al.

“What you realize is, Canada is so young,” he said. “Copenhagen might be

a thousand years old ... it was fascinating. I teach investments ... their stock exchange started in 1608. There's lots of history ... no new buildings. All they do is take the existing building and renovate it.”

Racketlon, by contrast, is but 16 years old, conceived in Europe around the turn of the century, it's actually the four racket sports played in specific order, under one umbrella. The games are played in order from smallest racket to largest: table tennis, badminton, squash and tennis; each match to 21 points. At the end of the match, points are totalled and the most cumulative points wins.

Cleland's only match was in doubles

for the bronze.

Canada fielded – courted perhaps, is more accurate – two teams for the worlds, an elite team and a senior elite team in what Cleland called racketlon's equivalent of the Davis Cup tennis competition.

There were eight players, six men and two women on the elite team; eight on the senior elite team. Canada was one of six teams in the competition, in a pool with top-seeded Germany and Belgium. The U.K., Denmark and Switzerland were in the other pool.

Canada beat Belgium and gave the Germans a run for their money. But

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after losing the first leg of the competition, table tennis, by 18 points, they couldn't make up the deficit. They won in badminton and squash, lost narrowly in tennis and wound up losing the match by 16.

Canada finished second in their pool and faced the U.K. for bronze. But their effort was weakened by the fact team captain Frederic Damours, the number one singles player in senior elite, also played for the elite team. He was competing for the elite team at the same time. Canada lost in singles. Cleland and his partner, Richard Soucy won their doubles match by five points. They won in table tennis and badminton, lost in squash – "they gave us a lesson in squash," he said.

But they rebounded to win in Cleland's primary sport, tennis.

"You're not going to beat me in tennis," he said.

After the team event, there were individual competitions. Cleland combined with Soucy, just turned 45 – and they beat German Antonio Zeoli, considered a legend in the sport and ranked number two in the world individually, and his playing partner, before losing to Denmark in the next round.

In the 55-and-over competition, he and Lessard played together and lost a close match to the number one seed.

But Cleland left them with a warning – he's working on his game, and he'll be back for the Racketlon Gold Cup world singles event in Germany in late November.

"I've already got my ticket ... I'm all set," he said. "You only turn 55 once. I'm assuming I only have one chance at this, and I'm doing it. No regrets."

For Cleland, it's all about the memories.

And the clothing. There's also the clothing.

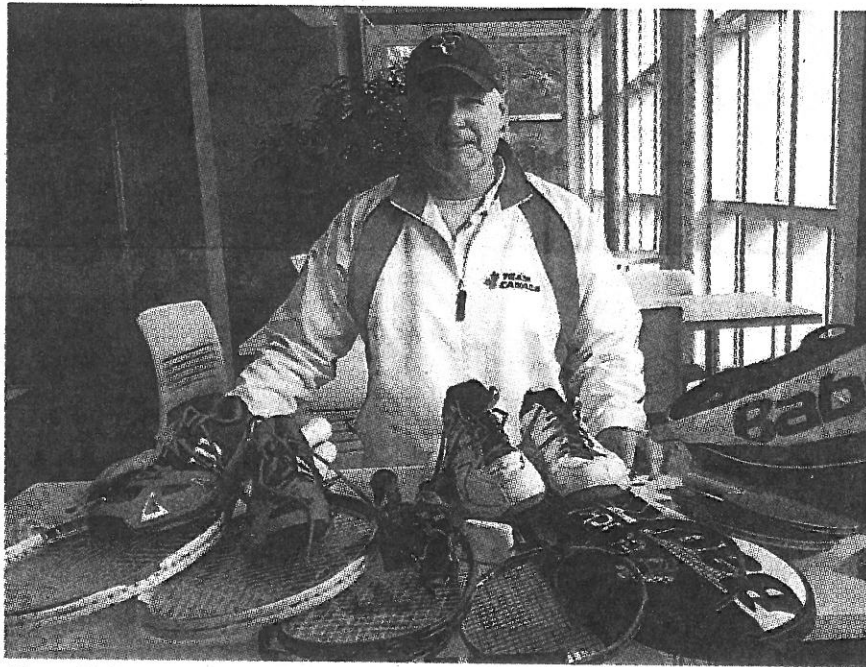
"That's what you play for," he said, proudly sporting the white jacket with Team Canada on the front and Racketlon Canada on the back.

"I'll be the only person in Atlantic Canada that has it," he said as he stood up to show off the uniform. "I told the guys, 'When I go to the tennis nationals, I'm wearing it.' There are only 15 people in Canada who have it. There's one light one and one dark one. That's what you play for."

Cleland has his own theories on how to broaden the appeal of the sport – exchanging the order of sports, for example; and handicapping of competitors to bring more balance to the competition.

He wants to improve his footwork to be better in Germany and improve in squash and table tennis in particular.

"That's where I have the most improvement," he said. "If you get behind in table tennis right away, it's tough."



Glenn Cleland shows the array of equipment needed to play the sport of Racketlon: table tennis, badminton, squash and his specialty, tennis.

PHOTO: BILL HUNT/THE DAILY GLEANER



Glenn Cleland of Fredericton recently competed at the World Racketlon championships in Denmark. PHOTO: BILL HUNT/THE DAILY GLEANER

Next on the radar for Cleland is the senior national tennis championships. That's where he'll wear the Racketlon Canada uniform. They come up Aug. 21-27 in Ottawa.

"At the end of the day, even though I love the other sports and I respect them, I still love my tennis," he said. "It's fun, because there is some variety to it."