These guys really have great hands

By Bob O'Donnell Ft. Worth Star-Telegram

The immortal right hand of Washington Senators pitcher Walter Johnson supposedly measured 14 inches from the end of the wrist to the tip of the middle finger.

Bronko Nagurski, the Bears Hall of Fame running back, wore

a size-19 ring. Connie Hawkins, the former basketball star and playground legend, can palm a ball with his thumb and middle finger.

"And I'm working on a bowling ball. When I get that down, I'm joining the circus," Hawkins says.

Big hands. Not good-sized hands, but big hands. The kind of hands that make their own shade. The kind you would mount on your den wall if you pulled them out of the water with a hook.

It's one thing to spend hours building biceps in a weight room. It's quite another to be born with the mechanism to hold an entire rack of pool balls at one time.

At the Saranec Glove Co. in Green Bay, they claim to have made a glove for a participant in a strong-man competition a few years ago, the thumb of which measured six inches in circumference. They can't remember the guy's name, or the year he ordered the glove, but they remember that thumb. Big hands are like battleships in that sense—they leave lasting impressions.

Ask anyone who has met Julius Erving what they remember most about the man, and they will tell you his quiet dignity and humongous mitts. And not necessarily in that order. The Doctor could palm a basketball off the dribble when he was in junior high school. His middle finger is nearly

five inches long. Big or small, the hand is a complex device with 26 bones, 20 muscles and 23 tendons that affix

it to the forearm. Most people have parents and grandparents to thank for the size of their hands, though it is possible to broaden or thicken the hands over the course of time. Developing muscles is one way to do it; subjecting bones to repeated trauma is another. (The bones actually become harder and thicker when used for things like fending off 270-pound defensive ends.)

But the actual dimensions of the hand are written in genetic code. "Your basic large hand is hereditary," says Dr. James Bennett, a hand surgeon at the Baylor University Medical School in Houston. "The exceptions are usually

skeletal abnormalities." Perhaps the most famous exception is wrestler Andre Roussimoff, better known by his stage name,

Andre the Giant. Roussimoff is a giant. He is 7 feet, 4 inches and weighs 525 pounds. His size is attributable to a condition known as acromegaly and results from a dysfunction of

the pituitary gland. Acromegalic giants are characterized by big hands, feet and skulls, and in Andre's case, this is what big means: You can pass a silver dollar through his ring.

Pituitary imbalances aside, professional athletes have produced amazing specimens.

In the late 1960s, the Washington Senators had in their organization a catcher named Wayne Brescher, who as it turns out

could hit them. It's said Brescher fit all 15 pool balls into one hand. "All 15 plus the cue ball. And I

palmed them, held them up," Brescher says.

Brescher, 41 and now a game warden in Louisiana, went on to more lasting fame in 1969 when he held eight baseballs while trying to make the Senators' roster. Eight is believed to be the major-league record, though fans of the late Rube Lutzke might take issue.

Lutzke was a third baseman for the Cleveland Indians from 1923-27 who bounced around the minor leagues before finally calling it a career. In 1931, he found himself with the Chattanooga Lookouts of the Southern League, and advertisements in the local papers at the time invited people to games early to see Lutzke hold nine baseballs. Assuming his hand didn't grow in the Tennessee air, Lutzke probably pulled the stunt as a member of the Indians.

There was nothing unofficial about the size of Sonny Liston's hands, which were so big he had to have boxing gloves specially made. Liston's fists measured 15 inches and were the largest of any heavyweight champion. Primo Carnera came close at 14 inches, but he stood 6-5. Liston was 6-1.

Mort Sharnik, the director of boxing for CBS, was with Sports Illustrated in the early '60s when Liston was terrorizing the sport and remembers the visible effect of those hands.

Sharnik said, "They looked like cannonballs when he made them into fists. Everything about Sonny was foreboding—his eyes were dark and often red—and his hands were an extension of that visage.

"He was the kind of puncher that just to look at him gave you a headache. His opponents used to say that his punches hurt like nothing they'd ever felt. His hands were a visible extension of this

It's doubtful the size of Liston's hands had anything to do with his actual punching ability. Jack Dempsey's fist was 11 inches, Rocky Marciano's 11 and Joe Louis' 11. All three had lullaby power in either hand. Nigel Collins, editor of The Ring magazine, says of a fighter's fist measurement: "It's about as important as the ankle measurement."

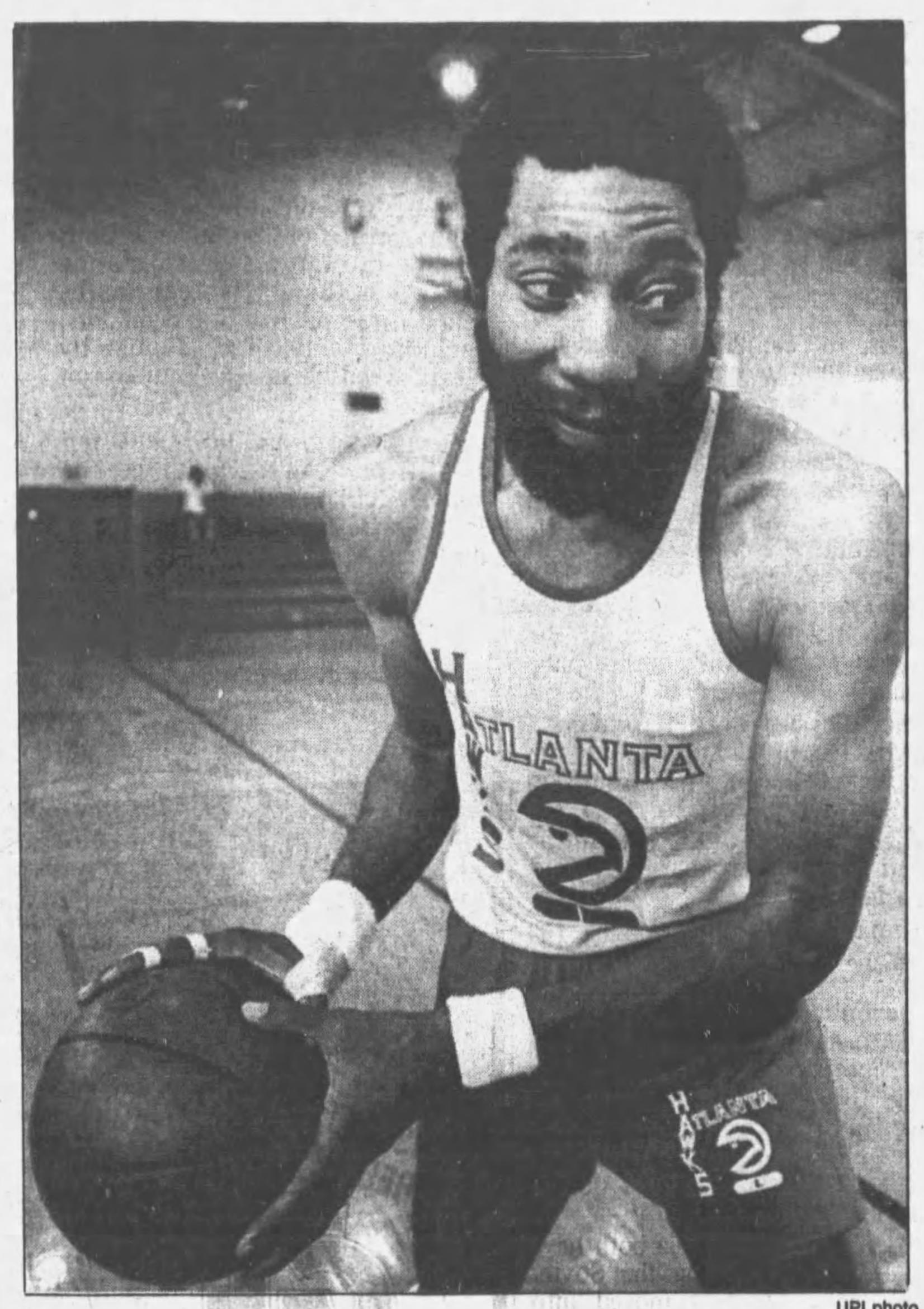
Which is about where hand size seems to rank in the statistical pecking order of other sports, well below categories such as height, weight, vertical leap and time in the 40-yard dash. The prevailing sentiment, expressed most succinctly by Washington Redskins general manager Bobby Beathard, is that "big hands are an advantage" to an athlete "but not a guarantee." Even at positions such as wide receiver, shortstop or center in basketball, hand-eye coordination and strength are the requisites, not size.

Two of the biggest and most effective inside players in the National Basketball Association, Moses Malone and recently retired Jeff Ruland, have comparatively small hands. Both are 6-11 and weigh at least 250 pounds. Malone, a two-time NBA Most Valuable Player, wears a size-12 ring; Ruland barely can palm a basketball.

Jerry West, general manager of the Los Angeles Lakers, says, "Big hands are something that should could hold balls better than he be a plus but aren't necessarily.



Tribune photo Bronko Nagurski's Football Hall of Fame ring—size 191/2—fits around two fingers of an average-size man's hand.



Connie Hawkins could palm a basketball using just his thumb and middle finger. Controlling the ball one-handed was a big asset.

"If you've got a guy with big hands who can't catch, what good are they? The important thing is average-sized hands. having sure hands."

dexterity than those with average his arms measured 82 inches. or small ones. The brain, which is the wellspring of hand-eye coordination, simply doesn't discriminate against size.

muscles in the forearm. They are the ones that do most of the heavy work, from pushing and pulling to grabbing and twisting. The muscles of the hand are for finer things, such as picking a guitar. reflect hand strength.

Mickey Mantle, who could hit a

baseball as far as any man, had the forearms of a blacksmith but only

Certainly Johnson had more Bennett and others agree that going for him than enormous hand size has nothing to do with hands. He threw 99.7 miles an coordination. There is no medical hour with a body that was big (6evidence that a person with big 1, 200 pounds) and farm-boy hands will have any more or less strong. From fingertip to fingertip,

"To throw a baseball, you need a combination of muscle fiber, strength and coordination," Texas Rangers pitching coach Tom Hand strength, on the other House says. "The more leverage hand, is a function of the large you can get, the more force on a baseball. Sure, it's an advantage to have large hands, if you've got the good arm to go with it."

But for the athletes who combine coordination, strength and ability with trophy-sized hands, Consequently, hand size does not the advantage can be decisive, the effect intimidating.

Harold Carmichael was a cor-



Philadelphia Eagles and Dallas Cowboys. He had speed, agility, a 6-8 frame and could wrap his 9inch hands nearly halfway around the football. Carmichael was capable of grabbing (not to be confused with cradling) a pass with one hand. "We used to call it 'stabbing' a ball," he says.

practice:

The Eagles were running a sevenon-seven passing drill, and the competition between the offense and defense was growing hotter by the minute. Carmichael came across the middle on a pattern and had a step on the defensive back. The pass slightly. Carmichael said he reached back with one hand, stabbed the those days and became scuffed and

defensive back in defiance. "Our coach at the time, Dick Vermeil, just went nuts," Car-

michael says. "He loved it." punishing runner who never strayed from the straightest path to the goal Fame quarterback who was a Bears at you." teammate of Nagurski's, says Bronko used his big hands with great effect.

"He had a devastating stiff-arm," seen come close to it since is Walwould go right through you. It handed?

would cover your whole face." Hawkins and Erving were able to beats small. Hands down.

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nerback's worst nightmare during do spectacular things in midair behis years as a wide receiver for the cause they could control the basketball with ease. From funky spins and finger rolls, to free-form dunks, they literally helped shape modern basketball with their hands.

"Control was the key," Hawkins says. "In the professional game, there's a lot of contact, and it's an advantage to be able to fend someone off with one hand and still be The stab that stands out most in able to control the ball with the Carmichael's memory occurred in a other hand, especially on a layup or a dunk.

"A lot of guys aren't able to go up and control it without using two hands. I could move it around and fake with it with one."

Batters who faced Johnson often complained that it was difficult to pick up the ball as it left the great came his way, but was underthrown pitcher's hand. The fact that baseballs stayed in play longer in ball and never bothered to tuck it dirty as the games wore on had away. He ran down the field, arm something to do with it. Undoubtextended, showing the ball to the edly, so did the size of Johnson's

"It would be like a normal hand holding a golf ball," MacFarlane says. "Johnson threw almost At 6-2, 230 pounds, Nagurski had sidearm, bringing his body through all the advantage he needed over his and then his arm before finally reopponents before you considered leasing the ball with a tremendous his hands. By all accounts, he was a snap of the wrist. The entire effect was like seeing a truck coming around a curve and all of a sudden line. But Sid Luckman, the Hall of something comes out of that truck

So think about it the next time you pick up a basketball, or have a third-down pass go off your fingertips on a Saturday morning. Hand Luckman says. "The only one I've size isn't everything, but wouldn't it be nice to stab one every now and ter Payton. That hand of Bronko's then? Or snatch a rebound one-

All things being equal, big usually

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BRIEFS

Athletic Director Gene Corrigan, responding to published reports Saturday in the Atlanta Journal and Atlanta Constitution, denied that Notre Dame concocted a story that injuries would cause wide receiver Alvin Miller to miss the 1987 football season to cover Miller's ineligibility for signing with sport agent Norby Walters. "Any implication of a cover-up presupposes knowledge," Corrigan said. "I have never talked to Alvin about this situation, and I have no knowledge that he improperly signed with an agent, as reported." Miller suffered his second serious knee injury last October and underwent surgery. He could not practice this spring and was a question mark for the '87 season. He informed the school in April that he didn't plan to return for his extra season of eligibility. Corrigan added that it wasn't until May that anything came to light regarding a federal grand jury investigation of agents and its decision to subpoena Miller.

Illinois Racing Board members, acting under appeals from owners and horsemen from Quad City Downs, have reversed a July 7 ruling and granted the East Moline facility exclusive offtrack betting rights in Peoria. Owners and lawyers from Balmoral in Crete, which had been granted a competitive license in Peoria, protested the board's action and promised to appeal.

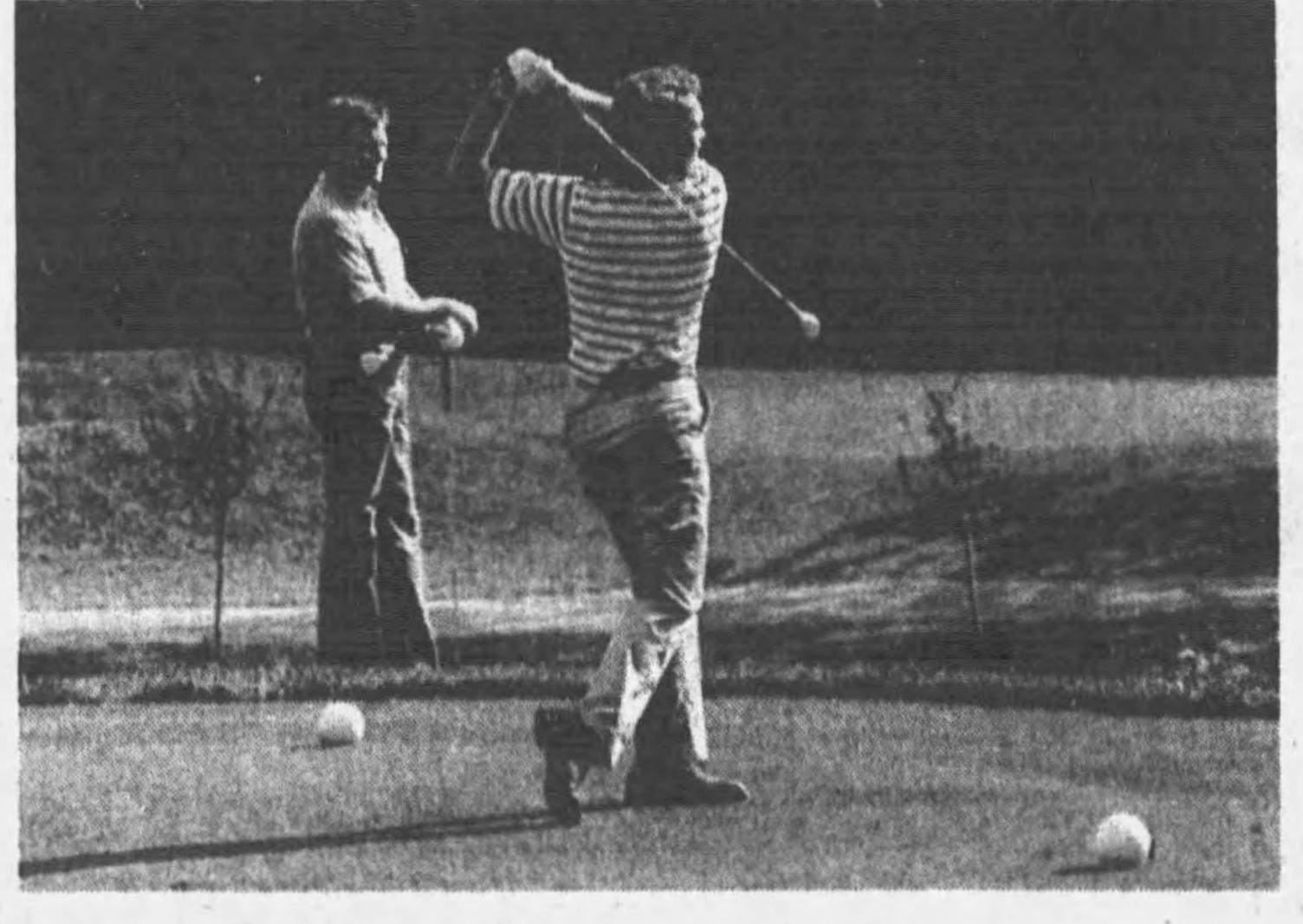
The Texas House of Representatives has approved a bill that would require sports agents to register with the secretary of state's office. The bill, which had been approved earlier in the state Senate, goes to Gov. Bill Clements.

The National Basketball Association has unveiled its 1987-88 schedule, and the Bulls open Saturday, Nov. 7, at home against the Philadelphia 76ers. CBS' first national telecast will be Saturday, Dec. 12, featuring the Bulls at home against Houston. The 38th All-Star Game is at Chicago Sunday, Feb. 7. The world champion Los Angeles Lakers' only appearance at the Stadium is March 10. The Boston Celtics are in town Jan. 12, March 18 and April 24, the season finale.

An official announcement is expected soon of the retirement of three-time Olympic boxing champion Teofilo Stevenson, meaning the Cuban will not seek an unprecedented fourth title next year. It has nothing to do with charges against the 36-year-old Stevenson in connection with the death of a motorcycle rider, a Cuban official said of the impending announcement.

Defending champion Bobby Rahal nailed down the pole position for Sunday's Molson-Indy race in Toronto by improving on his first-day qualifying lap from 104.780 miles an hour to 105.170.... Tim Richmond, seeking a record fourth straight win at Pocono International Raceway in Long Pond, Pa., set a qualifying record with a one-lap speed of 155.979 m.p.h to capture the pole for Sunday's Summer 500 NASCAR Winston Cup Race.

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