



**Jake's
Adventures**
By Jake Satin-Jacobs

Editor's Note: (Sept. 12, 2001) Jake stuns his quirky opponent, Jim, in a seaside game of Smashball. Too bad most business meetings can't be conducted on a beach with a ball and paddle in hand. And the opportunity to underscore your point – as Jake does – with a bruising slam to a sensitive area.

The Zen of Smash

My friend Jim is an odd character.

He's pear-shaped from the combination of years of limited exercise and decades of eating chocolate chip cookies, to which he is uncontrollably addicted, and washing them down with apple juice, which he pours on everything, including his Quaker Natural cereal.

He is chinless, with small teeth, bulging eyes and, until recently, when I threatened to kill him if he did not have it removed, he sported a ponytail comprised of twenty or thirty of the few hundred hairs he has left on his head.

Jim is six feet, six inches tall. His skin is translucent and you can see all his veins and arteries. He looks like a giant glass vase blown by a craftsman who had spent the first years of his career making balloon animals at children's parties.

I've known Jim for twenty-five years. I see him twenty-five or more times a year and each time we spend at least eight hours together. That represents about half a million hours of companionship and, in the whole time, we've probably had fewer than 1,000 hours of conversation.

To say that he is quiet would be an understatement. We can go for twenty hours grunting at one another and pointing or just nodding. That's partly the result of our being very much in tune with one another and partly because, as regards most things, he has nothing to say. It may also account for at least part of the issue that has ended three marriages for him.

Left him for a volleyball player

Jim and his first wife met when they were in Navy Boot Camp. After a year of marriage, Mavis hooked up with a sailor more to her liking. Jim doesn't talk about it much. His second wife, to whom he was married for ten years, left him for a volleyball player named Tina. He doesn't talk much about that either.

His third wife refused to leave the house if she had a chancre sore, a blemish or indigestion. She would also remain indoors during the two weeks prior to and following the full moon. Jim actually left her because he couldn't get any "quality alone time." I don't think he will ever talk about that.

Jim and I are clearly very different. We are certainly not bound together by conversation. We are united in "SMASH." That is what aficionados of the game call Smashball, a little-known and less understood game of paddleball played on the beach, using an eight-inch diameter oak paddle and a 1½-inch hollow rubber ball.

In this game there are no boundaries; there is no net, no scoring and no apparent winning or losing. The object is simply to keep the ball in play. It sounds childish. Then again, while Jim and I are quite different, we are both very childish. SMASH is the way we are learning to be adults.

People who don't know the game are confused by it. They sometimes stand, staring for fifteen or twenty minutes trying to discern the boundaries, rules and scoring. Most of them walk away, shaking their heads, understanding that they don't understand.

No water, no beach

I love the guys from Cincinnati or Gila Bend -- places where they either have water but no beach or lots of beach and no water and certainly no SMASH -- who will stand watching with the whole family and then, as they walk away, describe the rules and scoring of the game in detail to the innocents surrounding them.

Play always starts out gently and kindly. "Let's get a rhythm," I always tell Jim. The volleys are short and looping enough for slow, lumbering Jim to get to them. Even then, he usually returns the ball ten feet beyond my reach and I end up running back and forth like a terrier trapped in a small room with an agitated bat.

I try to stay calm and be understanding. Jim is a little out of shape. I am in better physical condition. It is incumbent upon me to run down his wayward shots and gently loft them within easy reach of his translucent arms.

Eventually, I get tired and start grouching about his failure to move his feet and his paralytic stroke that sends the ball flying in random directions. He responds with a plethora of lame excuses that involve his joints, tender footsies and the position of the sun.

As the game progresses and he loosens up, Jim responds with greater effort and it becomes less frustrating and tiresome for me. But each time I raise the level of play, reducing the arc of the ball and increasing its speed, we repeat the same silly ritual of accusations and justifications. Eventually, with time and patience on my part, we reach a point where the ball is moving with pace; we are standing twenty-five feet apart, we are both running and sweating and there is only one thing left to do. WELT (more in a moment).

A little psycho-drama

Now, I said that the game had no scoring and it doesn't. There are no points. There is simply an end. After several minutes of running full tilt, swinging as hard as possible, the blaming and defensiveness disappear the little psycho-drama begs for resolution

The need for and the joy of exacting payment was never clearer to me than June 22, 1999, when, after a long and frustrating volley in which I had blamed Jim for all my troubles on and off the invisible court and badgered myself unmercifully for each shot that was not perfectly hit, I let fly an unspeakably hard shot, which struck Jim on the thigh, one inch west and two clicks north of testosterone central.

A purple, circular, brightly-ringed WELT immediately popped through his skin and Jim dropped to his knees like a stunned infidel at a miracle. I was beside myself with joy, jumping up and down and screaming the way I imagine I would if I suddenly inherited enough money to fund a healthy retirement.

When Jim had gotten to his feet and recovered enough to resume a

somewhat masculine posture, we ran at each other and bumped chests or high-fived or something equally macho-idiotic. I really don't remember. I was giddy and lightheaded, bathing in the blood of my prey.

No agenda, no one in charge

SMASH reminds me of many business meetings. There is usually no agenda and no one is really in charge. The participants have little in common outside the topic at hand. Some people appear useless, but have sudden moments of brilliance. Others are just not up to the task. Some people play better than others.

The better players have to exercise restraint, lobbing topics into the area of understanding of the slowest participants. Communication has to work its way through all the accusations and excuses before any real dialogue can take place.

Most meetings may be like bad Smashball – endless, meaningless exchanges. But the really good meetings are like really good SMASH. The participants eventually work through the defensiveness and forget the accusations, the pace quickens and it all ends with a decision.

When the decision is made depends upon the exhaustion of the participants. Who makes the decision depends on expertise, power and a neurotic need for resolution. The idea of final resolution is celebrated by all – winners and losers alike.

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