

Grudge Matches

It's accuracy; accuracy; accuracy. Nothing else. Speed doesn't matter any more. Quality, not quantity. The younger generation never understand that. Neither did I when I was much younger. But I haven't looked back since 1969. Jemima Squair: 1969 accuracy champion in the IFTWA. Twelve winks, three feet from the pot - wham, bang, thank-you, ma'am - I got them all in with just 23 shots. 23 squidges, as we used to say in the International Federation of Tiddlywinks Associations. That fairly made Gottesmann of the USA sit back - he thought he had it in the bag with his 25 shots. He gave me a real American MCP look when I lined up my winks - "a woman", he was saying, "and a limey at that!" But 23 broke his record and then broke him: shortly after that he resigned his post as Secretary of the US Federation and disappeared into oblivion; someone said he cut off his shoulder-length curls and volunteered for Vietnam.

There, got you squopped now, my little man. Oh yes, you can look at me like I crawled out from under a Council-funded stone. You can teach at your fancy fee-paying school, smoke a pipe and grow a beard; but you can't beat Jemima Squair at Tiddlywinks. And, no, you're not much good at de-squopping, are you? There - that's three in the pot! Seventh game to me - and I'm winning 43 points to 6.

Looks like I'll be the only representative of the school to win a match at anything. The pupils, as expected, suffered annihilation in rugby, badminton, cricket and football. Anything that requires some hand-eye co-ordination or some teamwork. We don't do co-ordination in this school. All right, they rallied a bit when it came to games of Cheat and Canasta - but they still lost by the narrowest of margins. And as for Monopoly - the mothers of those rich little blighters from that other school probably have the rules to Monopoly tattooed on their breast, for the edification of the very young; with those fees, they need to win thousands before they're out of nappies.

There! - that's another game done: first three in the pot, seven points to me, eight games down and 50 points to 6 up: AND I've got you double-squopped on the mat. Humiliation, in my book. What do you make of that then, young Justin Pettifer?

Those poor little dears! And as for their teachers - not a lot better. Absolutely thrashed at golf - both singles and foursomes. Fleeced for every penny they possessed at Bridge. Driven off the roads - literally, in some cases - when it came to the motor-rallying; some of them were lucky to escape with their lives. But what on earth did they expect? They were up against the idle rich here, "masters" from a school where social skills count for far more than imparting knowledge, drivers who grew up in MG sports-cars.

If you could see me now, Gottesmann! "Magic Mike", they called him, partly because of his winking skills (all flash, no body), partly because of his ability to do wonderful things with mushrooms. It was the late 60s, after all. Did you see how I squidged that wink across - what? - about 2 feet of space, straight from a squop? What skill! Accuracy - I said it once, I say it again. Accuracy, Mr Pettifer, that's what it takes. And I'll thank you to know it. Good God, boy - he's all over the place!

Mr Beesley, he thought he might stand a chance in one of the more arcane areas - Latin-American dancing. No, not a hope in hell, very elegant Beesley! As for young Roberts at snooker - it was just embarrassing to watch. And you'd think that the Geography department would know better than to take on ex-Army staff in the Orienteering competition; they're still out there, somewhere. The ex-Army boys

have offered to go back and look for them, but Hamilton would rather tear off his own head than admit defeat to that crowd of yompers.

So, the standing to date, Campbell-Bannerman's College: - 23, Boroughfield High - nil. But when I pull this match off, we can salvage some pride. And I may even get a couple of days' peace in the staff-room, before they start goading me again with their tiresome tittle-tattle.

Ha! - caught you disturbing my wink, Mr Pettifer! Clumsy bugger - I'll quote Rule 12 at you, and if you do that again, I walk away with all seven points. Seven points gives me the match.

We went metric in 1975: had to convert the accuracy standard from 12 winks at three feet to 10 winks at one metre. You might not think that would make much of a difference: three extra inches, two fewer winks. But it just didn't feel right to me; and of course the Spaniards have dominated since then.

All right, then, let's line up this wink for the pot. Take your time, Jemima Squair, pride of Boroughfield High, take your time.

Damn! What did he say? What did you say? "Speed it up, woman", was that it? "Got chaps to teach", have we? You want accuracy, not speed, in this game. Accuracy - oh, bugger it! Missed it. And you got yours. Moron! Let's try some speed then, Mister Rat-Face Pettifer. Let's just - damn! missed again. All right, so you got yours in - so, you get all seven points now. I can afford it.

Used to be good at speed - 1963, 1965, 1966. Fast as they came. Then in bursts Aneurin Astles - the Welsh Wizard. 1967 onwards: 24 winks potted from a distance of 18 inches, in 26.5 seconds. Incredible! Amazing! Best I could do was 31 seconds, and that was hot. Still is hot, in these technologically-advanced times. We just split the empire between us then - Jemima on accuracy, little Aneurin on speed - in more ways than one. But I think we could get that old touch back, don't you think so, Mister Pettifer? Just watch me...

Oh, bugger it, seem to have lost some of that old touch. Still, it's only the tenth game, and there's still 30 points between us. I only need 7 to win. Come on, Pettifer, I'll show you what an old girl can still do. Don't you scoff at me behind my back, with your supercilious smile and your can of Coke. Hamming it up in front of your friends, eh? I'll show you. Let me just - what do you mean? That was no deliberate foul. Referee - whose side are you on? Stupid woman - my cardigan simply brushed the winks, that was no deliberate foul. Cardigans do that. That's what cardigans do, woman!! Yes, I know Rule 12 - I *wrote* Rule 12, you little bitch!

They're in league, I tell you. No respect for the old timers. But we can show you a thing or two about how real tiddlywinks is played. Me, Aneurin, Mick from Ireland - we were a trio of Celtic angels in those days. We strode like gods and goddesses over the mats of world match-play. Exhibition matches the length of the land, Student Unions threw open their doors - and their bars - to us.

Poor old Astles: come 1975, the Europeans converted the speed challenge to 25 winks from 50 centimetres, and Aneurin just cracked up; his concentration snapped at twenty winks, then he just freaked out, leaving the field clear to the French... It was a stitch-up.

Blast, buggery and blast again - what is happening here? I used to be the best at speed! I'll show you, Pettifer, old chap. Not only am I the best, the very best, at accuracy, I'm pretty damn good at speed, still. Thirty-five years on. I think a little refreshment from the hip-flask is in order here - no rule against *that*, to my knowledge!

That slut - I'll bet she's sleeping with him! How come we've done the fourteenth game, and he's all of a sudden got 48 points? That doesn't compute... Hell, what's happened here? Get a grip, Jemima. Back to accuracy, it's what you know best. You've been doing it for four decades after all. Calm down, girl, cool it. You're still in the lead. Slow, slow, take the measure, slide down the angles, and squidge down slowly - damn! Missed again. You say that thing one more time about me being slow, mister, and I'll pull a knife on you! Don't think I won't - I've got a knife taped where you don't get to look, ever since Kabul in 74. A man's stomach is the surest way to a man's heart, that's what my friend Mary used to say - with six inches of cold steel through the gut.

OK, OK, so it's the last game and all to play for: 55 points to my 50. You've been in worse situations, girl. What about that night in Istanbul in 1972? Or Mario in Sicily? You got out of those ones - damn! Concentrate, woman - he only needs the first pot to - bugger!

He's only done it. How in hell did he manage that? What have you done, Jemima Squair? What have you done? Only blown it...

---