

Table tennis article in GQ magazine

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American Gladiators

Behold the glory that is American Pong: Olympic hopefuls, has-been foreign stars, bitter up-and-comers, the socially inept, and a dwarf who could blow you away. The only thing missing is the fans.

By Matthew Klam

It's the middle of my second day at the United States National Table Tennis Championships, the sudden-death game of this best-of-five match between two pretty good players, top forty in the country, Tuan Le leads, 8-5. His opponent, Courtney Roberts, moves nimbly, but against Le, gravity isn't helping. Courtney stands six three; he's 220 pounds, a light-skinned black man with a jacked physique and shaved head. To train for elite Ping-Pong, he benches 375, squats 565. I don't know why; he says the real key is vitamins and plyometrics. Tuan Le weighs 120 pounds, grazes five feet one. He plays without recognizable flourish, with no visible happiness, a tiny medical doctor with a cube-shaped head.

On the next point, he lets one float longishly; it hangs. Courtney bounces lightly on the balls of his feet, then smokes it down the line.

Le dives, gets a racket on it. Courtney does it again. He really puts the plyometrics to work. He wheels around, his feet come off the floor, the striated muscles of his thighs pop as he cranks another down the line, an outside side-spinny thing, whizzing corkscrew. Tuan Le digs and lobs, and now they're trading full baseball swings, standing five paces back from the table, about forty feet apart, ka-pock, ka-pock, both guys backed to the rear barriers of the court, hitting big topspin, crushing backhands to forehands. The ball moves through the air as if it were solid rubber, it cuts sharply, drops suddenly, explodes off the table.

Tuan Le comes around late on maybe the ninth ball of the rally and frames one off the edge of his paddle, and the ball sprays thirty feet into the air, ten rows up into the stands, then disappears beneath the seats. Roger, the kid sitting next to me, the only other spectator at "center court," claps.

If this were Europe, he tells me, and we were watching near-great players at a major championship, there would be hundreds, or more likely thousands, of paying customers howling, waving banners; if this were Sweden, where talented teens are sent to table-tennis high schools, there'd be fans dressed like Vikings, with plastic helmets, plastic pigtails, face paint; if this were Austria, where the great Werner Schlager's likeness now appears on a postage stamp, or the big-money leagues of Germany, they'd be drunk on stadium beer, screaming these players' names, blowing trumpets. If this were China, Singapore, Japan, if this were England or Ireland or Italy or Qatar,

hundreds of thousands more would be watching on TV. But we're in America, in the Las Vegas Convention Center, during one of the slowest weeks of the year. And since Tuan Le framed it, it's up to him to step over the barrier and crawl under the bleachers and find the ball himself.

The match grinds on, the table game versus the power game. There's the infuriating, nauseating insolvability of Le's spin, the agonizing quickness, the sweet touch of his drop shot. Courtney is tall and noble and made of granite. He appears so dedicated and tormented, so out of place in this small, weightless foreign sport. He should be throwing bodies, trying to stomp the quarterback. He should tear Le's head off and eat the inside out. Instead, he loses the match.

Table Tennis has been around for at least a hundred years. One version of its origin has it that British soldiers overseas, bored witless, put sculpted champagne corks into play using cigar-box lids. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the sport had a brief boom in England and the United States as a parlor game played on a dining-room table, and maybe because of its addictive nature, it developed a reputation as something that mad you google-eyed. For a time, it was even banned in the Soviet Union.

I hadn't seen a Ping-Pong table in years until the people I share an office with invested in one and we crammed it into a little table-sized room. We painted the walls green. I invited friends over. I'd been struggling over a book about family and death, and the Ping-Pong table became an object over which I could lord control. The babyish ease of hitting balls, the predictable plonk, it killed anxiety. Some friends who came to play got the fever, too, and while it had started out as a kind of ha-ha fucking-around thing, the good times sort of tapered off, and I cooked up a few vendettas. During the day, I'd take breaks and spend time alone with this garbage can full of balls, practicing trick shots. If someone heard me practicing, he might appear, paddle in hand. And then the shit was on.

The people who beat me the worst were a somewhat bald-headed dude who eats chicken wings with a knife and fork and is quick as a rabbit and happens to be a tremendous squash player, formerly top-five in the country; and a musician buddy, one of those scowling, obsessed geniuses with now girlfriend who wears sandalwood oil and needs a shower. The musician and I had one or two close matches among many. The squash guy beat me 600 times in a row without ever seeming to feel guilty. The two of them had something, an attribute that, from the outside looking in, went beyond mere mechanics. There was, frankly, something freakish in their ability to concentrate. I beat the crap out of a few people, too, but while I kept at it, I couldn't beat either of these guys and felt there was something wrong with me.

After a while, I bought a book on technique and another on the history of Ping-Pong and an instructional video that, if you rewind over and over, could help break down the fundamentals. Then I found the Maryland Table Tennis Center in Gaithersburg – maybe the best known training ground in the country – which is really not much more than an unadorned garage. The place is run by Cheng and Jack, former

Chinese National Team members. There were a dozen or so tournament-grade tables, a row of dusty couches, a shabby little office by the door, Chinese newspapers and magazines, and a television playing video of the 2001 Osaka World Championships. Fifteen or twenty people drilled intensely as a small thin man with a wispy mustache walked around picking up balls off the floor with a long-handled fishing net.

In studies on sports in America, table tennis is stuck in the "indoor games" section, with bowling and darts. While some vast part of the world considers it not just a valid athletic activity but in fact the athletic activity, Americans don't. In this garage, though, the gravy was bubbling. I watched the warm-up of a microscopic boy who should've been home watching television in his Spider-Man pajamas but instead was snapping perfectly grooved crosscourt forehands at a woman who was either his mom or sister or coach. She wore high-heeled mules, no socks, a tight belly shirt, jeans, gold dangling earrings, metallic blue nail polish, and matching eye shadow. Her body rocked back and forth in metronomic rhythm, flicking machine-gun backhands. The ball stayed an inch or two above the net. They sped it up, really cranking on it, and kept the ball in play for fifty, then a hundred, then 200 hits. There was something unbelievably ant-like and insistent in their tenacity. Their form was perfect, elegant. It looked like a deeply gratifying meditation. She had eyeglasses on top of her gelled hairdo. The father sat beside them on a plastic folding chair, lost in reverie.

The sport I witnessed that night was definitely not the thing we played in my office, not the thing you play at home with a sandwich in one hand. It made me want badly to understand what had gone wrong with Ping-Pong here, why it had never caught fire.

The number one leisure sport in America is bowling. Crash, boom. Football, baseball, basketball – these sports now live almost solely for the spectacles. Whatever else you want to call them, these are release sports. That's what Americans seem to want: release. Or miserable, dependable fitness. Consider these wildly popular no-fun American activities: swimming, jogging, Pilates, StairMastering – mindless pastimes designed to keep you fit. Elliptical training. Cripes.

In this garage, though, in an industrial park in Gaithersburg, I found a small flourishing sports counterculture, like a band of rebels, determined to make American table tennis into something else. Not corporatized, not jacked up on steroids, not expensive, not easy, not dull. Standing there amid the clatter, I thought that maybe I could look further and find a pure sport in a moment of beautiful evolution, not yet tainted... which is why I came out to Vegas.

The Name of the tournament is a little misleading. Only a handful of players here are actually contending for the National Championships. For the rest of the gladiators, it's a chance to win a couple hundred bucks in whatever bracket they qualified for: the elementary-school championship, the over-80, the wheelchair singles, the standing disabled.

I notice, among the participants, entrant number 785, an older man

with a piece of electrical tape wrapped around his ear, catatonically plinking forehands to another geezer. In the far quadrant opposite the hot-dog cart, a man in a flesh-color hard-plastic body brace, Velcroed front and back, plays a guy with a long gray beard and a lumberjack shirt, in gym shorts, with two full-size black knee braces.

Everywhere you look, there are athletic specimens shunning the latest fashions. A potbellied guy with the ruddy face, distracted glare, and bowlegged walk of a high school calculus teacher, in a worn-out thick tracksuit; another man with muttonchops; many more flicking, snapping, cracking balls; others just hanging out with towels around their necks, gassing with Ping-Pong buddies from years past. There is an ancient timelessness to this group; they're like the hobbits. Here's a guy seventy pounds overweight, his comb-over taking wing, floating an elegant underspin backhand chop. And past the toupeed guy who whines that the Vegas altitude "makes my balls float" and the father in an all white who tells his 10-year-old kid to "get back in there and take care of business" – just when you think you've seen it all –there's a dwarf, Mitch Seidenfeld, and he's kicking the normal guy's ass. Until recently, Mitch was the number one player in Minnesota. A full-time coach and family man, he has a whip-cracking forehand and twenty different kinds of serves. He turns out to be a really nice guy and used to rank in the top one hundred in the country. According to the guy he's beating, the book on Mitch is: "Compact strokes. Plus, you look across the net and see a dwarf and get confused and never catch up"

There are moments when I think that the passion for this sport is itself not unlike a physical deformity, because it stays with you until you die and seems incurable, and its strangeness makes you an outsider in your own land. Consider Eric Boggan, the best American player in the past fifty years. He played professionally in Europe for most of his career and peaked in the early '80s, ranking as high as eighteenth in the world. Boggan is lanky and shy and was known for smashing paddles and screaming at himself, "You play like dogmeat!" He'll be inducted tonight in to the USA Table Tennis (USATT) Hall of Fame, at a banquet in a rotating Stratosphere Hotel. Since 1991 he's been a postal carrier, plays no exhibitions, doesn't coach. "That's the perfect job for Eric," one of his disciples told me. "He's very introverted. Got a little bit of the Rain Man going. He wants to concentrate on zip codes."

Mark Hazinski, seeded fifth here, is 18 years old and has a kid's scruffy goatee, a silver hoop earring halfway up his left ear, and purposely messy hair pushed into his eyes. He has a broad-shouldered frame and is easily six feet four. He caught the attention of the most prominent American coach when he was 9 years old. At 12 he beat the top men's seed at a statewide championship; in 2001 he made the U.S. National Team, taking out everyone who mattered along the way and finishing in a three-way tie for first. In this second-round match, he hits big, terrible forehands that so overwhelm his opponent it almost gets painful to watch.

Hazinski was raised in Mishawaka, Indiana, and is midwesternly polite and well liked. (On Saturday, when he reaches the semifinals, the announcer introduces him as the "Hoosier Thunderbolt," which causes

him to hang his head in shame.) He has reached the squeak point for an American star. If he stays in the United States, he'll travel to regional events that he's already won a bunch of times and compete for the same old trophy and \$300. He'll probably have no choice but to focus on college, which doesn't make any sense, considering that he doesn't even go to school. Hazinski's been home-schooled since age 14 so he can train all day, and he has no other goal than to make it as a table-tennis pro and attain Olympic glory. The time is now, if that's what he wants, because the lightning-fast reflexes drop off in a player's twenties. The only choice is to move overseas, to compete against young players whose whole world is table tennis.

Unlike Boggan, and maybe Hazinski, most studly American-bred players never make the trip; they accept the foregone conclusion that the game will never catch on here, will never be loved by crowds, and rather than move to some place where the food stinks, they wean themselves from this thankless game and find new obsessions – accounting, medicine – though they know they'll never re-create Ping-Pong's excitement. One guy who hasn't given up is Barney Reed, ranked fourth here and on a hot streak. Barney sees the shitty standing of Ping-Pong in America as a conspiracy of negative forces, most notably the table-tennis establishment's crusty m.o. and its total inability to market the game. "I could sell this to anybody." He says. "You gotta stage exhibitions where you see guys running over the barrier, lobbing, getting back, smashing, the crowd going crazy. Americans need a show. We can do that."

This week, nobody is more talked about than Barney, who this past summer finished serving a two-year suspension for using a banned substance. He looks on the whole ordeal now as a blessing. "Every talk show across the nation mentioned it," he says. "A table-tennis player being suspended for steroids? I mean, the Paul Harvey show, and Jay Leno mad a joke about it. It was huge. Now I'm the bad boy. I got a full-page story in Sports Illustrated. I've won all these titles, four-time U.S. National Team member, but this is how you get ratings."

Unfortunately, the stars need more than ratings. Beyond the lack of seed programs and facilities and funding needed to inspire or support talent, I couldn't shake the feeling that the people who administer this tournament are somehow invested in keeping the sport to themselves. At the highest level, the event seems firmly in the death grip of people who are territorial and woefully unhip – like the former president of the USATT, who shows up each day in a different jackass ensemble: an American-flag tracksuit on opening day, zany genie pants the next, an Uncle Same costume after that. And then there's the problem of Marty Reisman, who in 1952 was ranked number three in the world, the highest ranking ever held by an American. He's still playing. This week he's here, striding the hall dressed like a cruise-ship lounge singer in a Panama hat and big Phyllis Diller sunglasses. He's also the figurehead of a retrograde movement against the sport's only technical advance of the past half century, the sponge paddle, a modification that did for Ping-Pong what graphite rackets did for tennis: sped up the points, made the game more explosive.

On the final day of the tournament, Marty will play an exhibition, still using his spongeless hard bat, to which Barney will respond, "This exhibition is disgusting. This is the fucking pathetic story they want told. Marty Reisman and his hard bat. The old-timers will not release the sport. It's sad."

There are some other things here that make Barney crazy. On top of everything else, there's his ex-girlfriend, Jasna Reed, formally Jasna Fazlic, whom he refers to as a "psycho Commie bitch." Jasna is the top-seeded women's player. In the tournament guide, her photo is not a candid action shot but a posed portrait, the camera looking down on her as she slides off the edge of a bench, grinning, her paddle laid against her bare outstretched thighs. Jasna has an adorable wooden-puppet's perfect upturned nose, large brown eyes set close together, a small mouth, shiny short brown hair, and a bouncy samurai ponytail. She plays every match in a different-color pastel miniskirt.

Whatever personal animus Barney might bear, he inadvertently tipped me off to what other players have voiced, an ugly little xenophobic current in the American Ping-Pong world that becomes more and more detectable as the tournament goes on. The best players here – the ones who dominate year after year and who make up the bulk of our U.S. national teams and will play for us in the Olympics this month – have, for the most part, nothing to do with "American" table tennis. They come here from China or war-torn Eastern Europe, former greats in their home countries who finish out their waning days destroying the field while growing old and out of shape, regretting the lack of real competition, acting pissy or vaguely pleased as they take the trophies that might otherwise grace the mantels of our greatest pongists, who happen to be better at this game than you'll ever be at anything in your life.

As one top-twenty American-bred player put it, "If you take away the foreigners, I'd be, uh, higher up." In the past nine years, exactly one guy from this country has won the U.S. National Championship. Two Chinese guys (they're Americans now, just like us, but you know what I mean) won it a combined seven times, and a guy from the former Yugoslavia, this year's number one seed, is the same guy who won it last year. Everybody hates him.

The first time I see Ilija Lupulesku, he's hitting with Jasna. Lupulesku doesn't look athletic. He's beefy and tends to scowl. He wears black socks. He looks like a cross between Ben Affleck, with that enormous head, and Ernest Borgnine. As the tournament progresses, Lupulesku will justify his ranking. He'll play with a mixture of big power and the most graceful touch. In fact, he'll show the same plodding, brawny confidence Borgnine showed as Major General Worden in *The Dirty Dozen*, the same cunning in battle, unembarrassed by his nostrils and tooth gaps.

Jasna, on the other hand, appears almost mournfully intense on the court and screams at her own winners in a squeaky, high-pitched voice.

The tournament's number one seeds are both Yugoslav, former teen superstars, both medal winners in the '88 Olympics, raised in a nation that fostered young talent and treated its table-tennis heroes to salaries and free apartments and cars. Jasna and Ilija were married a

dozen years ago, but then the war broke out, and Jasna, being from Croatia, was now living with the enemy.

Everyone here knows the stories. One guy sitting behind me explains that Lupulesku lost his doubles partner, Zoran Primorac (who is Croatian too and is still one of the best in the world), and that Jasna dragged Ilija all over Europe, and that their careers and their marriage fell apart. Then an umpire who has just finished a match overhears us and tells me that everyone loathes Lupulesku because this pas August, when he was slated to play for the United States in the Pan-Am Games, he called and said he had thrown his back out playing soccer in the former Yugoslavia. The team went a man short and was destroyed.

Lupulesku slides his paddle into a little zippered case and takes his bag and says something Slavic to Jasna, who cocks a hip and leans toward him. As he leaves, I try to get his attention, but he turns away. "I can't talk to you without translator," he says, his face glistening, and walks off. Jasna sees my tape recorder and sits beside me.

She explains that it's humiliating, sometimes, to play here. That Ping-Pong is the fastest sport in the world, but also sometimes boring, and that you have to live inside it your whole life if you want to be a champion. She tells me that her nation turned against her when she left Croatia. She tells me that when she first got to the States, in the mid '90s, she lived at the National Team Training Center with Barney Reed and that she changed her name to Reed, not because she wanted to marry him or was anxious for a green card but because she thought his name sounded American, whereas people pronounced her name so that it sounded like phallic. They broke up, and she has nothing bad to say about him. But when a man in a tie-dyed T-shirt calls out to her and interrupts us, she just can't believe it and shakes her head in amazement. "These people, they come to you like, 'Hey, dude, what's up? How do I hit my serve better?' If this was a real sport here, they can't even talk to us. They would have to pay for tickets to come and see."

She looks out over the tables and erupts in a repertoire of Slavic scowls at the state of the American sport. "You come to see great players," she says, watching her old boyfriend and a few of the higher-ranked Americans fight it out. "This is ridiculous. Any real players can kill these guys."

It's Saturday. I've been in this overgrown warehouse for four days, and I've seen enough Ping-Pong up close for eight lifetimes. Staring at Jasna throughout the women's final, watching her hop up and down in her skirt, it occurs to me that matches on TV would need constant slo-mo replay, because the ball moves too fast to see and, more important, that when she plays, Jasna gets a look on her face that is the look of someone whose whole heart is possessed by something. It's the kind of face I'd like to kiss when this is all over, for about an hour, smack on the lips, on a big soft couch.

As one after another of the homegrown guys get knocked out, I try to look beyond the obvious finesse crap and blazing assaults to see the

difference between players who are all one thing, who are living inside it, and the merely amazing ones who lose.

In the men's semifinals, Mark Hazinski faces a heavily favored David Zhuang, four-time national champion, two-time U.S. Olympian, and blows him off the table. The prospect of Hazinski going all the way is looking very good. He has the wingspan, the quick hands, the emotional void and bamboo nerves that set a player apart, and in these last hours he has maybe begun ridding this hall of some of the shame and mockery that shadows American players.

But as Hazinski's miracle run continues, and as Ilija Lupulesku wrecks whoever gets in his way, some little bit of exhaustion or sadness grows in me. For what? Neither Jasna nor "Lupi," as she calls him, has an awesome career to look forward to. They can't help but love their moment of glory here, and they hate us for it. Which makes this whole event even sadder and makes me want even more for Hazinski to beat Lupulesku once and for all, as if that could somehow make things right.

For the finals, the bleachers are teeming. The national anthem is broadcast over the sound system. The CD skips so badly they shut it off. The audience is quiet as a golf gallery. I'm dying for a trumpet, a drum, some face paint, anything to signal the moment at hand.

It starts bad, and Lupulesku wins the first two games before Hazinski can play through his jitters. Down 3 to 5 in the third game of this best-of-seven series, Hazinski finally starts to wail. But Lupulesku is comfortable on the defensive; he's like a speedy lizard loping, bounding, fishing for smashes, trying to tire Hazinski out. These are big points, five or six in a row, where both players take up the full backcourt, Hazinski mostly bearing down, trying to crush it, Lupulesku practically falling into the front row of spectators as he chucks these honking lobs that boomerang around the net, then bounce dead. But then Hazinski cracks three whopping forehands, and for the first time in the tournament he utters a sound. He yells. He wins the game, and the crowd roars

Lupulesku is 36. When he was a teenager, he was ranked in the top twenty in the world, and while he was at his peak, the war took apart the delicate mechanism that was his world-class pairing with Primorac; or maybe having his country torn apart ruined him. Mark Hazinski is currently ranked number 366 in the world. His favorite food is Taco Bell; his favorite movie is Happy Gilmore. He's a big, polite, dedicated kid, playing his guts out. A year ago, he was the best junior in the country, and now this. As game 4 continues, it's a great match, but the audiences is wildly for Hazinski. Everyone in here feels it. Fore the moment, this match is about America, and the new kid busting out, and the end of Communist sports Gulags and old-world domination.

I hate Lupulesku like everyone else does. I hate him because I love Jasna and because Jasna wears pastel-color miniskirts and because an hour ago, when she won the women's finals, and before that, when she won the doubles and also the mixed doubles (with her ex-husband), I

realized she still loves Lupi. It's obvious, and now I watch her as she sits in the front row, cheering madly for him, best friends with his wife, kissing his baby on her lap. Jasna loves him so much that every time he takes the court, she's somehow in the periphery, not so much trying to please him but because she seems to feel protected by his presence. He is her home.

"Lupi can return many balls far from table," she explained to me earlier. "He's famous for his defending. He's practically a wall. He can't let anything get away."

In the fourth game, Hazinski goes on an all-out offensive, driving Lupulesku into the weeds until he finally misses. Hazinski wins the game, and now it's even, we're in the fifth game, and the stands grow more and more noisy as Hazinski goes up, 5-2. Then somehow he loses five points in a row. At 5-7, Lupulesku moves in close and grunts and unleashes a perfectly grooved forehand hook. He nails it so cleanly, something pops. I think he's broken the ball as it rips past Hazinski and smacks the nylon tarp barrier behind him with a loud snap.

Lupulesku calls for time. It wasn't the ball. He smashed his hand during that point. He's busted his racket on the table edge, he's bleeding, his thumb may be broken. Jasna is up and running, glowing with excitement, and hands him her own racket. He clenches and unclenches his fist.

The match finally resumes, but now there's now hope for any of us. Lupulesku is a sort of monster, and woken up, the beast plays even meaner. He wins that game 11-8. The final game is worse. He rolls over Hazinski.

At match point for the championship, the entire hall is stunned silent. Lupulesku strides to his corner, touches his towel, then turns and exhorts the crowd with both arms straight up in the air. "Awww, come on!" he roars, half pleading, half accusing. It's a weird moment. He knows everyone hates him. But now people cheer, because he yells at us to cheer, because we're lucky to have him here, beating the crap out of us, showing us what it's like when their game is your only way out. And I can't help it; I cheer too. And then he gets down to the business of crushing American Ping-Pong.

Maybe we won't be able to turn the Hoosier Thunderbolt into a Lupulesku. Maybe this country will never find room for a sport that's hard to televise, that doesn't require good looks or youth or even a sense of fashion, that just needs loads of mental energy. And maybe now is not the best time to push a sport that gives the rest of the world another chance to look down on us. This game may never get more respect here than air hockey.

One of the first guys I met this week, a veritable institution of the American sport had been kind enough to agree to his with me before the tournament's end. Some hours before the men's finals, when I still held out hope that Hazinski would pull it off, when I hadn't yet exactly accepted America's fate as kings of beer pong, Larry Hodges and I found an empty table.

Larry is a typical table-tennis nut: a middle-aged guy with great reflexes and a personality disorder stuck somewhere between high-functioning autism and dorky social misfit. He's a terrific athlete, has written more than 800 articles on Ping-Pong, and is the winner of eighteen national titles.

I didn't bring my own paddle to the tournament (I'm not that stupid), so I borrow a very spongy one from a little kid nearby, and with the kid glowering, Larry makes me a deal. If I can touch his serve – just get a racket on it -- I win the point. And if I can touch his return of my serve, I win the point. It seems easy enough as we warm up, but then he serves me a few, and I'm not even close. And on my super-speedy-topspin serve, he steps in and knocks it past me with a graceful follow-through, then winces from tendentious. I have to go find the ball three courts away. Then he takes my tape recorder from me and holds it in his hand, using the back of it as his paddle. I still have the recording of him jabbering as he beats me, 11-4. "He misses again," he says, and then gives a little lecture on form in his nasal monotone. The tape recorder is a trusty ten-year-old Sony. You can hear the crack of each hit on the case as he narrates his history of beating pikers using foreign objects. It started back in college, giving out handicaps in the dorm, like the time he played somebody using a Magic 8 Ball and someone else using a hockey stick. Listening to the tape, I start to consider that this invisibility, the freedom to acquire expertise in a field no one cares about, the luxury of doing something just because it's a kick in the pants – this is growing on me. Sure, the powers of U.S. table tennis could market the sport better. Sure, Mark Hazinski and Barney Reed and all the other Barneys-in-waiting deserve to have someone bring their sport out of the closet. But maybe this is just who we are. Maybe Ping-Pong should remain in our basements, the balls covered in dust under our pullout couches, forever a haven for skid-mark nerds like Larry... and me, I guess. The tape goes on. One time in college, he beat somebody with a gerbil in his pocket and a book balanced on his head. Crack. He's beaten people using a credit card – crack – a forty-pound cooking pot – crack – and ice cube (though he actually had to use three ice cubes, because they melted). He rallied once wielding a 3-year-old with a sheet of sponge stuck on the kid's forehead. "It's my life's dream," he says, "to beat someone with a frozen fish."