

Sports\_memories.doc

Though I have several other areas I want to type about that may be more important than this, at least from some views, I very much want to say something about my sports experiences.

I was never an outstanding athlete in any sport. However I was once a young man with a decent body and was in reasonably good shape well into my 40's. I played at least 50 hours, often more than 100, in a number of sports. I want to at least identify some of them here and say a little about my experience.

Diving:

Most of my diving experience was while living in Venezuela. We belonged to the Little Theater Club and it had a nice pool and both a high and low diving board. I also dived a few times at the Circulo Militar – the Venezuelan Officers club – which had an Olympic platform as well. I don't recall ever diving off the Olympic high platform, though I did jump from there.

I loved diving. I never took lessons and never competed. However I got fairly good at getting a good high spring from the board. Timing was everything. The other important thing was to be very careful not to do anything that might cause you to hit the board coming down. I touched it a few times but was never hurt.

I learned to do dives that look like those done by the experts. The Swan, the Jack Knife and the 1 and ½ forward flip. I could also do a back dive and a back flip. I don't think I ever had much success with a back 1-1/2 flip I could also complete a double flip sometimes. I especially like the Swan and Jack Knife. Both had this wonderful moment at the top of the arc where I felt suspended in air/

Because we were often playing around in the pool, splashing each other and splashing people on the side I also learned to a cannon ball (simple) and a Watermelon. The Watermelon gave by far the biggest, and longest splash, especially when I was in my 40's and had put on some extra weight. I was the only one I knew of (that had to be plenty – it's no big deal) who could splash the life guard stand at the Hastings pool.

The watermelon is kind of like a Jack Knife. The trick is get as high as possible and to come down with your body perfectly straight when your hand hit the water. It did not matter whether you touched your toes at the top like with a jack knife. The angle you hit the water could be straight up and down or with your feet a little nearer the board than your hand to give more direction for the splash. The deal was that when your hand hit the water you rolled into a tight curl, this would swing your hips forward over your hands so that they hit the water with extra speed due to the spin. It helped if you had a bigger bottom. I created a large, high, and directed forward splash. My sons loved it when they saw me do it in Hastings.

I would dive for 20 minutes or more at a time at the Little Theater Club. I loved the feeling of floating through the air and being able to control my body as it turned in different directions.

One year I was a clown, with my friends, at a water ballet show at the Tamanaco. The girls did beautiful (or so I thought, but then I thought the girls were beautiful) synchronized swimming and we just did goofy things. I was not afraid to hit the water at any angle from any turn of the low board. A belly flop would hurt a little, but not too bad. I found it could hurt a bit hitting wrong off the high board.

## Swimming

I enjoyed swimming from my earliest memories. I especially liked swimming under water. At my best, after working on it for weeks, I could swim three full lengths of an Olympic pool underwater and push off on the 4<sup>th</sup>. I would dive to start this and would coast a long way after pushing off of each end. That's my current memory – though now I wonder if it was two lengths and push off on a third. This was more than I knew anyone else to do. However I was not that strong a swimmer and did not have fantastic prowess at holding my breath so I guess many good swimmers could do more.-

I went swimming with fins to see fish in Tobago and Puerto Rico and it was big thrill. I felt wonderfully comfortable among fairly large beautifully colored fish.

## Tennis –

I liked tennis a lot. I probably had a few hours of lessons somewhere along the line. I never played a lot. I was able to do the Australian overhead server fairly well and would occasionally get in a really good serve. I was an aggressive player felt that I was good at getting a good start to go where I needed to be for returns. I enjoyed doubles, but like singles better.

I was in an amateur league in Hastings for a year or two. I think they ranked us and I was in the middle league – not the worst and not the best. I never came close to being the best, but I had a good time playing on Saturday mornings.

I had one memorable experience I would like to mention. I was playing doubles in the Hastings league on a beautiful sunny Saturday morning and I had something close to a spiritual experience. I have since read of athletes describing something like this and they referred to as “being in the zone”. I guess I got into that zone.

What happened was that part way through the game reality seemed to shift for me. Time seemed to slow down so that I had all the time in the world to get to the ball, to think about what I wanted to do, to know exactly where I wanted the ball to go after I hit it. I had time to think about the swing of the racket. It was as if my mind was running twice as fast as usual and everything around me was just slowly drifting along. It was an utterly wonderful experience. I think it lasted for at least a few minutes. I do not remember that I played significantly better when in this state, but I do remember that I wanted it to go on forever. I never had an experience like that again.

I think my mother told me that I seemed to be like her father at sports – good at everything but expert at nothing.

## Squash

The little theater club had some squash courts. They may have had a coach because someone showed me how to pop my wrist when I hit the ball. Anyone who plays much squash does this, some better than others. It allows a player to hit the ball very hard so that it goes much faster than with a full armed swing. I got a kick out of this.

The other thing about squash was that, like ping pong, you had to react almost instinctively as soon as the other player hit the ball. You did not have to time think in a conscious way where the ball was going to go. You had to see it all at once and go there. The deal was that the ball could, and often did, bounce

off two, three, or even four walls before you could hit it. You had to figure out where it was going and get there. Once again, anyone who played much squash had to do this – and some were better than others.

The other part of that kind of sudden calculation had to do with hitting the ball. You wanted it to go where it would be difficult for the other player to get a good swing at it. That meant that part of your planning depended on what was happening with the other player. Where in the room was he (or she), in what direction were they moving, how were they facing.

It seemed to me that the choices in hitting the ball included these options :

- slam it hard at an angle so it was very difficult for the other player to know its trajectory as it bounced off the walls. The faster it was going the trickier this was
- Hit it so that it would kind of slide along close to a side wall, preferably going high up out of reach and then dropping as close to straight down as possible. This required your opponent to swing close to the wall – which was tricky. A good player, like the coach at MIT, could hit serves that dropped down the wall to an almost dead stop in the back corner of the court. Good players work on that serve.
- Do something unexpected – like a weak dink against the front wall, or a hit that would cause the ball to go directly at the other player such that they would be lucky to avoid being hit. There was lots of room for creativity – only it had to be instant.

I took squash as an elective at MIT and the coach, Ed Crocker, invited me to try out for the team. I went to a few practices but dropped out because I was so badly outclassed. I bumped in to the coach a year or so later and he asked me why I quit. When I told him he got a little annoyed. My recall is that he said something like this. “What did you expect? You were a beginner. You had a lot to learn. Those other players had been playing for years. I did not ask you to join the team because I thought you would be a champion. I thought you had the potential to be a good player, maybe ranked 3 or 4 on our team if you were lucky. We need those players too. You should have stayed.”

## Boxing

When I was in school in England (1/2 of our 5<sup>th</sup> grade and all of 6<sup>th</sup> grade, ages 10 to almost 13 , one of our Phys ed classes was in boxing. I did OK at it and ended boxing for my “house”. The school was divided into four houses, like Hogwarts in the Harry Potter books. The I got on the school team and boxed for that. I was so so. I won a few matches. I lost more. My father came to one match. My opponent was a much better boxer than me and had a longer reach. He kept poking me in the face and I was losing, in front of my father. I got angry and tried to charge him like a bull – and he just dodged me and banged away. My fat lower lip got cut and began to bleed. The match was stopped, much against my will – I wanted to keep fighting and somehow get to that guy.

I have been in very few fights in my life. My courage has never really been tested. I feel good about having boxed. I was not afraid to get in the ring with unknown opponents, time after time, so I can't have been that much of a sissy.

The only other thing I did, other than a few anger filled fights with school mates, that showed anything close to being brave was to try to go to Airborne training when I complete Officer's basic training after going on active duty as a second lieutenant in 1963. That would have meant (a) jumping out of airplanes

and (b) going through what was known to be very demanding physical training. I flunked the physical – three times.

The physical had two parts – strength (pushups, pull ups, monkey bars, etc.) and running. First you were tested on a series of strength tests and then everyone taking the tests that day had to keep up with a leader on a run where the leader set the pace. The run was in three segments – maybe 5 to ten minutes each. I passed the strength test every time – by the third time I was close to maxing the score. However I did not do well with the run. The run was broken into three segments, each 5 to ten minutes long. The leader set the pace and decided when to stop. There might have been a minute or two to rest between segments. The first time I don't think I even got through the second segment.

I did some running on my own between tests. I wish I had done a lot more, probably more was needed than I could imagine. By the third time I was in to the third segment and I really really wanted to finish. That's all I had to do, finish with the pack of runners. I just could not do it. I pretty much collapsed, frustrated, angry and depressed. It did not, at the time, feel like my will power failed me. My body simply could not do it. That's how it seemed.

#### Basketball

I have written about my basketball experiences in my memories of Caracas. I'll just add here that I loved the game and was never very good at it. I probably played well over 100 hours of basketball by the time I got out of college (may over 200, we used to play a lot in Caracas). If nothing else I think it helps me appreciate what's going on in the professional games on TV. I will add, as I said in the Caracas memory, I got as much satisfaction from making a good pass to a player to set up a basket (even if they missed the basket) as I did from making a shot.

#### Ping Pong

I also talked about Ping Pong in my Caracas memories. I played Ping Pong in college, in Columbus, Indiana, on Pinewoods weekends, any place I found a table, and at Emory & Henry college. I was much better than average and could slam forhand and backhand. I loved putting spin on the ball and that would mess up a lot of opponents. However, when the smoke cleared, anyone who was really good ping pong player, like on a high school team, would crush me.

#### Badminton

We had a badminton set in the backyard in England and played a lot with our friends, the Spies family. I was one of the best players- but mostly because I was the only boy and was a decent athlete.

#### Bowling

I think I could have been a half-way decent bowler if I had worked at it. As it was I was teams off and on and was usually in the middle of the rankings. I only broke 200 a few times and I think my best average for a leagues season might have been around 170. I enjoyed the sport. I also enjoyed the social side of bowling.

#### Roller Skating

We used to a roller rink in Washington, D.C. and I got better, but never that good. I could skate backwards, and fairly fast, but I was poor participant in the roller skating dance activities. We used to

skate on the sidewalk and in the smooth basements of apartment buildings in Carlisle barracks when my father was at the war college there.

Bicycling – I rode a bicycle a lot from the time I was about 8 years old until I left MIT. I think it kept me in pretty good shape through some of those years.

Track

I was in a few track meets (school in England, boy scouts in Carlisle) and discovered I was far from the fastest runner. I was able to be one of four runners on the 880 team that came in first in the boy scout meet, but I just barely held my own in my own leg.

I played so little of the sports below that I will just leave them without comment below. I did have at least a few hours with each one and got, more or less, past the beginner stage.

Football – mostly touch. Got knocked out in a pickup tackle game on the beach in Monterey.

Trampoline

Gymnastics

Ice Skating

Ski-ing

Wrestling (not many hours there) but one win.

Cricket ( even fewer)

Soccer (the least)