

THE PLAYER.

Because of his existential crisis, the player had started to see a therapist. The cause of his trouble were the ball games, and as we all know, there are many of them. The player hated to admit it, but he was afraid of the ball.

There were a few exceptions. Soccer for example. For some reason it seemed easier to kick the ball with the foot because there remained a certain distance. The feet were protected by shoes and besides, he felt a vengeful pleasure in kicking the ball as hard as he could, paying it all back to the stupid round thing, that naturally didn't care at all.

He didn't mind ping-pong either. Maybe because the ball was so ridiculously small and light it became impossible to feel threatened.

But the rest of them were critical. His ultimate horror was basketball. He hated and feared the heavy brown chunk that needed to be caught, but instead only painfully sprained the fragile fingers. It was just as bad trying to throw it. He was always lacking the strength, and probably also the skill, to direct it accurately. He could consider himself lucky if he didn't make a fool out of himself because the ball clumsily tottered to the ground a few meters further along. It had been like this as long as he could think. He hadn't been able to throw nor catch. He just enviously watched the talented players jumping up to elegantly catch a ball coming at high speed and far out of his own reach, while he tried to resist the urge to duck his head.

The situation was fucked up, as the teammates would have said, because he was a player, and surely did not want to end up being a loser. When he couldn't handle the frequent and reoccurring feeling of being a complete failure anymore -one who didn't even deserve to be called player- he became so depressed that he stopped playing.

He totally stopped. That is, he locked himself into his room and played solitaire on the computer (and actually became quite good at it). But it started to get a bit boring and finally frustrating, and in the end made his self-hatred only grow worse.

The therapist told him that the game is not about winning, but about the pleasure of playing, and the player agreed.

So he began playing again, mostly games that required dexterity and skillfulness. Those he enjoyed most, he loved all those little difficulties and practiced in devotion until he mastered them. That was the best moment of all to him, when he suddenly realized that he was able to perform what he had been training for. Therefore it was in the end not only about the pleasure of playing, but certainly also about succeeding; and about winning. If it was about being good at something, then being good must mean being better than the others, or what else could be the scale?

In any case, he was doing quite fine as long as he left the ball-games aside and didn't bother about them anymore, until he happened to run into his old teammate, the basketball player. The basketball player was in a good mood. His team had just won a tournament, and he was boosting with self confidence telling about the baskets he had shot.

The player didn't directly say anything but was a bit annoyed. He knew it was true; the other was certainly a brilliant basketball player, but he had been kind of born with it. He could skip 3 practices in a row, and it wouldn't do him any bad. So what kind of accomplishment was it, to win yet another tournament?

On his way to the therapist, the player's anger about the basketball player slowly started to dissolve into self-doubt. By the time he arrived, he was seriously troubled. What if he was doing just the same thing by avoiding the ball games? He was also just going the easy way. But without any risk of losing, it cannot really be considered a game. Going for the effortless sense of achievement surely wouldn't make him a proper player. No doubt, in order to be a good player, he had to go for those ball games again.

His therapist seemed pleased; he supported the idea and the player's new train of thought. To-

gether they figured out a practice plan. It started slowly with tennis, because that still included a racket and was a logical advancement from table-tennis. From there training would move on to baseball, volleyball, and eventually also handball. Basketball was the final goal to strive for, but only to be approached after systematic preparation.

When he met the basketball player the next time, the player was just on the way to a tennis match that was scheduled for the afternoon. In fact he was still considering to cancel it, because he was feeling a slight nausea. On the other hand the nausea disappeared whenever he got distracted enough to forget about the upcoming match. He knew all too well that it resembled the nausea he usually felt before visiting the dentist. So finally he forced himself to gather his racket and shoes and was a bit late. Therefore he had merely time for a wave and a quick "hello". To explain his hurry he let it slip that he had to run to a tennis match and for a short moment his nausea got replaced by pride.

The match itself turned out to be a disaster anyway. While playing he was counting the time for it to be over, dreaming of solitaire.

Later, in his therapy session, he talked about the brief encounter with the basketball player. Ever since he decided to play ballgames again his well-known feeling of general reluctance had returned and caused him trouble. The incident appeared to be a positive development to the player and he was surprised by the therapists grim reaction.

"Are you playing or pretending to play?" the therapist asked, suddenly sounding almost like a trainer. A player only playing for the fans or the fame, would never be a good one.

Once again the player realized he would have to change his attitude. He straightened his posture, and had a determined expression on his face. He would take the challenge, and the risk of losing. He would work hard, and overcome any fear. And he would start right away!

The player instantly canceled all the upcoming tennis, baseball and volleyball practices and called his trainer to tell that he wouldn't be able to take part in any of his beloved billiard tournaments in the near future. Instead he signed up for 3 different basketball clubs in town, scheduling training for every afternoon of the week. Additionally he enrolled in a special ball therapy, that took place twice a week and where he would be directly exposed and in contact with balls of all kind constantly, to get used to it and overcome his fear.

A year of intensive work outs started for the player. At times it was so much and so demanding, that his therapist advised him to take it easier, in order not to get burned out. The player didn't listen to any warnings, though. A devoted defiance was burning in his chest that kept him going.

The effort seemed to pay off. Of course he just wasn't very tall. His arms were still lacking the strength to throw very far and -despite all efforts- he couldn't get rid of a certain clumsiness when dribbling. But nevertheless he was selected to the top team of one of the clubs, because he made up for everything with his devotion and imperturbable will to win.

His career as a basketball player culminated in the annual city championship. He not only scored many points, but also sensed that the opposing teams were somehow scared of him. His drive and anger made their players give in before even trying to stop him and the sensation of this victory was spurring him on further.

His team made it to the final, and was considered the favorite. In this decisive game he found himself facing his old acquaintance, the basketball player, who was the captain of the opposing team. Suddenly all his will power didn't help him anymore. The basketball player knew him -and his lack of talent- from the past, and therefore wasn't scared. The basketball player elegantly stole the ball from him and dribbled away so fast the player couldn't keep up. When the player wanted to pass the ball to a teammate, the basketball player jumped up -tall as he was- and easily caught the ball out of the air. Then he threw it in a beautiful high arc far over the player's head into the basket and the player's team was losing by devastating margin.

Shortly before the final whistle the basketball-player suddenly threw a ball that was strangely

out of direction. Maybe he became careless due to the fact that the game was a safe bet already, but possibly it was intentional. It was unlike the basketball player to goof-up like this, so the player was caught totally off-guard. He didn't catch the ball but it hit him hard on the head and knocked him out.

He had to be carried off the court like an ultimate loser. His head was buzzing as he watched from the bench how his team was doing a lot better and actually caught up a little in those last couple of minutes of the game. It was obvious; they had only lost the championship because of him. After his good performance in the earlier games, his teammates had started to trust him, but whenever he had the ball, the basketball player could effortlessly score.

The player hit rock bottom. Now it was for certain that he was a loser.

After the championship the player's life took a tragic turn. All the therapist's reasonable consolations were in vain, the player didn't listen. He let himself go and didn't show up to practice anymore. Instead he played excessively solitaire. His heavy depression didn't directly kill him; he was still too much of a player to commit suicide. Instead he started to drink, and was seen hanging out in pool halls and amusement arcades. But he was not interested in his once so beloved billiard anymore, he was only gambling.

Consequently, the last game he ever played was Russian roulette.