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Steven Skiena

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER ONE

# THE MAKING OF A GAMBLER

My interest in jai alai began during my parents' annual escape from the cold of a New Jersey winter to the promised land of Florida. They stuffed the kids into a Ford station wagon and drove a thousand miles in 2 days each way. Florida held many attractions for a kid: the sun and the beach, Disney World, Grampa, Aunt Fanny, and Uncle Sam. But the biggest draw came to be the one night each trip when we went to a fronton, or jai alai stadium, and watched them play.

Mom was the biggest jai alai fan in the family and the real motivation behind our excursions. We loaded up the station wagon and drove to the Dania Jai-Alai fronton located midway between Miami and Fort Lauderdale. In the interests of preserving capital for later investment, my father carefully avoided the valet parking in favor of the do-it-yourself lot. We followed a trail of palm trees past the cashiers' windows into the fronton.

Walking into the fronton was an exciting experience. The playing court sat in a vast open space, three stories tall, surrounded by several tiers of stadium seating. To my eyes, at least, this was big-league, big-time sport. Particularly "cool" was the sign saying that no minors would be admitted without a parent. This was a very big deal when I was only 12 years old.

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We followed the usher who led us to our seats. The first game had already started. We watched as the server spun like a top and hurled the goathide sphere to the green granite wall, where it rocketed off with a satisfying thunk. His opponent climbed up the sidewall to catch the ball in his basket, or cesta, and then – with one smooth motion – slung it back to whence it came. The crowd alternated between ooh and ah as the players caught and released the ball. The players barked orders to their partners in a foreign tongue, positioning each other across the almost football-field-sized court. Thunk, thunk, thunk went the volley until a well-placed ball finally eluded its defender.

After each point, the losing side would creep off the court in shame replaced by another team from the queue. The action would then resume . . . thunk, thunk, thunk . . .

You have to visit a jai alai fronton to really appreciate the sights and sounds of the crowd. Most of the spectators, at least the most vocal ones, don't seem terribly knowledgeable about the players or game. Indeed, many are tourists or retired people who wouldn't recognize a *pelotari*, or jai alai player, if they woke up in bed with one. There is only one player they are interested in: themselves. The spectators have money riding on each and every point and are primarily concerned about the performance of their investment:

"You stink, red."

"Drop it, number 5."

"Just one more point, Laxi – uh, whatever your name is."

Occasionally a more knowledgeable voice, usually with a Spanish accent, would salute a subtle play: "*Chula! Chula!*".

The really neat thing about jai alai is that events happen in discrete steps instead of as a continuous flow, and thus the game is more like tennis than basketball or horse racing. After watching a few games, I began to get the hang of the scoring system. The pause between each point gives you time to think about how the game is shaping up and what the prospects for your bet currently are. Sometimes you can look ahead and figure out an exact sequence of events that will take you to victory. "Look, if 1 beats 5 on this point, then loses to 7, and then 4 wins its next two points, the game ends 4–2–1 and I win!"

With each point, the loyalties of the crowd change rapidly. A wonderful aspect of the jai alai scoring system is that the dynamics of the game can

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change almost instantaneously. In baseball, you can be 12 runs ahead, and thus giving up one run costs you absolutely nothing. This is not so in jai alai. No matter how far ahead you are, the loss of a single point can kill by forcing you to sit down to watch your opponent win the match. Suddenly a team given up for dead trots back on the court, and then it becomes a whole new game.

Fan loyalty is particularly fleeting because it is often the case that a bettor now needs to defeat the same player he or she was rooting for on the previous point.

“You stink, blue.”

“Drop it, number 6.”

“You’re my main man, Sourball. I mean Sor-ze-ball.”

After we got settled into our seats, my father gave me, the oldest of the three kids, a pair of rumpled one-dollar bills. It was enough for one bet over the course of the evening. “Use it wisely,” he said.

But what did wisely mean? On his way into the fronton, my father had invested 50 cents on a *Pepe’s Green Card*. *Pepe’s Green Card* was a one-page tout sheet printed on green cardboard. I was much too young to catch any allusion to Pepe’s immigration status in the title. For each of the games played that evening, Pepe predicted who would finish first, second, and third alongside a cryptic comment about each player such as “wants to win,” “tough under pressure,” or “in the money.”

On the top of the card, in a box on the right-hand side, Pepe listed his single “best bet” for the evening. That night, Pepe liked a 4–2–1 trifecta in the sixth match.

My brothers and I studied this strange document carefully. We liked the idea of a tout sheet. It would help us spend our money wisely. As kids, we were used to being told what to do. Why should it be any different when we were gambling?

“Boy, this is great. Pepe must really know his stuff,” I said.

My brother Len agreed. “You bet! We’ve got nothing but winners here.”

“Dad, why do other people pick their own numbers when Pepe has all the winners here?” asked Rob, the youngest.

“Pepe, my *pupik*!” came my parental voice of authority. “Pepe wouldn’t know a winner if he stepped on one.”

“Look, Pepe gives a best bet. A 4–2–1 trifecta in the sixth match. It can’t possibly lose.”

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My father shook his head sadly. “Trifectas are the longest shots of all, the toughest bet one can make in jai alai. You have almost no chance of winning. Why don’t you bet on something that gives you a better chance to win?”

In retrospect, it is clear that my father was right. To win a trifecta, you must identify the players who will come in first, second, and third – all in the correct order. There are  $8 \times 7 \times 6 = 336$  possible trifectas to bet on, only one of which can occur in any given game.

But we trusted Pepe. And besides, it was now *our* money. Eventually, we convinced our father to trade in our 2 dollars for a 4–2–1 trifecta ticket on Game 6.

We waited patiently for our chosen moment.

At last the public address announcer informed us it was one minute to post time for Game 6. Last-minute bettors scrambled to the cashiers to the accompaniment of the betting clock: tick, tick, tick, tick.

The chosen game proved to be a doubles match. Eight pairs of men, each pair wearing a numbered jersey of a prescribed color, marched out to ceremonial bull-fighting music: the “March of the Toreadors.” They gave the crowd a synchronized, if half-hearted, wave of the cesta, and all but the first two teams straggled back to the bench.

The betting clock completed its countdown, which was terminated by a loud buzzer announcing that betting was now closed. The referee whistled, and the first player bounced the ball and served. The game was on.

We cheered for team 2, at least until they played team 4. We switched our allegiance to team 4 up until the moment it looked like they would get too many points and win without 2 and 1 in their designated positions. We booed any other team with a high score because their success would interfere with the chances of our favorites.

We watched in fascination as player 2 held onto first place, while player 1 slid into a distant but perfectly satisfactory second-place position. When player 4 marched on the court for the second time, my mother noticed what was happening. “My G-d, only two more points and the kids win!”

This revelation only made us cheer louder. “Green! Green! Green!” I yelled.

“Four! Four! Four!” my brothers chimed in.

Player 4 got the point, leaving us only one point shy of the big payoff.

The designated representative from team 4 served the ball.

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We followed up with the play-by-play: “Miss it, ooh. No, catch it! Ah! Miss it, ooh. No, catch it! Ah! Miss it . . .”

He missed it!

Family pandemonium broke out as we waited the few moments it took for the game to become official. Our trifecta paid us \$124.60 for a 2-dollar bet – an incomprehensibly large amount of money to a bunch of kids. The public address announcer, in shock, informed all in the house that *Pepe’s Green Card* had picked the winning trifecta in the previous game. Mom told all in earshot that her kids had won the big one. Dad sauntered up to the cashier to collect our winnings for us, kids being forbidden from entering the betting area by state law.

We kids took the family out to dinner the next night. We experienced the thrill of being the breadwinner, hunters returning from the kill. It was indeed fun being a winner – so much fun that I starting wondering how Pepe did it. It was clear that most people in the crowd didn’t understand what was going on at the fronton, but Pepe did. Maybe I could figure it out, too.

An old gambling axiom states that luck is good, but brains are better. Indeed, it took me almost 25 years, but finally I have figured it out. Let me tell you how I did it . . .

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## CHAPTER TWO

# WHAT IS JAI ALAI?

Jai alai is a sport of Basque origin in which opposing players or teams alternate hurling a ball against the wall and catching it until one of them finally misses and loses the point. The throwing and catching are done with an enlarged basket or cesta. The ball or pelota is made of goatskin and hard rubber, and the wall is of granite or concrete – which is a combination that leads to fast and exciting action. Jai alai is a popular spectator sport in Europe and the Americas. In the United States, it is most associated with the states of Florida, Connecticut, and Rhode Island, which permit pari-mutuel wagering on the sport.

In this chapter, we will delve deeper into the history and culture of jai alai. From the standpoint purely crass of winning money through gambling, much of this material is not strictly necessary, but a little history and culture never hurt anybody. Be my guest if you want to skip ahead to the more mercenary or technical parts of the book, but don't neglect to review the basic types of bets in jai alai and the Spectacular Seven scoring system. Understanding the implications of the scoring system is perhaps the single most important factor in successful jai alai wagering.

Much of this background material has been lifted from the fronton Websites described later in this chapter and earlier books on jai alai. I

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A pelotari in action at Milford.

particularly urge readers interested in more background to explore Websites such as [www.jaialai.com](http://www.jaialai.com) or my own [www.jai-tech.com](http://www.jai-tech.com).

## How the Game Is Played

The term *jai alai* comes from the Basque word meaning “merry festival.” In the English vernacular this is sometimes spelled as it sounds, that is, “hi-li,” although the use of the corrupted spelling seems to be fading.

In the Basque provinces of Spain and France, where jai alai began, the sport is known as *cesta punta*. *Cesta punta* is a traditional part of Basque festivals, which accounts for the connection. The Spanish call the game *pelota vasca* (Basque ball). Whatever the game itself is called, jai alai has a lingo associated with its equipment and strategy that we detail below.

## EQUIPMENT

Jai alai is best viewed as a variant of handball in which two sets of players (or pelotaris) alternate throwing the ball against the wall and catching the rebound. The most important pieces of equipment, therefore, are the hand, the ball, and the wall:

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A return from backcourt.

- *The cesta* – Basques played early forms of jai alai with bare hands and then with leather gloves and wooden paddles until the cesta was introduced. Some credit Melchoir Curachaque with inventing the cesta after breaking his wrist in Buenos Aires in 1888. Another story gives the patent to a young French Basque who tried hurling the ball with his mother's curved wicker basket.

Either way, the word *cesta* is Spanish for basket. Every cesta is handmade to the player's specific requirements and constructed by interweaving thin reeds found exclusively in the Pyrenees Mountains through a frame of Spanish chestnut. The life of a typical cesta is only about 3 weeks. Cestas cost about \$300 each, and a professional player goes through about 15 of them per year. Like cigars, cestas are stored in humidors to prevent them from getting too dry and brittle.

- *The pelota* – Named after the Spanish word for ball, the pelota is slightly smaller than a baseball and harder than a rock. The ball's liveliness comes from its virgin rubber core, which is significantly larger than the equivalent core of a baseball. This core is covered by one layer of nylon and two outer layers of goat skin. The stitches on the



WHAT IS JAI ALAI?

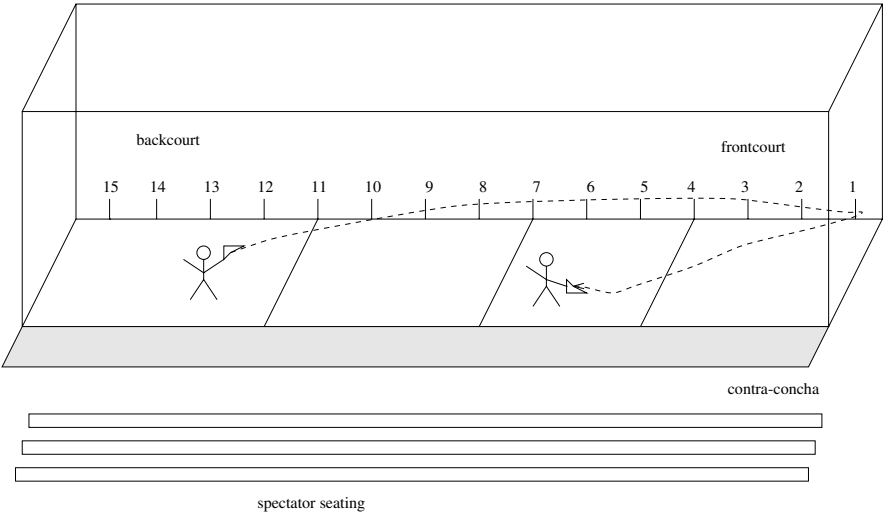
pelota are embedded so as to minimize damage when it slams into the cesta.

Each pelota has a court life of only 20 minutes or so before the cover splits owing to the punishment it takes hitting the wall during play. These pelotas, which are made by hand at a cost of about \$150, are then recycled by sewing on new covers and subsequently aged or “rested” for at least one month in order to regain full liveliness.

Pelotas in play have been clocked at over 180 miles per hour, which is twice the speed of a major league fast ball. The combination of hard mass and high velocity makes it a very bad idea to get in the way of a moving pelota.

Pelota is also used as the name for a sport with religious overtones played by the ancient Aztecs. Those guys took their games very seriously, for the losing team was often put up as a human sacrifice. Such policies presumably induced greater effort from the players than is seen today even at the best frontons, although modern jai alai players are able to accumulate more experience than their Aztec forebears.

- *The Court* – The most interesting part of the playing court is the granite front wall, which makes a very satisfying clicking sound whenever a pelota hits it at high speed. At Milford Jai-Alai in Connecticut, this front wall is 34-feet high and 35-feet wide and is made of 8-inch-thick granite blocks.



The geometry of the playing court.

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The court (or cancha) can be thought of as a concrete box with one of the long sides of the box removed. A wooden border (the *contra-cancha*) extends out 15 feet on the floor outside this box. The pelota makes an unsatisfying thwack sound whenever it hits the wood, signaling that the ball is out of bounds. A wire screen prevents pelotas from leaving the court and killing the spectators, thus significantly reducing the liability insurance frontons need to carry. At Milford, the court is 178 feet long, 50 feet wide, and 46 feet tall. Although courts come in different sizes, players stick to one fronton for an entire season, which gives them time to adjust to local conditions.

The numbers from 1 to 15 are painted along the back walls of the court. The *front court* is the region near the small numbers, and the *back court* is near the big numbers. The lines marked 4, 7, and 11 designate the underserve, overserve, and serve lines, respectively. The rest of the numbers function, like pin markers in bowling, that is, only as reference points to help the players find where they are on the court.

## STRATEGY

The rules of jai alai are quite similar to those of tennis and racquetball. In all of these sports, the goal is to accumulate points by making the other side misplay the ball.

All games begin with a serve that must land between the 4 and 7 lines of the court. The receiving player must catch the pelota in the air or on the first bounce and then return it to the front wall in one continuous motion. It is illegal for the player to stop the pelota's motion or to juggle it. The players continue to volley until the pelota is missed or goes out of bounds. Three judges, or referees, enforce the rules of play.

An aspect of strategy peculiar to jai alai is that the server gets to choose which ball is to be used. At each point, he may select either a lively ball, average ball, or a dead ball – all of which are available when he serves. Once the server has chosen a ball, the receiving team may inspect his choice for rips or tears and has the right to refuse the ball should they find it to be damaged in any way.

Jai alai matches are either singles or doubles matches. Doubles are more common and, in my opinion, far more interesting. The court is simply too long for any single person to chase down fast-moving balls. One key to