

HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT

Who's a cut above? Rock, paper, scissors players prime and shoot it out

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TORONTO - I am not a violent man. I do not generally walk up to someone and throw a rock. But when you're sure the guy across the table from you is about to throw scissors, you have to take action.

After all, rock crushes scissors. Every time.

Such are the immutable laws of the World Rock Paper Scissors Championships, held here Saturday. More than 600 competitors came from around the world for a chance to win a first prize of \$7,000 Canadian playing a simple child's game.

You know the one: paper covers rock, scissors cut paper, rock beats scissors. It's been used for generations to solve playground disputes, determine who gets the last slice of pizza, or who has to go buy diapers.



Ryan Smith shoots paper and loses to the scissors thrown by Heather Birrell, a 33-year-old writer from Toronto. (CHARLA JONES PHOTOS)

"Everybody has a place in their heart for rock, paper, scissors," said Graham Walker, event organizer for the World RPS Society and co-author of the book *The Official Rock Paper Scissors Strategy Guide* (Simon & Schuster, \$9.95). The society has sponsored the world championships since 2002.

When I signed up to compete in the championships, I got lots of advice. Everything from, "Go with the rock because you'll always look tough even if you lose. And if you do lose ... you'll be ready to throw a punch" to "Wear sunglasses."

My fellow competitors were no help. At my hotel, there were four guys at the front desk practicing. They had driven from New York City, explaining, "We're into obscure sports." When asked in the elevator about their strategy, one responded elusively, "We have our theories."

I tried a number of strategies - only using scissors, starting with a series called Paper Dolls (paper, scissors, scissors) - but my practice rounds didn't go well. No matter what I did, no matter who I was competing against, I lost. My hopes were not high as the evening of the competition approached.

A half-hour before the first face-off at a club called Kool Haus, there was a long line slithering back from the front door. I was particularly pleased to see a few guys in white Miami Vice suits and others in Spandex wrestling gear. All sports have their uniforms, and rock, paper, scissors apparently was no different.

Then up pulled a white limousine full of men dressed in matching black warm-up suits with red trim. They called themselves the Legion of the Red Fist. Clearly, these were the villains. Sensing this, the crowd lifted its collective voice in chants of "Overrated!"

(Perhaps the crowd was right. Later, I found Pete Lovering, aka Master P, the 2002 Rock Paper Scissors champion, holding a beer in his red-gloved fist, lamenting the fact that he was ousted in the opening round. At age 36, he is one of the sport's elders; it's a young man's game now.)

When my turn came, I sidled up to a small table opposite my opponent. The referee - yes, there are refs, all dressed in official black-and-white striped shirts - reviewed the rules and explained the illegal throws that would get us disqualified. No lightning. No Spock. No Texas longhorn. No dynamite. No hand of God.

Then he put his hand between my fist and my opponent's, signaling we were to pump them up and down three

times (called the prime) before revealing our throw (called the shoot) on four.

Under the heat of an intense spotlight, I started with a gambit called the Crescendo - paper, scissors, rock - and won the first set of three games. I lost the second set but edged my opponent in the third to move on to the next round.

My opposition, Mike Dojc, a 26-year-old from Toronto working for Chill magazine, said he only practiced the day of the competition, playing about 20 or 30 times. It would do him no good. "I was playing in the mirror, so I was always tying," he said.

He admitted to being nervous, but thought I was, too, and figured I'd throw paper. That's probably why at match point he threw scissors. But rock always crushes scissors and I rocked.

To be truthful, I was impossibly nervous. My arm was shaking. Our primes were way too fast. I took a time-out between throws to try and calm down, but it didn't work.

"You had a little bit of the attitude," referee Robbie Chaplick, 24, counseled me later, "but I feel like you were a little frightened. I feel like you were a Johnny-come-lately."

Afterward, Bradley Wolansky, a player from Philadelphia who competed in a regional contest in New Jersey last year, offered me some advice. My opponent had always thrown rock when he got nervous, he said.

Mr. Wolansky, 28, shared his own strategy, too.

"I'm gonna actually announce my throw. Mine is an intimidation game," he said. Then he softened. "I throw from here," he said, pointing to his chest. "I throw from the heart, not from the wrist. I'll never be a professional athlete, but for three primes and a shoot, I'm a god."

It helped throughout my first match that I had some people rooting for me. My top fans were Ann and Mark Lanpher, two college friends who now live in Toronto, where the World RPS Society is headquartered. They'd practiced with me all day, defeating me nearly every time and not letting me forget about it.

But it seemed that just as strong a supporter was this random guy standing next to me in a gigantic afro wig, big sunglasses, leather jacket, and a fake mustache. "Come on!" he shouted. "Hey, what's his name? Ryan? Go Ryan! R-r-r-ock! Throw rock! Hit 'em with an R!"

"I throw rocks all the time because nobody throws paper," he confided to me later. "I made a pact with my friends. I'm gonna throw rock every time."

His name was Tommy Gisoni and he had driven 11 hours from New York City to be here. The 26-year-old, a commodity trader on the New York Mercantile Exchange, was fortunate enough to have a sponsor from work.

"We play it at work for a couple bucks," he said. "I do pretty well."

Perhaps the rock, paper, scissors gods were watching, because they brought the two of us together head-to-head in the next round. Knowing his strategy complicated my own because I knew that he knew that I knew his tactics.

To test his word, I led with paper. He slyly countered with scissors. For the rest of the match, I threw rock often because I figured he thought I'd think he would still be partial to rock so he would throw scissors expecting me to throw paper. Confused? Me too, but it worked and I won.

The next round was my finest. I started off with a Crescendo and then finished my opponent off with a Fistful of Dollars (rock, paper, paper). I celebrated by pumping my arms like a bodybuilder.

Between rounds, I took time to rest my arm and check the competition. There was this guy wearing a big belt buckle that said "ROCK" who particularly intrigued me, and there was a rumor circulating that a team called MARPS wasn't ever throwing scissors.

The quickest game I saw was that of Jen Leach, 31, of Toronto. She played her first-round game in high-heel boots and with a beer in her left hand before losing in straight sets.

And then there was Geir Arne Brevik, who came all the way from Oslo, Norway, to lose in the third round. Mr. Brevik, sporting two white wristbands and thick, black-rimmed glasses, attributed his loss to lack of experience and lamented that he hadn't played differently.

"I would throw scissors to open. Then you set the tone for the game in a different way," he said. "I should've

stalled, but I got caught up in the moment."

Next year he dreams a Norwegian invasion, of bringing an entire team of rock, paper, scissors ringers to town, each with a specialty: "One for appearance, one for mind games"

By the time my next match began, only 64 people were left, and I was feeling confident This even with the television cameras circling through the club - Fox Sports Network will air something on the event later this year - and the growing crowds of lively spectators.

I was matched up against Heather Birrell, a 33-year-old fiction writer from Toronto who'd come with some friends but hadn't decided to compete until she was in line outside Kool Haus.

She wore a T-shirt featuring a Christian cross, the trinity of rock, paper, scissors hands emerging from it. Above the cross, it said: WWJT (What Would Jesus Throw) and on the back it read, "The Passion of the Fist." This didn't bode well. I was up against a higher power.

I led with my now-signature move, the Crescendo, and won the first set. I had her at match point for the second set, but lost 2-1. I really don't remember what I threw. It's all a blur.

After the second throw of the third set, we were tied again. It was match point. I stopped to regroup, plan my move. For the first time all night, I wasn't sure what to do. The three throws circled through my head. I decided I would throw rock. No, scissors. No, paper. Paper.

When I'd made my final throw, my legs suddenly felt very weak. My arm was a little sore. And there was a grave weight on my heart. Given her history, her propensity to use a certain throw, I should have known she would use it again. I must have known. But it didn't matter. I found out the answer to the question on her shirt the hard way: Jesus would throw scissors, and so did she.

The ref came over and ripped away the strip of paper pinned to me that said, "Currently Undefeated."

"I had no strategy whatsoever," Ms. Birrell told me after the match. "I think maybe scissors is a bit of a default for me. In times of stress."

She ended up making the finals and winning \$2,000 as the runner-up to a man from Burlington, Ont. But at least I went out the way I wanted, the way a journalist should - throwing paper.

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[< previous](#)

[next >](#)