

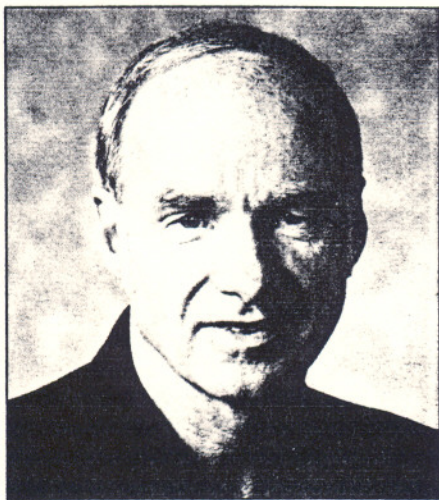
Games Men Play

Last year I almost quit playing racquetball. Almost, but not quite. I'm glad I didn't. Racquetball is a high priority in my life. By that I mean I play three times a week and often carry my racquet, shoes and shorts when I go out of town.

When I'm at home, I divide my playing time between an outside court and a shiny new court in a condo project being developed by my friend Brooks Watson.

I used to play doubles with Brooks, but on several occasions, he tried to change my good looks with his racquet. Brooks is left-handed—which makes him lethal when you put him on a court. One bloody afternoon it cost me \$65 to have 12 stitches put in my chin because I forgot Brooks swings from the south while I swing from the north.

On the way home from the emergency room, I decided a 20-by-40 court is too small to contain four middle-aged men swinging clubs at a wildly bouncing ball—especially if one of them swings



BY JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Jamie Buckingham is Charisma's editor-at-large and the author of more than 30 books, including the recent A Way Through the Wilderness from Chosen Books.

backwards. Now I limit my game to singles—with an occasional threesome for variety. (More about that later.)

My regular opponent is our pastor, Curry Vaughan. Curry is 10 years my junior, played first-string guard at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, has biceps like Godzilla, and goes after every shot as if he's charging downfield on a kickoff to smash a helpless midshipman into a pulp. He's the kind of fellow who laughs after hitting you in the small of the back with a ball going 200 mph—and then uses it as a sermon illustration the next Sunday. It gives me great pleasure when I beat him.

I sometimes play with Harvey Hester. Dr. Hester is a psychologist who sometimes, just as I'm getting ready to serve one of my blistering corner shots, clears his throat and asks me if I hate my mother.

I also play with Al Reed who wears trifocals, which makes him even more dangerous than Brooks Watson, and with Kent Busing who is ambidextrous and switches his racquet back and forth between hands so he never hits a backhand shot.

I used to play with Buddy Tipton, an Assembly of God pastor. But on the rare occasions when I beat him, he would remind me he used to ride with a motorcycle gang and didn't like losing. I determined it was better to turn him loose on his deacons than on me.

But the reason behind my almost quitting was the discovery I was getting angry on the court. It always happened when I was playing in a threesome—called "cutthroat." Here three men play, rotating serves, with the server competing against the other two. My anger would flash whenever I was ahead and my partner began missing shots, allowing the third man to outscore me.

I never threw my racquet, swore or even spoke harshly to the offending player whose stupidity, ineptness or crass inability to return a ball caused me to

lose. But on several occasions, when my partner would miss an easy shot, I would feel my eyes begin to dilate and a taste of burnt copper would appear in my mouth.

Even though it only lasted a few seconds, it bothered me. It was a foreign emotion.

I talked this over with Dr. Hester one afternoon as we sat cooling off after an outdoor match. He said a lot of people have a deep-seated anger. Most Christians try to hide it, but it often shows up under stress.

I've been thinking about that. Often adultery grows out of anger toward someone. Many alcoholics, drug addicts and compulsive overeaters are angry. People who easily lose their temper are obviously angry. According to Curry, who used to be the world's champion shouter, most shouting preachers have a lot of pent-up anger.

I'm grateful for racquetball. It let me realize my anger. I've been working on it, and some practical conclusions have emerged.

One, even though I take the game seriously, I don't take myself or my opponent seriously. I play to win—but laugh a lot.

I've also learned that all anger is not bad. Anger over a missed shot can be transformed into a steely-eyed determination to do better next time.

Happily, I've discovered my mental attitude affects my ability to play. If I miss a shot and angrily call myself "Stupid," it lowers my self-esteem and leaves me open for defeat. However, if after a goof-up I say aloud, "You can do better, old boy," I actually do better. My anger, having no place to roost, moves on.

Finally, I'm determined the sun shall never set on my anger. That means when I leave the court I leave with a sweaty arm around my opponent.

Dealing with my anger has made a big difference in my game. Not only that, but my mouth tastes better, too. ↪