

## THE WORLD'S FASTEST SPORT

LAST SEPTEMBER New York City was treated to something of a surprise when two well-known promoters remodeled the old Hippodrome into a Cuban Fronton and introduced the Spanish game of Jai-Alai there. The opening night was a complete sell-out, and 3900 excited fans jammed the rafters, at a \$7.70 top, to cheer the game's debut. Since that time, Jai-Alai has been put on about four times a week to an average audience of between 1500 and 2000 persons, although on Saturday and holiday nights, the attendance jumped to around 2500. By January 1, the promoters had realized \$250,000 on their investment, which was better than breaking even, and announced their intention of continuing the attraction indefinitely—until the close of the World's Fair anyway.

Jai-Alai was first played in Brazil 300 years ago and a Jesuit priest, returning to Spain, brought the game with him. It was an instant success there, especially in the Basque district where it flourished like a Green Bay tree. It was then called *juego de pelota*, or ball game, and it didn't acquire its present name until 1900 when a Havana

sports promoter built an arena which he called his "Fronton Jai-Alai." Translated into English, Jai-Alai, which is pronounced "Hi-Li," means "a merry festival" or "a happy feast."

The *pelotas* are all made by hand and are worth \$12.00 apiece. They are about three quarters the size of a baseball and are made of hard rubber, covered with twine and two thicknesses of baby goat skin. They are as lively as a golf ball, even though they weigh as much as a billiard ball and are almost as hard. When thrown by an expert, the *pelota* travels 110 miles an hour, which is 40 miles an hour faster than Walter Johnson ever threw a baseball. The average Jai-Alai match uses up half a dozen balls, as the slightest scratch prevents them from flying true. Each ball is re-covered after a match. Whenever a *pelota* hits a player in the head, especially if it's going at full speed, it's pretty sure to split open his skull. Jai-Alai players have often been killed in Spain and Cuba, but the 35 accidents at the Hippodrome so far have been of the minor variety.

The *cestas*, or baskets, are woven of Spanish and Brazilian reeds, and a good one lasts about 90 days. The most important part is the frame which is made of a single piece of especially-seasoned wood. Each *cesta* has 13 ribs, made of willow from the swamps of Brazil. These ribs are the main support of the basket and once one is damaged, the *cesta* is discarded. When a player first takes up the game he picks an individual size and shape of basket for his own, the same way ball players pick out their bats and gloves. The *cesta* weighs between 15 and 25 ounces and is attached to the hand by a carefully fitted leather glove which is sewed to the basket. The *cesta* is then tied to the wrist by an imported tape called *falla*. This, wound around the wrist and basket a dozen times, prevents the basket from slipping off the hand. All *cestas*, incidentally, are right-handed since, the side wall being on the players' left, left-handers would find themselves at a great disadvantage.

The playing court is constructed of a special concrete called *gunite* and is the only substance known which successfully withstands the constant battering of the Jai-Alai *pelota*. The three walls and the floor are the game's playing surfaces, and balls hitting either the net or the ceiling are dead. Matches

are played with two or four players, the server bouncing the ball against the forward wall to start play. This wall is called *frontis* and the rear wall *rebote*. The main object of the game is to throw the ball from the *cesta* against the *frontis* so that the opponents cannot return it. The ball may be taken on the fly or on the first bounce and a top-flight player has a whole *cesta*-ful of trick shots with which to confound his opponents. Some of the better known include the *rebote*, where the player allows the ball to pass him and then runs back to flip it off the back wall; the *drop*, where the player hits the front and side walls simultaneously so that the *pelota* drops dead on the spot; and the *carom*, where the player bounces his return against two or three walls according to the angle and speed of the throw. Some players even put "English" on their shots so that the returning balls spin out of the opponents' *cesta* when caught.

During the match, three judges sit inside the netted enclosure to rule on all claims of fouls. When the two associate judges disagree, the chief judges, who wears full dress evening clothes, makes the final decision. All three judges hold what look like trout nets in their hands which are used for self-protection from the *pelota*. The usual

match runs 20 points and every time the ball is put in play a point is made by one side or the other. According to Spanish tradition, the crowd always stands for the final point of a match.

The players average from 16 to 30 years of age and all are in the pink of condition. Jai-Alai is a very exacting sport, and speed, endurance, and skill are three very necessary attributes. The players keep fairly strict training at all times and rarely eat a heavy meal until after the night's matches have been played. Most of them are paid in the neighborhood of \$300 a month, which is about what a good minor league baseball player gets for his chores in a class A league. "Babe" Guillermo, nick-named the "Babe Ruth of Jai-Alai," is the highest paid member of the Hippodrome stable, receiving \$1,000 a month. For seven years he was the Jai-Alai champion of the world and only lost his title to Piston last year. A couple of years ago, in a match in Havana, Guillermo slugged a judge over a disputed point and the authorities won't let him compete there now until he apologizes, a thing which Guillermo, who is a pretty hot-tempered fellow, says he will never do.

Jai-Alai players are a temperamental lot anyway and they are always being fined by the

judges for fighting, breaking chairs, tossing "bean balls"—an extremely dangerous pastime—and swearing. They carry their personal grudges into the dressing rooms and there is always a wonderful free-for-all there after a hotly-contested match. The judges' word is law on the court and it is baked up by fines running from \$2.50 for a minor oath to \$10.00 for one of a more personal nature. The other misdemeanors are punished according to the whim of the judges. They, incidentally, receive \$400 a month for their work.

Under the terms of the Spanish Association, which controls 95 per cent of the frontons of the world, Jai-Alai players must always give their best. If the Association ever catches any of them cheating, throwing a game, loafing, breaking training rules or conducting himself in a manner both unbecoming and detrimental to the best interests of the game, he is barred for life from every fronton under its jurisdiction. He has no recourse or appeal from this sentence. The Association takes the word of the complaining official as gospel. In addition, the offending player also forfeits his rights to an old-age pension from the Association. Jai-Alai players all chip in from 5 to 10 per cent of their salaries into the Association's pension fund so that they

will have something to care for them when they finally hang up their *cestas*. Retirement from active play is more or less compulsory after a player reaches 35, although some, like 46-years-old Maguregui, seemingly go on forever.

To encourage competition and to make players outdo themselves, the promoters post bonuses of from \$30.00 to \$50.00 to the winners of the evening's matches. During the

games, an announcer instructs the spectators in the intricacies of cheering and razzing the players in Spanish, and in no time the Hippodrome echoes and re-echoes with encouraging "arriba's" and disparaging "peipa's" The best place to sit, incidentally, is at the extreme sides and high up, as otherwise the chin muscles are worked to death watching the flight of the *pelota*.—*Bill Stern, condensed from Listener's Digest.*

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## *What is Stamina?*

THE DICTIONARY defines the word stamina as the *power to endure fatigue, privation and disease*—capacity to hold out under any and all conditions. In the history of medicine there stands out to this day the name of one man whose stamina, even unto death, gave us our first knowledge of the human anatomy.

This man was Michael Servetus, who lived and died in the sixteenth century. He it was who discovered the secret of our pulmonary circulation; that our blood entered the right side of our heart, passed through our lungs and returned to the left side of the heart through tiny valves. The facts that the researches of Servetus developed were wholly contrary to the accepted beliefs of his time and, by declaring these facts, he suffered the wrath of the most powerful influences. A price was put upon his head. He became a fugitive, and in the city of Genoa he was seized and tried as a heretic. Offered the boon of life if he would renounce his convictions, Servetus refused. He had the stamina to maintain what his scientific observations had convinced him was right, and so Servetus died that a true physiological process might become known, and that thereby we might have a better understanding of the workings of our bodies.—*Edward Parrish, M.D., in Successful Living.*