

Mittsiball

Seckie raced around the gym, clearing the low hurdles as if they weren't even there, hesitated at the end of the lap--then just because it felt so good, did it again.

Remers, at the sidelines, stared, mouth open in a smile, then said to Kernn, "Doesn't Seckie look fantastic?" Kernn nodded in admiration. They both hooted and whistled then as their Edwin Moses passed them by.

Still waiting on the floor, at the end of the gym, was the fluorescent green tennis ball. Seckie picked it up and threw it at the target ten metres away. She missed. Figures, she laughed, as she ran to retrieve the ball and try again.

"Try it again, Seckie," she heard Remers encourage, "You can do it!"

Yeah! Zowee! Next is five--where's yellow five?

She looked up and saw Ditch halfway across the gym ready to throw. Seckie nodded then ran a few steps forward to catch the purple and orange striped playball.

Remers and Kernn yelled "TWO!" Seckie did a little football touchdown jig. Ditch grinned then grabbed the basketball off the floor at red six.

The balance beam was five. Running to it, Seckie tucked the playball under one arm, and using the other for balance, quickly walked across the beam. She added sound effects to her dive to the crashpad.

She looked up then to pass the ball, but Ditch was still doing lay-ups. And it was too far, Pratzsky--where the hell was Pratzsky? At the end of the gym crawling the tunnels. Pratzsky never looked for the ball anyway. Pratzsky was not a good team player. Pratzsky gets a 'D' in group work.

Six--oh yeah--six was tires, Seckie trotted to the middle of the gym. She did not like tires. Tucking the playball under her arm again, she took a moment to rehearse: one-two-one-two-one-one-two-one-two-two. Okay, here goes. She carefully hopscotched through the maze of black rubber. All right! If you had the rhythm right it *was* easy! Remers always said so. But then Remers could dance the polka too, without looking at her feet. Seven, yellow seven was--

Finally! The ball sank through the net, Kernn let out a cheer, and Ditch, eager to make up for lost time, spun around looking for red seven. Aha--the bleachers--moonwalking. In three seconds flat, she had slipped on the ankle weights and had begun to run up and down the stairs. The harder she ran, the funnier it'd feel when she took off the weights and watched her legs float away with every step. Up and down, up and down, that's two, up and down, she felt her heart pound, up and down, her body sweat, up and down, that's five!

Okay--next--she laughed at her legs doing *grands battements* all on their own--whee!--underwater, outerspace--

Next was eight, rope climbing. No problem. Then she was at nine, monkey bars. And ten was push-ups. Whose idea was this, her shoulders screamed.

"Come on, Ditch, four more!" Remers called out. She groaned and pushed--up. Twice she saw Seckie look over to pass but it was impossible. What the hell was Pratzsky doing?

Pratzsky was doing blue nine: bicycling his ass off, his eyes on the speedometer. As soon as he hit 35 kmh, he scrambled off and ran to blue ten: putting. He picked up the golf club and in one try, he succeeded, "Yeah!" he yelled and looked up to see if anyone

saw him. Seckie saw him and threw the ball. He managed to catch it.

"THREE!" Remers and Kernn yelled out.

Pratzsky held the ball awkwardly and looked for blue eleven. Ditch was staggering up from the push-ups. He called out and threw the ball. She lurched for it but missed, swore, then went after it. Blue eleven was the soccer kick. He ran to it.

Seckie was on her last one--a devilish thing they called 'the hyena'. It was simply really, a co-ordination exercise involving point-steps to the front, side, and back, while the arms were lifted up, out, and down. But it had to be done in front of the weight-lifting mirror. Five times in a row right. Under normal circumstances, that was enough to defeat even those who *could* walk and talk at the same time. Placed at the end of a run, the hyena usually reduced everyone to a hyperventilating amoeba with three arms and no legs.

Ditch, hearing Seckie's shrieks of laughter, knew she was doing the hyena. She began to chuckle too, sneaking glances, as she started red thirteen. Mats--two front rolls, three back rolls, a headstand, and a cartwheel. She loved to see the guys at this one. Men simply could not do cartwheels.

And Pratzsky, Pratzsky had the ball again. Ditch had thrown it back just before she started on the mats. He couldn't throw it to Seckie and the rules allowed only one throwback so he was stuck with it for his last one, blue fifteen: sponge ball bowling. It was a silly station, he thought. Probably Seckie's idea. He threw the ball, and watched as it bounced crazily on a zig zag course that missed the 'pins' entirely. He concentrated on another throw--and missed again. He looked around then--Ditch was nowhere to be seen--he had to finish before Seckie. He tried again.

Seckie, with an idiotic leer on her face, was doing the hyena in slow motion. Very slow motion. Taking an interminable amount of time between each toe point and arm lift. Forward right with up. Forward left with out. This was her fifth time. Out right with down. She was not going to mess it up again. Out left with up. Back right with out. She paused, thinking hard. Back left--with down. Yes! She lunged dramatically for her bell and beat it to death, stopping her time clock but good.

Pratzsky knew then that Seckie had finished. He threw again--missed again. Should he pass and call it quits? His time couldn't be that good anyway, Seckie and Ditch were both done already. Then again, maybe yellow and red were fast runs this time. And he liked the idea of being able to do it over and over until he succeeded. But enough was enough. He glanced to the end of the gym. The four of them--Seckie, Ditch, Remers, and that new guy, Kernn--were chorus-lined in front of the mirror doing 'I'm a little teapot'. He shook his head. Two throws later, he got a strike. Yes! He trotted to where the others were and half-heartedly rang his bell.

"Oops", Ditch said as she went to stop her clock, looking at Pratzsky, daring his anger.

"Geez!" he spat. These guys were no fun at all. He thought he had beaten Ditch's time on the red run when he drew it the time before--now he'd never know. Shit.

"Blue is a tough course", he said, leaning forward to rest his hands on his knees. But his chest was no longer heaving.

"They're *all* tough, Pratzsky," Ditch said, loping her arm around Seckie's shoulders and grinning, "We make 'em *all* tough."

Then she clicked in to the 'old school' subtext underlying Pratzsky's comment, and

realized that her response had, within that framework, detracted from his effort, devalued his performance. "But you done good, Pratz", she tried to repair. "Was it fun?"

He ignored her question. It was either trivial or patronizing. Or both.

"Remember the course we set up last summer, out at Ditch's place?" Remers reminded Kernn of 'Mrs, Poole' on *The Hogan Family*--bubbling in spirit as well as body.

"Oh yeah", Seckie said, with a rueful grin. "I couldn't move for a week after."

"What was the course like?" Kernn asked. He had just joined--in fact, he had just been hired by the company. Expecting a squash round-robin or a baseball team, he found 'mittsiball' instead. It shouldn't have surprised him though--the company operated on flextime and had an inhouse daycare too.

"Well", Ditch began, "first of all, we made it part scavenger hunt--you had to look for the coloured markers that would tell you what and where your next station was."

"Stupid idea", Pratzsky commented. The others laughed and Kernn waited for an explanation.

"Pratz spent the better part of an hour looking for 'red two'". Remers volunteered, then burst out giggling again with the others. "It was up a tree!"

"At least when I hid the blue markers, I used a bit a common sense!"

"Anyway," Remers brushed past what was obviously still a sore point, "we were into the bush, climbing over rocks and stuff--"

"And we included a swim in the lake--"

"And three cannonballs off the dock", Seckie remembered.

"To which some of us added tarzan yells". Ditch laughed at Seckie.

"And..."

Pratzsky had left the group to tally up the scores. If he didn't do it, it didn't get done. Actually there had been a bit of discussion at the outset about whether or not to even keep score. He was called old-fashioned and conservative. Well, maybe he was. But what was the point if you didn't keep score? He checked the individual times against the point grid. Then he subtracted points for every station passed on (allowed, but only after trying it for thirty seconds). Points were added to the individual scores for every successful ball pass; unsuccessful passes and put downs (putting the ball down to do a station) lost you points. At the end of the play, you added up all your points from the best five or six runs, however many the person with the least runs did. His time for the blue run was 14:26--not bad, he thought. But then he had nothing to compare it with. Maybe Kernn would get blue this time. He took the sticks off the table and moved back to the chatting group.

"I'm surprised you didn't make one of the stations 'catch a chipmunk'!" Kernn was enjoying himself.

The others looked at each other.

"Write that down", Seckie said to Ditch.

Pratzsky interrupted then, to recite the scores, but Kernn was the only one to pay attention. The others knew better. A stunning individual time could be wiped out if no passes were made. So much depended on who your trio was, and that was everchanging, depending on the luck of the draw. That's what made it so neat, so interesting. Mittsiball was a test of adaptability and versatility, as well as a test of strength, flexibility, coordination, speed, and endurance. Optimum scores were the result of optimum cooperation between optimum individuals.

"So," Pratzsky said loudly, "Are we ready to go again?"

"Okay!"

"Yup!"

Pratzsky held out his fist, holding the five 'pick up sticks'. Remers and Kernn had to go this time, so they picked first. Remers' stick was yellow-tipped and the one Kernn had pulled out was not painted.

"Pick again", Seckie told him. He did so, and got the red run. Then Remers took the remaining three sticks and held them out to Seckie, Ditch, and Pratzsky. Seckie pulled the blue.

"Whew," Ditch breathed, "my shoulders could use the rest. Whose idea was red eight, nine, and ten, by the way?" No one answered. "Rope climbing?"

"Oh, I suggested that--why?" Kernn felt uneasy, embarrassed--he was new to setting the runs.

"Monkey bars?"

"Mine", Seckie grinned, and dangled her arms like an ape.

"And push-ups, Pratzsky?" He nodded.

"Well", Ditch pointed out the problem, "they're all in a row!" Then she explained to Kernn, "Usually we're a little more co-ordinated in our creations."

"Well, too late now--let's go", Pratzsky said impatiently.

"No," Seckie said, "we can change it."

"I'm doing red this time--it's okay with me--" Kernn was unsure, but he thought he felt some personal politics here.

"Okay," Remers said, smoothing it over, "then let the games begin!"

She quickly dinged her bell to start her clock and was off--she knew she wasn't really getting a headstart, but so what? Kernn started his clock and ran onto the gym floor after her, looking for red one. Seckie remembered to take the playball with her but then from the middle of the gym, she had to call back to Ditch, laughing, "What colour am I?"

"Blue!" Pratzsky yelled.

As soon as she finished her first station, bench hopping, Seckie passed the ball to Remers--who was always watching, always waiting. Pratzsky and Ditch called out "ONE!" She moved on to blue two. It was a joy to play with Remers. You could throw her the ball even when she was doing the tires and she'd catch it--if you aimed well--without missing a beat. Seckie remembered one time, on a course much like this one, Remers had made a perfect pass--perfect timing, perfect aim--Ditch had caught it in mid-air coming down from a lay-up. Then almost without thinking, Ditch landed, took two steps as if going for another lay-up, and passed it to her. She was on the monkey bars and with a reflex action, caught it with her feet. She finished the bars, flicked the ball from her feet to her hands as she jumped down, and passed it back to Remers who was just coming out of the tunnel. Remers had to make a small grab for it but, always alert, she caught it. The whole thing was incredible, so smooth--it was as if they'd rehearsed it. Seckie heard "TWO" then, and looked to see Remers casually climbing over a hurdle, humming a little tune. Trot trot trot--climb. Trot trot trot--climb. She looked for Kernn--he must be crawling through the tunnel with the ball. She carried on to blue five.

But it got that way after a while if you played with the same people. You got to know their strengths and weaknesses. For instance, Seckie knew, you never ever passed

at Ditch when she was moving backwards. Actually moving forwards was kind of a risk too--that's why that one play was so fantastic--but in between stations Ditch always looked and was always ready.

Playing on the same course made a big difference too. Not only did you get to know where the lulls were in any given run, you also got to know where the runs intersected--physically, so the pass would be more of a hand-off, but also temporally. "THREE!" she caught the pass from Kernn.

For instance, she thought as she approached the bicycle, chances are that while I'm on blue nine, the red player will also be on nine, but the yellow player will be on eleven or twelve. Some stations always take longer than others, that's Just the way *this* course went. Before she climbed onto the bicycle she passed the ball to Remers, who was of course expecting it-- no one liked to pedal with a ball in their hands. "FOUR!" So at that point a pass between red and blue would be difficult, because red was monkey bars. But yellow could pass to blue--as long as the aim was accurate, because blue couldn't move--"FIVE!"--and blue could then pass back. No, she couldn't, Seckie remembered in time--only one passback was allowed.

However, the red player, Kernn, was only at five. He knew he was going slowly. He kept looking for the ball to come spinning through the air and hit him on the head. He didn't want to look ridiculous. He laughed then. So what did he look like standing in a line with three other adults doing 'I'm a little teapot'? He saw Seckie on the bicycle with the ball, and he held out his hands. Seckie threw it to him. "SIX!" Ditch and Pratzsky yelled, cheering.

It was hard though, to find that balance--between the attention, the energy used on

individual performance and that used on group performance. There was a point at which both maximized. Kernn recalled, as he ran up and down the bleachers, that as a child he was fascinated with standing on the teeter-totter in the middle, just so, so that both ends were off the ground the same amount. As an adult he saw himself running along the splintered board first to one end so the other flew high in the air, then back along to the other end so the first end was off the ground. If you had only your own rhythm to consider, he thought, either way achieved a balance. But group efforts had a rhythm of their own. You had to be ready to maximize your attention to the group at that moment when individual input would maximize the group's performance. No point in being ready to pass the ball when no one else could catch it. He wondered how long Seckie, Ditch, and Remers had played mittsiball. How long did it take to find that balance, that timing?

Before he started the dreaded eight, nine, ten sequence, he had to throw the ball-- Remers was closest. "SEVEN!" Was that a lot of passing? The group before had only what, four? "EIGHT!" Remers had passed it to Seckie. He scrambled up the rope and back down. Then he jumped up to hang from the monkey bars. He started across, right, left, right--his arms were sore but really it wasn't too bad. He dropped right into the push-ups--a little slow, but sure--and as soon as he got up he saw the ball coming. He reached for it, fumbled, recovered. All right! He heard cheers, "NINE!" and felt rather pleased with himself.

Then he heard Remers laughing. The hyena? Had to be. He glanced over. It was. She looked like a drunken octopus. Heading for red eleven, he saw Seckie on the sidelines. Done already? Must be. She was so fast! So he'd have to carry the ball for the rest. That meant he'd have to set it down for red thirteen--and lose points--or do a

one-handed cartwheel. Yeah right.

He heard a bell. Again and again. That must be Remers, done with the hyena. We should put a gong there instead, he thought. Cymbals, at least. Well here goes. He tucked the ball under his arm and did two front rolls. More or less. Three back rolls? He tried one. Splat. He tried again. No way. Inspiration hit--he put the ball under his shirt and tucked his shirt into his shorts. Can a pregnant man do back rolls, a headstand, and a cartwheel? Ditch, Seckie, Remers, and Pratzsky were watching to see. Yes to the back rolls! Yes to the headstand! And--YES! A cartwheel, by a man, with a belly out to here! They cheered and hooted--he bowed before trotting over and ceremoniously ringing his bell.

"Nine passes," Ditch complimented the threesome, "Wow!" She nudged Seckie and nodded to Kernn. "Wait till this guy tries the course out at my place."

"I look forward to it", Kernn smiled, exhilarated.

Seckie had the sticks in her hand. She offered them to Ditch and Pratzsky first. Ditch pulled blue and Pratzsky pulled red. Yellow went to Kernn.

"I have to go again?" Actually, he wanted to. In spite of and because of the sweat running down his face.

"Now we'll see what you're really made of", Pratzsky slapped him on the back. He looked out at the expanse of the gym, tracing the red run.

Seckie gratefully sat down beside Remers to watch the play. She had done three in a row a few times--it was hard. But fun hard. She liked mittsiball. Rumour had it that the originator had named the game after her puppy; it didn't surprise her, if 'mittsi' was anything like her own dog. She had a terrier spaniel, a little over a year old, with a black

fluffy coat dipped in caramel, and wisps sticking out all over that made her look inquisitive, reckless, and of course, just plain cute. Seckie often watched her play 'tug of war' with one of her many friends: as soon as the other dog let go, she'd dangle the leather strip or whatever (she was resourceful when it came to toys) right under its nose, nudging it, insisting it grab on again and play some more--she had no concept of win/lose. 'Playing ball' meant wait for the throw, race after it, pounce on it, and bring it back prancing-oh-so-pleased-with-herself, to wait again, race after it again, pounce on it again, and bring it back again, and then again, and again--she never kept score, and only fatigue determined when the game was over. She played for the hell of it. It was as simple as that.

Seckie laughed then as she stretched out her legs, remembering just this morning. She had happened to look out the window and see her: sprinting around the tall pines, dodging in and out as if they were a slalom course, pausing every now and then to lean on her forepaws, rump in the air--panting, and giggling at the trees.