

42 GAMBLING

When we were kids, we were always gambling. I may be stretching the word a bit, but besides betting, it also means to play games, games of both skill and chance. And, you played to win. The kids on my block were always challenging or being challenged: “I betcha I can run faster, hit a ball further, jump higher, throw better.” Or I betcha I can beat you at checkers, tic tac toe, box ball, arm wrestling etc. And the kid being challenged responds, “How much you wanna bet?” Initially, there was no money involved. Just bragging rights.

As we got older, we actually bet money, but no more than a nickel or a dime. For the most part, we gambled for and with pennies. The most popular game was pitching pennies. Several kids would line up at a mark near the curb, and the one who got the penny closest to the wall, won, collecting all the pennies that were pitched. . That was a game of skill. Occasionally, when kids had a lot of pennies, two of them would shake and stack them between their thumb and index and middle fingers. Then one would take odds and the other evens, and they would compare their coins. If two heads or two tails came up, the kid who had evens won. If one was heads and the other tails, the kid who had odds took the penny. Flipping pennies was also popular. One kid would flip a penny and place it on the back of his hand while the other called heads or tails. If the caller was right, he collected the penny; if he was wrong he gave the flipper a penny. Pitching pennies required skill. Odds and evens, and calling heads or tails, didn't.

Before we moved onto pennies, we gambled with marbles, and baseball cards. There were lots of ways of playing marbles (which we called immies) but my favorite was played with a wooden cheese box in which you cut four or five openings with a coping saw. You would get the cheese box from the grocery store, borrow a saw (there was always someone on the block that had one) and cut square openings of different sizes, small, medium and large. The entrepreneur who had fashioned the box would place a value at each opening: a small opening might return three immies, a medium—two, and a large opening—one. You would stand near the curb and urge the other kids to shoot at your box. If you were lucky, the shooters would miss and you kept the immies. If you made the openings too big, you would have to pay off, and you may end up (if you didn't get rid of your box) losing all your marbles. I don't believe that is the origin of the expression.

There were several ways to gamble with baseball cards, The cards were either flipped, pitched against the wall, or held against the wall and dropped. Of course you didn't gamble with your really valuable baseball cards. Those you saved or traded. “I'll give you my Mel Ott for your Whitey Ford.” Or, “I'll give you my Red Ruffing and Harry Danning for your Hank Greenberg.” Kids somehow learned which cards were valuable. and they squirreled them away. Ordinary baseball cards were kept in a shoe box under the bed. When you flipped cards, the object was to match the card your opponent flipped. If his card landed face up, your card had to land face up in order to win. Pitching against the wall was like pitching pennies. Dropping a card that was held against the wall was a

trickier game. Its aim was to have your card fall on one of the cards that was already on the ground, enabling you to take them.

Eventually, the kids grew up and moved out of their parents' homes, and their mothers took all the junk that they had accumulated during their childhood, and threw it out. At some point, every guy would remember his old baseball cards, and having heard stories about how all old baseball cards were worth a lot of money, he would rush home and ask his mother where his baseball cards were. He would then be told that she threw them out along with the cars, trucks, marbles, broken toys, and comic books. "Oh my god, you threw out my comic books! They're worth a lot of money today."

That however, is not my story. My mother died before I moved out of the house, and it fell to me to dispose of my mother's belongings. One item which I did not discard, and which I still treasure, is my mother's ivory domino set. It is in a finely inlaid wooden box with a lock. The box and the dominos are truly works of art. From time to time, usually on a Friday evening or a holiday, after supper, we would take out the dominos, lay them out face down on the kitchen table, and my mother and I would play. As I got older, this occurred less frequently. It is the only game I remember playing with my mother. The tradition continued, and almost as a rite of passage, I taught each of my children the game of dominos, playing with my mother's ivory domino set. As they were learning, I took it easy, but as they progressed, I played to win, and despite the fact that I had been playing longer, I found myself losing more games than I won.

My mother was strongly opposed to gambling for money. I am sure she felt that many people who could not afford to lose, gambled away money that their families needed for necessities. In her will, she wrote the following: "It is my wish and I so urge my son to...avoid gambling of any kind except insofar as it may be necessary for his personal contact with other persons, and that if possible to avoid all forms of gambling." I had heard that my father enjoyed playing cards. It is possible that he may have lost money at cards. It certainly must have kept him away from home lots of evenings. My mother need not have worried. I never became a gambler. But I played all the games the other kids played, in order to...using my mother's phrase...maintain personal contact with other persons—the other kids on the block.

An activity that we were always involved with was "fingers" (also called odds or evens.) It was frequently used to resolve matters between two opponents, much like flipping a coin. It was also used for choosing, or if you were just hanging around with nothing better to do. The two contestants would select odds or evens. They would stand facing each other, and then say simultaneously: "One, two, three, shoot," and when shoot is said, they would throw out one or two fingers. If there were two ones or two twos, evens won. If there was a one and a two, odds won. Sometimes, one or the other would say "three takes it," and they would shoot until one or the other won three times. Choosing commonly took place between the captains of opposing teams to determine who picked first, or which team batted first, much like flipping a coin.

By the time we were 10 or 11, we were playing cards, despite my mother's feelings about it. One of the kids on the block always managed to find a deck of cards in his house and during the summer, we would sit on the stoop, or on the curb and play poker. Instead of poker chips, we used bottle caps. We never were really sure of the sequence: Does a full house beat a flush? Does three of a kind beat a straight? Why shouldn't you draw to an inside straight? We knew that a royal flush is the best hand, but we also knew that nobody will ever get one, even with deuces and one eyed jacks wild. The other popular card games were war and blackjack or 21. Some of my friends became real card players and graduated from bottle caps and pennies to nickel and dime poker, but not me. The fact is, I never was much of a gambler, but I was always fascinated by games of chance, as an observer.

I plan to write more about these activities as I observed them growing up: numbers, betting on sports, my first casino experience. And how I stayed true to my philosophy: everything in moderation. Stay tuned.

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One of my friends actually joined a fraternity at City College so he could sit in on the poker games. And a few others learned bridge. I understand that some of my friends' fathers were card players—mostly pinochle and something called “pisha-paishe.” The more sophisticated women in the neighborhood played canasta and mah jongg.

Which brings us to numbers. There was always a housewife on each block that was the numbers taker. I believe neighbors would drop by to place a bet on their way to work. At the end of the day, people knew the number because it would be connected to a closing stock market number. From time to time, we would hear stories about the numbers taker being arrested or shaken down by the cops if the cops had not been paid off. I envisioned the numbers operation to be a complex network with thousands of housewives all over New York taking numbers, and hundreds of collectors picking up the money and slips and bringing them to a central repository where lieutenants would sort them out and arrange to pay off the winners, and at the head of it all was the numbers king,

Consolidated Laundries shop chairman DC bus stop what's today's number?

Irish Sweepstakes

The second illegal activity which everyone seemed to know about was the punchboard. It was usually kept under the counter at the candy store

Italian version of fingers.

Reno casino

