

Spoofing Classics

Gentlemen
Spoofers
Sunday Magazine
April 1990



What do Andy Haden, Martin Crowe, Ian Smith, Murray Mexted and Dave Bennett, of Palmerston North, have in common? Well, yes, they are all New Zealand sporting representatives. But the correct answer is that they are all spoofers. Pardon? JOHN DYBVIG explains a hidden sub-culture within our society which specialises in one of the weirdest and most genteel pastimes in the world.

the gentle art of spoofing

You've got a thirst, the kind only a cold beer will quench. So it's off to the pub. Your attention is drawn to a group in the corner where the huge frame of former All Black Andy Haden dwarfs New Zealand cricketers Martin Crowe and Ian Smith plus several businessmen. They're all standing around in what seems to be a bizarre ritual — holding out clenched fists at the end of outstretched arms, their brows knitted while they rock back and forth on the heels of their shoes. Strange behaviour indeed.

What's going on, you say to the barman. He nods in their direction. You mean that group of guys over there? Yes, what's going on? That, the barman says in all seriousness, is the place where mental chess meets with Australian two-up. Pardon? You know, mate, they're spoofing ... mental gymnastics. Oh, right, you say in the way that people do when they definitely don't understand.

On Tuesday, April 3, men from the far reaches of the globe and from over a dozen countries — including New Zealand — converged on the British Club in Bangkok wearing black tie and with clenched fists and cries of 'James Bond', 'The German Virgin', and 'The Titanic'. What's this, some diabolical

plot of the Freemasonry to restore the British Empire? Nothing as simple as that. It's the 1990 world spoofing championships. The defending world spoofing champion was a New Zealander, Dave Bennett of Palmerston North.

Spoof. It's a strange word. It has some unsavoury applications which we won't go into here although the word is defined by the dictionary as 'a good humoured deception or trick'. Apparently it was coined by one Arthur Roberts (1852-1933), an English comedian.

The game of spoofing is defined by innkeeper Kevin Schwass as 'the ancient art of mathematical calculation as played by gentlemen'. The object of the game is quite simple. Each spoofer must present a clenched hand containing anywhere from zero to three coins at the command: 'Gentlemen, when the hands are out...' They then take turns to assess the number of coins held in the entire assembly of clenched fists. If, for example, there are four spoofers, the range of possibility extends from zero to 12.

The one who predicts the exact number of coins drops out of the school, leaving the other three to try again — this time with a possibility range of zero to nine. The last remaining player is the loser. He is expected to replenish the refreshments of his fellow spoofers. The size of a spoofing school may be two or 22



The hands are out: Miles de Lautour, Kevin Schwass and Bevis Scott in a spoofing school.

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or more. When spoofing, it benefits you financially not to be last...

The game has been around for years in one form or another. People used matchsticks or beer caps or anything at all. Then, one fog-bound night in London during the 1970s, a group of public school old boys of the posh and tosh type were amusing themselves in front of a cozy fire at a pub called the Hollywood Arms. They were spoofing in between



nips of port.

The conversation turned to the camaraderie they shared as gentlemen and lovers of sport and they decided to form a few loosely-knit spoofing rules to foster good fellowship. Nothing has ever been written down but, as befits a game for gentlemen, certain customs have developed to which people adhere the world over.

For instance, any show of emotion is simply not permitted. Win or lose, the reaction must be the same: 'Gentlemen, it's been a pleasure.' Failure to comply

can be expensive. And a gentleman's word must be his bond. You must honour the conditions of the spoof.

The classic example was the spoof between two players, Bill Endicott and Nick Poynton, two from the original group who formed the rules. They were the very best of lifelong friends. They did everything together. Until finally they decided there wasn't enough room in England for both of them. So they spoofed a best-out-of-seven contest with the loser to emigrate. Endicott lost and then, without any show of emotion, said: "Nick, it's

been an absolute pleasure to spoof with you" and a week later rang from Johannesburg where he's lived ever since. The call for 'two' right throughout the world is 'Endicott two' or 'absent friends'.

But before we become too embroiled in the rules and conditions of this unusual game, let's look at some of the players. In a relatively short time New Zealanders have stamped their presence strongly on the spoofing world. Former All Black Murray Mexted is credited with bringing the game to New Zealand and won the inaugural world champion-



Kevin Schwass in the gaudy spoofer's jacket which can only be worn after attending a world championship.

ship held in Wellington in 1983 following the Lions rugby tour of the same year.

The following two years also saw Kiwis emerging as world champions — John Sargent in 1984 and Tony Stewart in 1985. Dave Bennett won the world title last year and hails from the strongest spoofing region in all New Zealand — and possibly the world — Palmerston North.

John Sargent, another Palmerstonian, is Dave's cousin and also the New Zealand champion. John Gilmoor is the Auckland champion and the Manawatu titleholder is John Clare. Ask Dave Bennett the reason for Manawatu's great success and he says: "They have a good active school that meets once a week with

excellent participation."

Yes, but is spoofing skill or luck? "The word 'spoo' means to deceive so you must feel that you can put one over on your fellow spoofer. There's a lot of mental aggression involved and you have to feel like you can dominate your opponent. It's partly skill with a bit of luck thrown in." Bennett's description makes spoofing sound very much like a sport so it is no surprise to see some big names in the spoofing ranks — All Black Andy Haden and New Zealand cricketers Martin Crowe, Ian Smith and Richard Reid are all keen clenched fists.

The All Blacks apparently spoof to see who does the laundry when they are on tour. In fact Wellington All Black John

Gallagher, another serious spoofer, is supposed to have been heard saying: "I look forward to clenching my fist in your company." Those not in the know thought a brawl was about to take place and headed in the direction of safety.

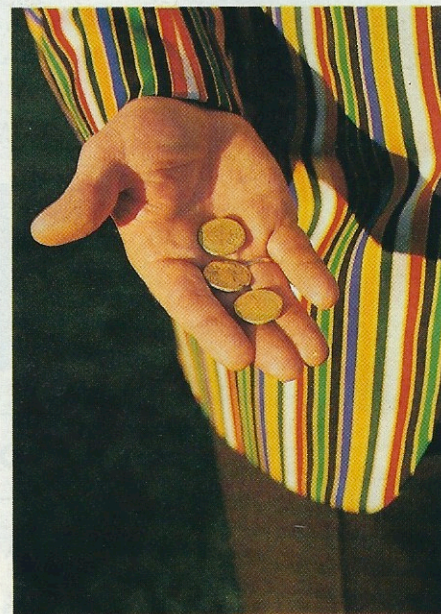
Haden, a respected spoofer, says: "The same guys always win and the same guys always lose. The good spoofers will recognise the calling traits of his fellow spoofers and then calculate the odds of being amongst the averages all the time. Your first thoughts are generally your best calls. It's a mind-versus-mind game — real psych-out stuff with crackling tension at the championships."

So, let's have a look at some of the odds and ends of this oddity of a game. Spoofing is never played for money because that's not a gentlemanly thing to do. You can spoof for anything — who buys the next round, who pays for a meal and so on.

But there are some well-known spoofs. Like a 'Jives' spoof. A player who loses a Jives must look after his fellow spoofers for the next hour — which can be quite a rugged task. One of the best known occurred at the Oaks Tavern in Sydney where a school of 20 decided to spoof for a Jives. The loser had to cook everyone's steak to order — on the barbecue in the Oaks' enormous garden bar — as well as make all the salads and serve the entire school.

Naturally, as a gentleman spoofer, it was his pleasure to do all this and he doggedly completed his mammoth task in the searing heat while all his fellow spoofers sat in the shade and enjoyed

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themselves. Finally he got his own plate together and sat down when someone exclaimed: "By jove, Jives, you're certainly not planning to sit with us, are you?" So Jives dutifully got up and sat by himself in a corner of the room until his time was up.

And then there's the snow chains spoof which is legendary in New Zealand. It seems that following the 1983 Lions tour of New Zealand, Henri Bru (a French journalist), Simon Rumney (a Scot), Nick Poynton and one other took a tour around the ski resorts of the South Island. They were assured they would need a set of chains for the car in the snowy areas. As it happened the winter of '83 produced little snow so the chains never made it out of their box.

When they came to depart the four found they were still toting the chains and they spoofed on the spot to see who would bring them to their next meeting. Several months later they all met up — in Bahrain. It must have been an interesting sight for the Customs men in Bahrain — snow chains in a part of the world where sand is a lot more common than snow. The chains are now a ritual. They turn up all over the world and are easily the best-travelled chains in the history of man.

Many of the spoofing calls revolve around some actual event such as 'Endicott Two'. Seven is always 'James Bond' or 'Jimmy Bond' after the secret agent 007. Eight is 'Harry Tait never pays' after a legendary spoofer whose one rare skill was mastering the craft of never dipping into his pocket. Murray Mexted tried to have this call changed to 'York' because the Duchess of York, Sarah Ferguson,

It is something straight out of Victorian England operating in today's mad-dash society — nicely blended, of course.

gave birth at eight minutes past eight o'clock on the eighth month of 1988. But it wasn't on...

Nine is 'The German Virgin' which is a play on words centring around what such a young woman would say to an amorous suitor ('Nein!'). Ten is 'Kiwi' after the New Zealand 10 cent coin which is much loved by spoofers for the playing of the game.

Eleven is 'Tina Turner' and comes from the bingo call, 'legs eleven', and is a compliment to the much-admired legs of rock and roll's grandmother. Fourteen is 'cut your toes' which is derived from the French for 14 — quatorze. Fifteen is also derived from its French equivalent

— quinze. Spoofers, however, call 'Film Festival' when they mean 15 — quinze sounds exactly like Cannes, the place of the famous film festival.

There are basically two types of spoofing: in the pub — where the last player shouts the round — and championship spoofing where there are formal preliminaries, quarter and semifinals and a final. Dress is very important in the championships. The required attire is black tie or, in the case of the world championships, a special spoofer's jacket and tie.

In order to qualify for a spoofer's jacket you must first attend a world championships. Then you are permitted to buy the bolt of cloth — there is only one supplier in London — and a jacket is produced which can be worn only once a year.

Spoofers have designed their jacket in the colours of the International Rugby Board — green, red, blue, yellow, black and white — and all fashioned in splendid stripes.

So how does one get involved as a spoofer? First and foremost you must be invited. Hotelier Kevin Schwass, who currently hosts the Auckland Spoofing School at the Poenamo every Tuesday, was invited by his then flatmate, New

Zealand wicketkeeper Ian Smith. "If you go along on three occasions and nobody objects — of course no-one will tell you they object, you'll just find yourself not speaking to anyone — then you're in," says Schwass. "It's the sort of snobbish thing that the British do well. The worst thing you can do is to show any emotion about wanting to attend. It's the classic *Catch-22* situation that the British are so good at."

Schwass is no mean spoofer and once reached the finals only to lose 4-3. "Afterwards this very posh older gent by the name of Sutcliffe doddles up to me and says: 'Well done, old chap.' My chest was puffing with pride and then he says: 'Of



Dave Bennett: The 1989 World Spoofing Champion.

course, you do realise that no-one ever remembers the name of the loser.' From then on, whenever introductions were made, people seemed to have forgotten my name. Typical dry British humour.

"Then this other chap comes up to me and says: 'Do you realise that I have finished runner-up on four separate occasions.' I say that I didn't realise and he says, completely deadpan, 'Nobody ever does.'"

But that's spoofing. Don't take it seriously, try to win but don't show it, win but be dignified when you feel like whooping for joy. It's something straight out of Victorian England operating in today's mad-dash society — nicely blended, of course.

The English, of course, are terrible spoofers even though they invented it. New Zealanders love their accents but think they take themselves and their rules far too seriously. The Brits, meanwhile, criticise the Kiwis for wanting to win too much — just like their rugby. The only thing both sides agree on is that they are rather dubious about the Australians.

And, as for the 'Yanks', well, they haven't really crashed this scene yet. It's been suggested — unofficially, of course — that they find it difficult to be gentlemen. ■