

A New Mexican in New Zealand's Courts

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Some time last fall my wife showed me an article on hiking the New Zealand's Queen Charlotte Track. So, we eventually ended up going on a month's vacation touring the South Island. New Zealand is a country where 4% of the human population plays squash. So, before leaving home I searched the Web to see if I could scrape up a game of squash or two. I was successful, perhaps more than Maggie bargained for -- three tourneys in three successive weekends -- since we never did get to walk the Queen's Track. Our touristic itinerary was arranged around the squash opportunities.

Christchurch (on the East Coast)

On the next day after arrival, still jet lagged, I popped in on the E. Chester Street ChCh Squash Club. (There was a street sign even, pointing the way.) One of my contacts there, Len Reese, had gone south to Dunedin, but my other contact, Shayle Higginson was. Shayle's first question was what my skill level was, so she could give me phone numbers for appropriate playing partners. However, "3.83" was not very informative, so we guessed that the Kiwi equivalent might be, "low B2 or C1". She also pointed out an announcement about a "Master's Tournament" coming up in Dunedin, which was not on the printout of NZ tourneys made before I left.

On to the telephone, where I arranged a match the next day with a fellow who claimed to be a rusty "low C1". He won, but we were playing pretty evenly, I thought. So, perhaps "B2" was a bit optimistic. Interesting thing about these pickup matches -- members have a key that gets them into the club and which also goes into a gadget that turns on the court lights for a half hour, provided you have enough coins of the appropriate size to pay one's guest fee. More coins give you another half hour.

Greymouth (on the West Coast)

Moving on to the West Coast, on checking into the Neptune, somehow the subject of squash came up. "Oh, I used to," said the backpacker's manager, "but my wife still does." It turns out that Katrina Neiman is quite a good player, and she beat me 3-2, when we played at 8:00 the next morning. Her father, more my age, is one of the better squashers in NZ for his age group.

Invercargill (on the South Coast)

My contact here, Kevin Mason, had arranged that I would fill in on a business team that evening. "Classic Hits", a radio station, was short one of its usual players. This was a regular Wednesday gala at Squash City (four courts, all painted in different pastels). The idea here is to introduce newcomers to the game, so it has a for-fun kind of format. There are five players per team, ranked so that opponents are more or less equal. Since all courts were full that night, both here and at another club, that adds up to 16 teams, 80

participants! (Probably more than the total number of squash players in New Mexico.) Each player's match goes 30 minutes non-stop, alternating service every five rallies (like ping pong), with a point scored on every rally, with no lets called. I was put into their #2 slot, i.e., was the fourth match, and got "the first win for our team" that night. Unfortunately, my match was not well matched, as the score was something like 80 to 25. I wasn't able to stick around for the beer that was drunk afterwards.

Dunedin (on the Southeast Coast)

Fred Cross, the tournament director for the Dunedin Master's, had told me how to get to the North End Squash and Rowing Club, but I didn't appreciate how narrow the tunnel under the railroad line was until I got there. The tournament format was without age groups, so I found myself in this first NZ tourney in the A Division (ratings from A to C2, which is what Fred had assigned to me). "Master" just means anyone over 35. There were probably as many women players here as men. The way they set up these tourneys is so you are guaranteed three matches. So, I handily lost my first match, 0-3, to a pleasant 45-ish fellow, Noo Henry. (The one in the picture is a fake.) The custom here is that the winner buys the loser a drink, which in this case was an orange juice instead of the usual beer.

Anyway, that put me into the First Consolations bracket on Saturday afternoon playing Fred, also a C2. I won the first two games, and then lost the next three. In this case Fred bought me a Speight's Ale, which is (or was once?) brewed locally and of which the Dunedin folk are very proud. Watching the next match, in which my first opponent was losing 0-2, down 8-love, I learned about the "Dunedin Master's" rule: no skunks. If you do win 9-0, *you* have to buy the beer. Dion Johns, being a careful Scotsman, kept serving the ball out of court until Noo got one point.

So, into my Second Consolations match on Sunday with Barry Murdoch. Again, I won the first two matches, 9-5 and 10-8. But then -- amazing! -- Barry skunked me not once but twice! (He was warned about the rule and tried hard to avoid the penalty but I *still* was able to lose the 9th point, both times!) I eventually won the fifth game, 9-7.

Well, it turned out that anyone who participated and was still around for the awards ceremony (and the Chinese buffet) got a prize of some sort or other (consumable potables), even those who never won a match. In my case the prize was 18 cans of Speight's. All this for an entry fee of NZ\$ 25, and with congenial company at that!

A Tavern Riddle: "How can you take away three from eight and still have eight?" I've provided enough clues above.

Wanaka (just east of the Southern Alps)

We now headed inland towards the mountains. A gal named Angie Patterson at the Dunedin Master's had told me who to contact if I were to end up in Wanaka, "just say that Angie Creighton said to call." I assumed Creighton was her maiden name. Well, I got in

two evening matches in Wanaka, one of which was with Bill Creighton. It turns out that he is the younger brother of the fellow Angie was once married to. It's a small island, no doubt.

Queenstown (in the Southern Alps)

This was a rainy Easter weekend and the time of a lot of activities in this Aspen-like town. The tournament started on Good Friday and ended on Sunday, even though Easter Monday was also a holiday for many. There were people from all over NZ playing (I was the only American, as usual), some of whom I had already met in Dunedin.

I was again placed in the Open draw, and my first match was with the number one seed, a tall college kid named Callum O'Brien, down from Auckland. He won easily, but he must have been playing with me, since he let me get 4 or 5 points in each of the three games. He played a bit more seriously in the finals, three matches later, but won that 3-0 with more lopsided scores against a fit young policeman from Dunedin.

My second match, First Consies, was with a hard hitter from Invercargill, Don Marshall. He hit the ball hard and so totally dominated the match that I didn't even get sweaty. The Second Consies match was later that afternoon with a fellow more my age, Bruce Morris (62). He too beat me easily in three games. Somehow I was expecting to do a bit better since Bruce was rated a C2, but he eventually won that feed-in consolation flight.

Despite being out of the tourney I attended the men's and women's Open Finals and the subsequent awards ceremony. Prizes were both donations of goods and gift certificates by the various sponsors. If I had done better against Bruce, I would have won a free bungee jump off the Kawarau Bridge! (Maybe losing was the better part of valor.) There were also *cash prizes* (!) for the finalists in each bracket, something I wasn't expecting, and they were substantial (NZ\$ 400 in the Men's Open).

Christchurch (again)

In this tournament the organizer, Greg Atkins (who only organized, didn't play), didn't quite know what to do with me. I was placed in the Men's Division 2 as eighth seed in a flight of eight. That turned out to be on the low side. This tourney ran from Thursday evening through Saturday (the club here has five beautiful courts). The players were mostly local, but two of the ladies I had already met in Queenstown. And I finally met Len Reese, the squash facilitator for Canterbury -- he's 74 and now only plays in age-group masters tourneys.

My first match was with a *very* young, spikey-haired lad, Craig Studholme. I won easily, and then had the dilemma of whether he was old enough for me to buy him a beer. "Speight's, please," he didn't decline it. I went on to win the Division, but the third games in the last two matches were both 10-8. As a prize I got to kiss Ellen Craxton and got an envelope containing NZ\$ 70. Which the next day I converted to New Zealand wines, so I wouldn't have to worry about being called a "professional".

Four Closing Comments

In the tournaments *every* match was both marked and refereed by the previous players on the court, no exceptions.

The Kiwis do seem to be a little loose in calling strokes. In one instance I thought I had won the point on a stroke, but the referee called it "no let". Well, maybe it's only different from what I'm used to.

Even very small towns (such as Lake Tekapo, population 1000) often have a squash court, which can be accessed by anyone for a fee. For example, if you can find it, a notice on the door tells you to go, say, to such-and-such a gas station to rent a key. The problem, of course, is finding a playing partner, if you're not traveling with one.

The New Zealand women players -- and there are many -- are often very strong players. Callam O'Brien's opponent in the Men's Open semi-finals in Queenstown was his girlfriend (who also was the Women's Open champion).