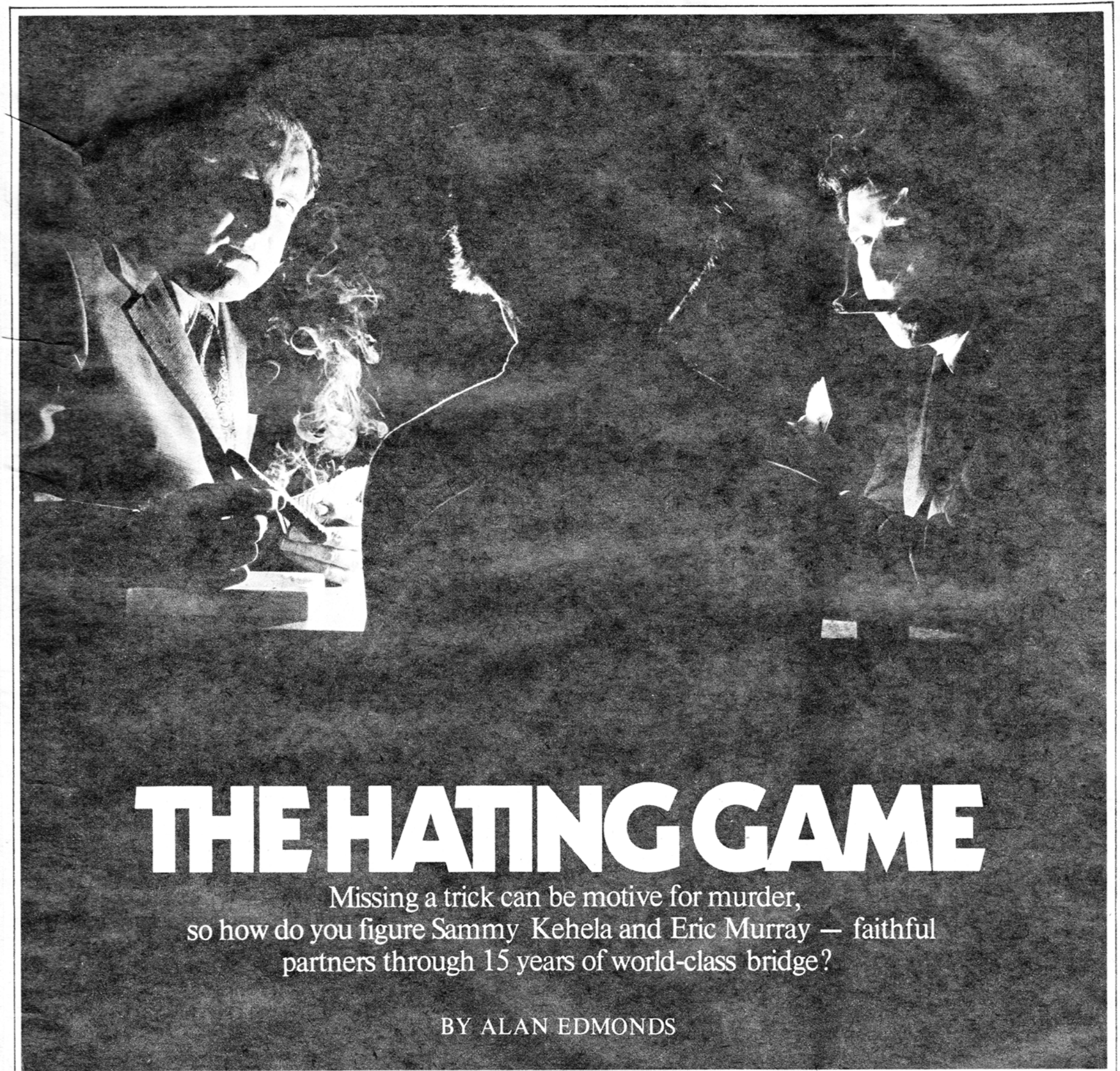

THE HATING GAME

Missing a trick can be motive for murder, so how do you figure Sammy Kehela and Eric Murray — faithful partners through 15 years of world-class bridge?

BY ALAN EDMONDS

Murray (left) and Kehela do have one thing in common apart from bridge — a preference for cigars.

The accepted wisdom is that 4 million Canadians are more or less addicted to bridge, a game that brings out the worst in people even when played with friends in the living room around a bottle of Chianti. Another accepted wisdom is that it's hard on marriage since if there's trouble in paradise it will show up in the cards, man and wife hating — yes, actually hating — one another because he or she led the deuce instead of the queen. Even the social (as opposed to tournament) bridge table is a great place to let the steam out of a marriage, and the history of the game is pocked with stories of husbands and wives screaming at one another, emptying drinks over each other or at the very least going home in hostile silence. In Texas, where they seem compelled to upstage the rest of the world, one woman actually pulled a gun and shot her husband just because he missed a trick.

All of which explains why Sammy Kehela's view of his partnership with Eric Murray is especially significant, not to mention ironic. Kehela (south or west) and Murray (north or east) have kept Canada in the international bridge tournament big time for more than 15 years, playing together for longer than any other pair on the globe-trotting bridge circuits. In their high-pressure world of tournament bridge, that makes them an object of wonder. They are commonly asked: "How have you put up with one another so long?"

What Kehela says to explain it is that their partnership — any tournament partnership — is like a marriage. "To make a marriage work, two people have to learn to live with one another and

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Photography: Ken Elliott

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AS IN A GOOD MARRIAGE, THEY DON'T CROWD

make allowances for one another and be loyal to the other as well as to themselves. Perhaps because you know one another well the relationship isn't so exciting as if you were with someone new, but in the end it's far more satisfying, more significant.

And a tournament bridge partnership is like a marriage in another way, says Kehela. "You get people wooing you from outside, and sometimes you flirt with them. Eric and I have played with other partners, but with them we've never done anything significant. We've won nothing really worthwhile. So we stick together."

The analogy doesn't have to end there. Marriages seem to work best when both partners have their own separate interests, and don't crowd one another. Kehela and Murray get along by rarely seeing one another except at the bridge table. They often fly to bridge tournaments in Hong Kong or Boston or San Francisco or Vancouver on different planes. They don't even eat together in these strange cities — and they rarely, if ever, talk bridge. At home in Toronto they rarely meet: neither can recall when he was last in the other's home. They do display fierce loyalty — Kehela was outraged at a recent wounding criticism of Murray in a bridge magazine — but Murray says: "If we spent much time together our game would suffer. Last year we broke the rules and took my wife and Sammy's girl to the international pairs championship in Stockholm. We did things together then — had dinner, went sightseeing, that sort of thing — and we ended up placing nowhere." He pauses. Then adds disgustedly: "Fifth!"

That surprised everyone. Kehela and Murray are ranked as at least fourth or even third in the pecking order of international bridge partnerships. And many experts who would themselves like to be champ, Murray included, rank Kehela as the best individual player in the world.

On the face of it, they're an odd pair; two men unlikely to meet socially and just as unlikely to get along if they did.

Kehela, 39, was born in Iraq and is a Jew. He was raised mostly in India, and educated partly in California before he joined the family scrap metal business in the Caribbean and in England. He is of medium height, a bachelor, rarely wears anything but slightly rumpled black and, despite disclaimers to the contrary, is the nearest thing to a glamor boy on the big-league bridge circuit. Called "Black Sam", Kehela is widely admired by those more or less nubile ladies whose passion for the game is focused more on the star performer than on the cards themselves. Dianna Gordon, a striking woman who has played for Canada, says cautiously: "Many to whom the game means a lot would give a great deal just to play with Sammy." Kehela is also a bridge professional, an occupation that mostly involves giving lessons and writing about the game. Since his income is estimated at about $10,000 a year, he couldn't afford to ride the international bridge circuit if his tournament expenses were not paid by either the American Bridge League or the Canadian Bridge Federation — and on occasion by organizers of smaller tournaments who pay his way to be a star attraction.

Then there's Eric Murray, QC. At 45, he is a prominent lawyer in practice with his wife. He has three children; is a WASP and a member of several of the very best clubs. Where Kehela is dark and almost sallow, Murray is tall (and now slightly paunching), fair and impeccably tailored over that glossy layer of flesh that usually signals health, wealth and the seemingly unassailable self-confidence of the Establishment.

Bridge apart, the only thing the two men seem to have in common is the habit of chomping on fat, malodorous cigars through the long days (from three to ten, up to ten hours each day, depending on importance) of bridge tournaments. Even the ways in which they play are wildly different: Kehela sits slumped, morose and sardonic, holding his cards low, yet playing with computer-like precision, while Murray sits ramrod straight, holds his cards high and plays with a non-scientific bravura you might more readily expect of a poker game.

'Damn him, he's bridged out,' fumes Murray

Kehela the professional who says he's going sour on the game...Murray the dedicated amateur...together they dominate the rarefied world of international bridge to a degree that is remarkable considering they don't play as often as other world-championship-class partnerships. And if there is any trouble in the "marriage" it's because Kehela won't play as often as Murray would like.

There is only one international tournament in which individual nations compete, and that's the Bridge Olympiad begun in 1964 and played every four years since. Largely because of Kehela and Murray, Canada has placed third twice and second once — "and that's remarkable for this small country where the passion for bridge arrived late", says Murray. The best known international tournament is the Bermuda Bowl, played in the years when there's no Olympiad. In that, teams represent six regions of the world: Europe, South America, Asia and so on. The North American team (which represents Mexico, Canada, U.S. and Caribbean) is chosen from partnerships that get the most points in four major tournaments each year. Despite their ranking in the card-table pecking order, Murray and Kehela have never played on a team that has won the Bermuda Bowl — and Murray wants to so badly that when he talks about it his urbanity briefly deserts him. This year he wanted to play in at least two of those four major tournaments; Kehela didn't. "Damn him, he's bridged out," fumes Murray. More reasonably, Kehela points out that Murray is an amateur in whose life bridge is just one of several interests. He says: "I'm a professional. I play bridge day in and day out, and frankly I'm getting sick of the tournament world. It's unhealthy, unsavory."

Tournament bridge differs violently from the game those 4 million Canadian addicts play in their living rooms. That's "contract" bridge. In tournaments the game is "duplicate" bridge, in which the cards are pre-dealt and held in an aluminum "shoe" that looks like an oversize cribbage board. In the team events each team is made up of two partnerships. One partnership plays north-south; the other east-west. Each plays in separate rooms — but the pre-dealt hands are the same in both. Thus, in one room the north-south pair are playing *with* cards that their teammates are playing *against* next door. One partnership may win the north-south games of their room — and yet the team will lose because of the poor performance of the east-west pair next door. In the first round of such games there may be as many as 200 or 300 competing teams, and these are whittled down until in a final round there may be only a half-dozen teams, each trying to score more points than the other.

A social bridge player would stand little chance of survival in a tournament, where the tensions are hard for outsiders to imagine. The only thing wrong with the above description of a tournament is the use of the word "room": in fact one of those big four North American tournaments usually occupies an entire downtown city hotel, its reception rooms jammed with row upon row of bridge tables, air conditioners sobbing in a usually vain bid to clear the air of smokers' smog. There are usually four or five main events — men's pairs, women's pairs, mixed pairs and top-flight teams' games — but other competitions for less proficient players take place simultaneously. Fans mill around the tables, watching in critical silence. In bigger tournaments, closed-circuit television transmits pictures of the games to ballrooms crowded with spectators. Giant electronic boards like something out of Times Square dance with lights as play in key games is translated into electronic digits and symbols.

There are no cash prizes in North America (though in Europe tournaments sometimes offer, say, $2,500 to the winner) and there is no distinction between amateurs and those, like Sammy Kehela, who earn their living from the game. The glory — measured in titles and in points that can be totalled at the year's end — is all. Even so, the addicted spend thousands of dollars travelling from all parts of the continent to attend the major tournaments, where they pay to play and to watch, their fees paying tournament costs, helping support bridge organizations and footing the bill for the expenses of sending top teams to world championships.

Amidst all the oddballs — two sane men

Bridge itself is a cross between poker and chess. You win either by making a bid (that is, declaring in advance how many tricks you will take) and then living up to it, or by playing so skilfully that you prevent the opposition from taking as many tricks as it claimed it would at the outset. Partnerships have an infinite variety of codes, so-called "conventions", with which they try to indicate to one another where their playing strength may lie. Murray describing Kehela as a "computer" is not exaggerating: success depends on the ability to remember who played which cards and in what sequence; to determine what cards that playing-sequence indicates the opponents may hold; on actuarial possibilities calculated in a millisecond; on psychology — and what Kehela calls "table presence". To their partnership Kehela contributes the actuarial skills (he did study economics once), Murray is the psychologist. "His bidding behavior is so unpredictable that the opponents never know what's going on, and sometimes even I don't," says Kehela.

Watching them play, however, you feel the same excitement — electricity, almost — generated by, say, Rod Laver on the tennis court; Bobby Hull at centre ice; Glenn Gould at the piano. Anyone who does whatever it is he does surpassingly well generates an aura of almost magnetic excitement. While Kehela and Murray have it, they may at the same time be two of the more sane people in a world populated in part by oddballs and misfits. "In bridge, your playing is the yardstick of acceptance, not wealth or social graces," says Dianna Gordon. She says that many tournament players are egocentrics whose passion for winning surpasses good manners and simple decency.

"At tournaments you meet quite unpleasant, unacceptable people, so I understand Sammy thinking the tournament circuit is unsavory," says Murray. "A lot of them have the manners of pigs. Partners frequently abuse one another. I've seen players actually spit at their partners. Once, not long ago, a man called an opponent a stupid moron, and the man stood up and said 'Yes, I am stupid and I am a moron. And I'm sloppy, too.' Then he picked up the ashtray and emptied it over the other fellow's head."

Murray's ultimate example of bridge fanatics' crassness: The man actually playing out his bid — trying to get the tricks he has claimed he can take — actually handles both his cards and his partner's as well. The partner's hand called the "dummy" is laid face up on the table. The player must either lead from these cards, in which case he is "on the board" or from his own cards, in which case he is "in his hand". One young Vancouver tournament player has withered arms, and holds his cards with his feet. At a tournament last summer he had a moment's uncertainty and mistakenly reached to play from the board, whereupon an opponent snarled: "You're in your feet."

Kehela's distaste for the circuit extends to the way North American tournaments have become "professionalized". In recent years, he says, wealthy people hungry for success beyond their ability have taken to employing "hired guns" — professionals, teachers usually — who partner their employers for perhaps $200 a day and expenses.

Yes, son, there are groupies in bridge too

And then there are the groupies. Says Kehela: "They're not as plentiful in bridge as in, say, rock music or auto racing, and more's the pity. In fact, the people attracted to the bridge world tend to pimples and acne. But there are the girl university students, the drop-outs and the young bored housewives who aren't just satisfied to be seen with you, but they actually want to play bridge with you. Anyway, all that's behind me. I'm too long in the tooth now."

In a sense, both Kehela and Murray fit their own definitions of the bridge tournament misfit. Both took up the game because they felt, at one time, that they were social outcasts — though for different reasons.

Kehela grew up playing soccer, cricket and tennis in the India of the British Raj. Then, at 17, he went to the University of California at Los Angeles, where he was too small to play football, couldn't master baseball and found that there was little or no competitive tennis. He discovered bridge "and was lost because it satisfied my intense competitive urge". Murray took up bridge because he too was "intensely competitive" and "was just too clumsy to play ball games or take up track and field".

Murray was spared Kehela's fate because he studied law and pursued the game as an amateur. Kehela dropped out of UCLA, went into the family scrap business, dropped out of that in London, England, and to live played and taught bridge professionally. He came to Canada 17 years ago and again became a bridge professional, partly because it was his passion and partly "because I couldn't do anything else much". Murray's regular partner in local tournaments left town and a mutual friend — "a matchmaker", says Kehela, persisting with the marriage analogy — suggested the two men play together. They did; soon won everything there was to win in Canada and moved into the international circuit.

Kehela's reported $10,000 income from bridge seems uncomfortably modest. He says his teaching fees "are higher than most people in Canada charge, but a lot less than in America where fees can be from $100 up for a lesson". One leading American bridge professional makes more than $50,000 a year, and the grandpappy of all bridge pros, Charles Goren, is a millionaire several times over: currently most of his income is from bridge cruises, which involve addicts paying $1,000 or so to ride a luxury liner from, say, New York to the Caribbean, taking bridge lessons all the way.

Kehela is said to have the stature but not the energy to promote himself the way Goren did. He says: "To a certain extent bridge has become hard work. There's still a thrill when we win, but it's not like it was; not like that first woman, that first mountain. Why go on? Well, what else do I do? Be a clerk in an insurance company? No, I'll play bridge as long as I can."

Which means that the marriage of Kehela and Murray will probably endure. Kehela has promised Murray that he will play in enough of the big four tournaments during the 1975 season that opened in November to pretty well guarantee them a place on the North American team that will compete in the world championships in 1976. They have often played in the world championships, but thus far never on a winning team. Now that Kehela has agreed to compete again, Murray may in 1976 achieve his ambition of being a world champion. "I don't really want to play, but it's important to Eric and so I'm compromising and playing in two tournaments, not all four," says Kehela. "Compromise is what makes partnerships and marriages work."

Poisonous people play bridge, says an expert

By RAY LEE

Eric Murray and Sammy Kehela are acknowledged to be one of the world's best tournament bridge partnerships, and it is no surprise that they have again been chosen to anchor the Canadian team in a World Championship.

What has made them the force they are?

Following is an edited excerpt of an interview on the CBC's Barbara Frum Show, courtesy of CBLT, which offers some insights:

Frum: Do you cheer each other up? Can you feel the other guy's vibrations?

Khehela: Not easily, no. I wouldn't want to cheer him up, actually. We sort of have a love-hate relationship.

Frum: What is that?

Kehela: Well, there are times when you end up in the wrong contract, and you put your dummy down, and your partner looks at dummy. You get a slight feeling of pleasure that it serves him right because he bid too much. I've had that feeling often.

Murray: Sammy plays chess and I play poker.

Kehela: What he's saying in effect is that you can play bridge scientifically or have a slight gamble. And his style of play is geared to playing in that fashion. He creates an element of uncertainty at the table.

Frum: How do you do it, this psychological climate at the table?

Murray: Well, I don't know that there's a psychological climate, but if you have a reputation for moving the game around, when you do have your values, sometimes they don't trust you. It's a matter of reputation. Unfortunately, there are three people you can confuse with such tactics.

Frum: How much has to be in the pot for you two to have fun?

Murray: Fun?

Frum: Oh, you don't do this for fun?

Kehela: Bridge stopped being fun years ago.

Frum: Is it more exciting, is it more real when there is money riding on the game?

ERIC MURRAY
Bridge is fun?

SAMMY KEHELA
Love-hate relationship

Murray: Nothing compared to when you play in a World Championship.

Frum: What do you mean?

Kehela: Well, just beating the other team, the other player.

Frum: It's not money, it's recognition, esteem?

Kehela: Yes.

Frum: If it's not fun, and yet you're addicted to it, what is it that you're addicted to?

Murray: Well, it was fun. It's more fun when you're shooting at somebody. It's not as much fun when they're shooting at you.

Frum: What does losing feel like, then?

Murray: I rarely experience that.

Frum: People who win, are they nice?.

Murray: I would imagine that by and large there are more poisonous people playing bridge than most any other game you would care to mention.

Khehela: My experience has been that nice people don't normally win. You have to have a sort of mean streak. I'm surprised Eric doesn't do better for that reason.