

GAME ON!

THE STREAM TEAM

By Kevin Miller

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It was the word “job” that first put the idea into my head. That is, it was the threat of having to *get* a job, as in . . .

“That’s it, Wyatt. No more loafing around the house for you this summer. It’s time to get yourself a job—a J-O-B. I don’t care if it’s cutting grass at the golf course, stocking shelves at the grocery store, or cleaning rooms at the hotel, but you’re going to do something to earn your keep around here. Understand?”

That’s my mom speaking, in case it isn’t clear from the tone, although it could just as easily have

been my dad. Both of them had been on my case lately to “do something with my life.” It was only early January, but they were already planning my summer—planning to make it miserable, that is. Their idea of a New Year’s resolution, I guess.

The thing is, I was *already* doing something with my life, or at least I thought I was. My parents just didn’t see the value in it—not yet, anyway.

What was the thing I was doing, the activity that occupied every waking moment of my day when I wasn’t focused on schoolwork, doing chores, avoiding my little sister, or listening to my parents lecture me about how I was wasting my life? Come on—it was 2024, I was a fourteen-year-old boy, and I had a high-speed Internet connection wired straight into my house. What else could it be?

Gaming!

It didn’t matter what type of game we were talking about—shooters, sandboxes, platformers, battle royales, driving games, sports games, MMOs, MMOGs, MOBAs, or MMORPGs—if it involved battling someone else for fame and glory, I was in.

My ultimate dream? To become a full-time

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gamer just like my heroes—strike it rich, live in a mansion, own a fleet of cars, and live stream to my millions of adoring fans. There was no way I was going to become a drone who went off to do some mindless job each day just to earn money. And I knew if I gave in to my parents' demands and got a summer job, it wouldn't be long before I was stuck in the same depressing rut as everybody else. But I didn't want to be like everybody else; I wanted to be a *somebody*. And there was one game that I knew could make that happen.

Rumble Royale.

I'm not sure what it is about that game, but from the moment I first played it, something clicked. Whether looting materials, building, editing, or battling, there were few people I couldn't beat—at least when I was playing for fun.

The cool thing about *Rumble Royale* is that the game offers all sorts of opportunities to enter online tournaments, where players can win real money right from the comfort of their own homes. Then they can go on to win bigger and better tournaments—and even more money—at huge, invitation-only events. What could be better than that?

The problem was, as good as I was at the game, the moment money was on the line, something inside me went haywire. My hands started to sweat, my heart began to pound, and my normally iron-clad decision-making skills went out the window.

I turned into a total noob.

A bot.

“What are you doing?” my anonymous playing partners would often yell at me in exasperation, their voices causing me to cringe in humiliation as they blasted through my headset. “Why don't you

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do us all a favor and just jump off the map?”

Ouch.

The worst part was I was still good, but I was never quite good enough. As the storm closed in, the zone got smaller, and the fighting became more intense, it was like I forgot everything that had gotten me that far. Try as I might, I'd always finish just outside the rankings. All that money up for grabs but always just out of reach.

It was painful.

I won't bother telling you how many of my video game controllers suffered as a result of my failures. Let's just say they were on my birthday and Christmas wish lists almost every year.

The more I raged at my inability to break through to the big time, the more convinced my parents became that video games weren't the solution to my problems; they *were* the problem. I still thought video games were my ticket to the big leagues, but the time to prove that was running out. So, with summer just six months away and my parents hounding me to get a job—which would reduce my gaming time to nearly zero, not to men-

tion crush my soul under a mountain of boredom and hopelessness—I had to do something fast.

As I struggled to come up with a plan, I realized that up until then, I had been trying to make it on my own. But when I looked at my gaming heroes, nearly all of them had one thing in common—they had made it big as part of a team.

That made perfect sense. Not only could teammates rely on each other, revive each other, and watch each other's backs, there were way more opportunities to play tournaments and win in *Rumble Royale* as part of a duo or a four-person squad than there were if I tried to make it playing solo.

So, with that thought in mind, I decided it was time to come in from the cold, lonely fringes of the *Rumble Royale* world and recruit my own squad. If I could do that and we could win some actual money playing the game, maybe, just maybe, my parents would finally get off my back and put this whole J-O-B thing to rest.

The question was, where was I supposed to start looking?

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When it came to finding potential teammates, I concluded that I had two main options— OL or IRL, a.k.a. cyberspace or meatspace. If you still don't get it, or if you're a parent reading this, that means *online* or *in real life*.

I also had to think about whether I should make my recruiting efforts public or keep them a secret. If I recruited players online, I could hide behind my gamertag, *KwyattWyatt*—I know. Pretty clever, right? But sooner or later, potential teammates would ask to see my stats so they could determine how good I was, and seeing as I had yet to win a

single tournament, I didn't have much to show for myself. Plus, anyone who was any good was already part of a team. It wasn't like there was a waiting room full of future champions just sitting around waiting to be snapped up by some noob like me.

Recruiting in the real world came with its own set of problems, though. First of all, because I spent most of my time holed up in my gaming room with my eyes glued to my slick three-monitor setup, I didn't have a whole lot of friends to draw on. Plus, the few friends I did have were terrible at video games.

Second, because I was worried that people would make fun of me, I hadn't told anyone about my dream of making it big as a professional gamer. Even though most kids were into gaming and watched the same streamers on Twitch, YouTube, Mixer, and TikTok as I did, I knew that the moment I announced I wanted to become one of them, I'd be laughed right out of my school. I don't know why that is, but for some reason, the moment someone wants to do something different, people start lining up to cut them down.

So, it seemed like no matter which way I went

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about things, this whole team-building campaign might be over before it began.

Then another idea struck me. Instead of scouting people who were *already* good at *Rumble Royale*, why not find some potential teammates who had no experience with the game whatsoever but had the skills needed to become a champion and then train them instead?

That seemed like a great plan. Not only would it eliminate the need to advertise, it wouldn't matter that all the good players online had already been taken. But where could I find such people, and how would I recognize them when I did?

As I pondered that problem, I made a list of all the qualities I could think of that were required to be a good *Rumble Royale* player. Like most video games, I figured it came down to five things:

Fast reflexes

Excellent hand-eye coordination

Top-notch problem-solving skills

A desire to win at any cost

The discipline to practice, practice, practice

Oh, and considering my smashed controllers,

sweaty palms, and pounding heart whenever cold, hard cash was on the line, I realized there was a sixth vital skill:

The ability to stay cool under pressure

Now that I had my list, all I had to do was find three people who already had those qualities, sell them on the dream of making it big as part of a professional video game team, and then put them through a rigorous training program to make them *Rumble Royale* superstars. All in a matter of six months or less.

No problem, right?

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To keep things simple, I decided to start with the first two items on my list—fast reflexes and excellent hand-eye coordination. After doing some research on the sports that require those skills and comparing them to the clubs available at my school, my first destination became obvious immediately.

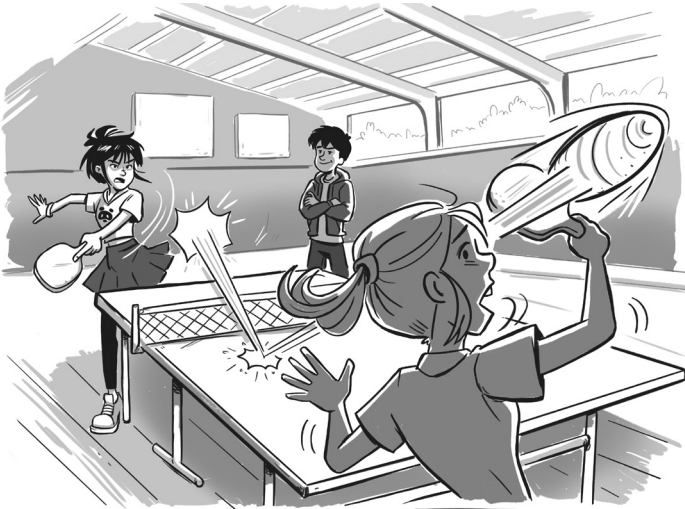
Just my luck, it was a Tuesday, and that club practiced in the gym every Tuesday and Thursday after school. As soon as the bell rang to signal the end of classes for the day, off to the gym I went.

As I approached, my ears were met by the ping-
ing and ponging of . . . you guessed it . . . ping-

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pong balls, as the table tennis club members batted them back and forth across a half-dozen green tables set up across the cavernous space. I had no idea who was the best player in the group, but I was determined to approach whoever that person happened to be.

Even though I knew next to nothing about table tennis, I could tell right away that some players were terrible, barely able to keep up a rally for more than a few hits. A handful of players were good, and others were really good, but one player stood out above all the others. In fact,



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she was sensational. Forehand, backhand, behind the back, between the legs—it didn't matter. Not a single shot got past her. And when it came to returning her shots, it looked impossible. Somehow she could use her paddle to spin the ball in any direction she wanted. The moment it hit the table, there was no way for her opponent to tell which way it would bounce, and it always seemed to go in exactly the opposite direction of what they expected, sending them diving and sprawling across the gym's hardwood floor.

As good as she was, when it came to recruiting her as part of my *Rumble Royale* team, I could already see a complication looming. If you don't know what it was, pay attention to two keywords I just used in the preceding sentence—"she" and "her." My top candidate in the reflexes and hand-eye coordination category was a girl?

Not quite what I was expecting.

Don't get me wrong—I have no problem with girls. In fact, I'm a huge fan. But video games are usually a guy thing, especially third-person shooters like *Rumble Royale*. So, even if our

school's star table tennis player had the qualities I was looking for, what were the chances she would even want to play?

Like so many other things in life, I figured there was only one way to find out.

I waited until she finished her game—demolishing her opponent 11-0—and then approached her with a smile and a wave, hoping I looked friendly and not like I was a creeper trying to hit on her or something—which I definitely wasn't, even though she was kind of pretty.

To my relief, she smiled and waved back, but almost as soon as I started into my sales pitch, which began with me complimenting her insane table tennis skills, she held up her hand to stop me. I was confused until she pulled out her phone and typed something into it, holding her screen toward me afterward so I could read it.

“No good English,” I said, reading aloud the first line of what was written on the screen. Then I realized she had used a translation app to type it. “Exchange student from China,” I continued. I looked up at her in surprise and despair, my entire

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body feeling like it was beginning to wilt. “Oh, so you’re not from around here?”

Massive understatement.

At that moment, all my hopes drained out of me like dirty water from a bathtub. So far, not only was my top prospect a girl, she was also from China, which meant she was probably leaving at the end of the school year, and her English was practically non-existent. Everything in me said I should just turn around and walk right out of there, hoping no one noticed my tail tucked between my legs, but then she smiled and nodded, pointing at herself.

“Shu Wang,” she said, which I assumed was her name. “And you?”

Walking out on her at that point would have been downright rude, so I forced out a smile and pointed my thumb at my chest. “My name is Wyatt. Nice to meet you.” She seemed startled by my response, which confused me until I realized I was talking louder than usual, as if that would help her understand me. “Sorry,” I said, lowering my voice to a more normal level. “Hard of hearing.” I

pointed to my right ear. It was a lie, but I hoped she didn't understand that part.

"Want play?" she asked, holding up her table tennis paddle.

"Oh, no. I really shouldn't," I said. "I'm not part of the club."

"Since when does that matter?" a gruff voice said from behind me. I turned around to find the table tennis coach, Mr. Daviduke, bearing down on me. He was one of the most feared teachers in the school. His craggy face looked even more fierce due to a thick brown mustache that he had sported long before "Movember" ever became a thing. Combined with his shaved head, which glistened under the gym's halogen lights, it made him appear like an outlaw biker itching for a fight. "We're always looking for fresh meat, and as you can see, Shu could use some competition."

I turned to look at the player she had just pounded into oblivion. Seizing on the distraction, he had snuck away with his tail between his legs, just as I had been about to do.

"But I've hardly ever played before," I protested.

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“You can learn.” Mr. Daviduke thrust a table tennis paddle into my hand, causing me to flinch in pain. “And you won’t find a better teacher than Shu. Isn’t that right, Shu?”

She looked at me and smiled, nodding vigorously.

Feeling trapped, I held up the paddle and considered it for a moment, then set it on the table and backed away. “Thanks, but no thanks,” I said, turning to go.

Just then, I felt someone tap my shoulder. I turned back and saw Shu holding up her index finger while she used her other hand to type something into her phone. I stared, awestruck. She was even more amazing at typing than she was at table tennis. Her thumb was a blur as it raced across the screen. Then she held her phone up.

“If no want play, why talk to me?” I said, reading her words out loud once again, my face turning red in response to her question. “May I?” I asked, reaching for her phone. When she gave it to me, I typed out a short version of my video game pitch—taking way longer with two thumbs than she would have taken with one—then handed the

phone back to her, hoping the app would do a half-way decent job of translating what I'd written.

Shu frowned as she read my message. Then her thumb flew across her phone's screen as if she were trying to set a new world record. When she was done, she handed her phone back to me.

You try my game, I try yours, it said. I looked up at her and smiled. "Sounds fair to me."

"Not so fast," Mr. Daviduke said, his iron grip clamping onto my forearm as I reached for the ping-pong paddle. I froze in place and looked up at him like a frightened animal caught in a leghold trap.

"Sir?"

His face was hard, and his eyebrows, which were nearly as thick as his mustache, were squished together above his steely eyes like two caterpillars that were ready to leap out and latch onto my face. "You break it, you buy it. Got it, Wyatt?"

If it were any other teacher, I would have laughed and pointed out his unintentional rhyme between "Wyatt" and "buy it," but considering the wild look in his eyes, I decided to let it slide.

"Yes, sir."

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Then his face broke into a wide-toothed grin, which was even scarier than his frown, and his grip on my arm relaxed. Just as I was wondering whether my arm was ever going to regain its feeling, he clapped me on the back so hard that if I had been wearing false teeth, they would have popped right out of my mouth.

“Have fun out there, but don’t come crying to me when she beats you.” He jabbed his thick index finger into my puny pectoral muscle to emphasize that last point.

“Uh, yes, sir,” I said, rubbing my throbbing chest while sneaking a glance at Shu’s grinning face. She seemed to be enjoying herself far more than I would have liked. “I won’t.”