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# Silverball News and Views - August 1999 - Alex's First Game

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## Alex's First Game

by Jeff Stimpson

Funny that my brother called last night. Why? he asked. "Because today," I replied, "Alex saw his first pinball machine."

"Tell Alex his uncle is very, very good at that game," my brother said.

I sort of remember that differently, but nonetheless 20 years ago we used to murder pinball machines. All those Christmas mornings 15 years ago, when we'd unwrap the roll of quarters from Aunt Yvonne and climb into his truck to find an open bowling alley. When it wasn't Christmas of course we'd have to dig up our own quarters. In we'd go to the dark gamerooms, past the bums on the video games to the back walls where the cool people were and the billion bulbs flickered with a midway's promise. My brother and I were two of the people with the flippers and the English, who thought nothing meant you were good like a replay's single hard cluck.

Pinball is out of my life now. Recently my in-laws told me they'd played a terrific pinball machine in Pittsburgh. They said it was called "The Addams Family." "Oh yeah!" I said. "Where the hand comes out and steals the ball!"

My wife Jill gave her stepfather an "Isn't-he-something" smile. Nobody's interested in pinball anymore, except maybe Alex, who's 11 months old and who insisted we get a closer look at the pinball machine in the game room.

"Uh-huh," says Jill.

Alex is my baby son. He saw the machine in the game room of the hospital where he lives. I wheeled him first to the playroom, but the music was loud in there, and he didn't even glance at the Barbie keyboard or the tropical fish. After a few minutes he began to get that expression of drooling daze that he and his parents reserve for listening to doctors. So I spun the carriage - "Hard about!" I ordered Alex - and we headed into the hallway, and past the open door of the playroom. He did turn his head first, his eyes caught I think by the playroom shades, which were dark green like the leaves in the hospital garden. On nice days lately we take him out there and park him under a tree so he can gaze at the bright canopy and listen to dad point

out the world's beauty. "Leaves, Alex, those are leaves."

The name of the game in the hospital was "Ice Fury." I wheeled Alex to where he had an clear view of the cartoons of hockey players and the green numerals of the scoreboard. I locked the carriage wheels ("Let go the anchor!") and watched him flick his eyes over the blinking lights.

"Look, Alex, look," I said, pointing at some of the world's beauty. "Thirteen credits!"

Credits are games, and this machine - placed here to cheer up sick kids and repressed fathers -- didn't take quarters. To get credits, you just punched a red button on the front. I punched. I played - quite well - and made the numerals of the score change while Alex followed the dings of the bumpers. He moved his head - no Barbie keyboard here - and started to whap his big soft block toy with his right arm. In the last month that's become a sign that he likes what's going on.

"Light the extra ball, Alex!" I told him.

Jill and grandma discovered us on my third ball. Jill and I took Alex back to the playroom. Grandma was still playing when we left her.

I'm all in favor of my baby hanging around arcades, but he doesn't get much of a chance. The doctors say he has reflux and must have surgery. Yet, because his lungs are fragile still, they cannot do a test for reflux because he might aspirate. Jill and I won't rubberstamp surgery without numbers to prove it's needed. Yesterday he spit up and some go-getter resident got the bright idea - which I've been pitching for a week - to have the spit-up analyzed in lieu of being able to put a tube and food in his stomach.

So we call a pediatrician in the hope that someone can play air traffic controller for Alex's bewildering radar screen. I ask the nurse for recommendations, and get three. I call. A doctor calls back and says he or his partner will be by on Sunday. Jill and I come in early on Sunday and sure enough, the partner is there. She asks a few questions about Alex, then says one problem with Alex's situation is the rotation system of hospital-based doctors. You just get somebody you like, and they go off duty.

"How much credence would hospital doctors in a conference be likely to give a pediatrician in a conference, as opposed to how much they'd give parents?" I ask. The doctor has a pageboy and glasses and an engagement ring, and I can imagine what was she like in a dorm.

"Probably more than they'd give parents," she admits. She seems good with kids, too: a toddler visiting his preemie brother in another bed comes over with the remote and gestures to the TV, which is right behind us. He says something I can't understand. The doctor levels her glasses on him.

"No not right now," she says, "no TV right now. Where's your brother? Where's your brother?"

She tells me she'll talk to her boss about taking our case.

I call her boss on Tuesday. No callback. I call her on Wednesday. She gets back to me within a couple of hours. Turns out she was going to call me! First of all, let her explain that her voicemail-less, cell phone-less boss hasn't returned to the office where my message was left. Second, her boss no longer does GI work and cannot take Alex's case in that capacity.

Third, they were talking it over and they feel that for them as pediatricians to "interfere" with Alex's current treatment would be "resented" by the hospital doctors. They'd be happy to follow up with Alex after he's released, though.

Sometimes you have to ask doctors to speak in English; this isn't one of those times. She's saying - or her boss has dumped it upon her to say - that Alex is not worth ruffling the feathers of the hospital in which this pediatric practice makes most of its money. They'll be happy, however, to cash our checks months from now, when the only ones needed by Alex's medical situation will probably be Alex and his parents.

Such conversations make me think more and more about those times when I knew where I stood by looking at the score in the backglass. When "Game Over" just meant dig for another quarter -- or hit up my brother.

I tell my brother what the doctors say. "Oh yeah, I'd have to have numbers. They'd have to prove to me surgery was necessary," my brother said. He moaned when he heard about our reflux dilemma. Last fall, when I told him about a lung crash that Alex had, my brother moaned as if someone were drilling into his tooth. My brother is backwoods stock from Maine; he does not moan with abandon. He also doesn't like babies. But he likes Alex. Alex is named after him.

"I don't care whose eyes he has," my brother said to me, "he looks like you. He looks just like you. I took one look at the pictures and said, 'Oh here we go again!' But jeez he's a happy little guy!"

He is, and I hope some day he has a quarter to hold. And I hope he gets to drop it into some machine in some place that's dark with excitement and promise, where the games are not given away.

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