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NEWS & COLUMNS

The New Staremaster

By Rachel Deahl

THE NEW STAREMASTER If you walk into Ben Stein's apartment, there's a good chance you'll find him reacting to a computerized hand, projected on a sheet against the wall, throwing out a series of hand gestures: rock, paper, scissors, paper, rock. Stein, a 25-year-old computer programmer, is getting ready for his upcoming appearance at the 2004 World Rock, Paper, Scissors Championships on October 16 in Toronto. The winner will take home \$7000 Canadian (US\$5500).

Currently training with his teammate and roommate, Ken Bromberg, Stein says he didn't realize how many other devoted RPS players were out there until he stumbled across the World RPS Society's website (worldrps.com), where the international tournament was advertised. Stein grabbed a few buddies and headed north to Canada. That was 2002. Today Stein is preparing for his third appearance in Toronto, a little bit older and lot wiser.

As members of team All Too Flat (a Monty Python reference), Stein and Bromberg will be playing as individuals but also, like most of the players in the tournament, taking advantage of a group support network. They speak officiously about popular gambits like "The Avalanche (rock, rock, rock) or "The Crescendo" (paper, scissors, rock), and mastering their prime (the hammer movement you make with your arm before a throw). With all the terminology being thrown about, it's hard to tell when—and if—they're joking.

"We originally went up to Toronto because we thought this was something funny to be doing. While it is really funny, it's deadly serious," says Bromberg.

For Stein, the return to Toronto is bittersweet. Last year, he was expected to go much further than he did. Although he's currently featured on an official RPS trading card as a player to beat (found at RPSchamps.com), Stein is clearly still haunted.

"I was surrounded by a big audience and...I guess my ego got a little inflated," he recalls. "On my last shot, I announced my throw to the crowd like Babe Ruth calling his home run. I revealed my scissors and then threw scissors. My opponent threw rock and I got eliminated in the first round. It's kind of funny in retrospect but, at the time, it was crushing."

The two men are doing their homework: tracking the throwing history of their opponents, calculating the probabilities (rock is thrown more often than scissors and paper) and sticking to a strict liquid diet of Molsen Canadian, a past sponsor of the event.

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But are they ready? When asked to show me their skills, Stein and Bromberg became stoic. A hush fell over the room and it was clear that these two friends are also RPS gladiators. This time, they were playing for who would do the dirty dishes. Next month, they'll be playing for so much more. o

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