

SUNSETS AND DOGSHITS



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*To my parents*



*It's not where you start, it's where you finish.*

Luckey Davis



# SUNSETS AND DOGSHITS



## The 2006 World Mincing Championships

Enthusiasts and trivia buffs will know that mincing, like so many sports, was invented pretty much by accident. The first *recorded* mince was executed by Captain William Tobias Glover when he squeaked down the gangplank of the HMS *Japonica* in May 1906, his buttocks clenched tightly together to stave off a severe case of the runs that had ambushed his constitution during the short walk from the bridge to midship. Unable either to go back – a bottleneck of ranking officers ruled out that option – or break into a full sprint for the nearest dockside convenience, for fear of losing face in front of the huge Warwick Island crowd that had gathered to welcome the ship alongside, the unfortunate Captain had to stifle his motion until he had shaken not only the Chief Administrator’s hand, but that of every dignitary, councillor, magistrate, policeman and blacksmith that had been convened into an official welcoming committee. Legend has it (though the Pathé footage does not corroborate this) that the Captain, before darting into a shipping crate to relieve himself, had also to stand motionless, perspiration beading his inscrutable brow, while a brass section of lobster fishermen discharged a flatulent rendition of ‘God Save the King’.

But it was not this alone – I mean the Captain’s cloacal plight – that spawned a pastime. Had he not turned to his Commander and bade him, “Walk as I do, walk as I do, man,” and had not the latter assumed the Captain was adopting a custom designed to endear the crew to the inhabitants of this diminutive British dependency – had *not* that gentleman, together with the Lieutenant Commander, Lieutenant, Sub-Lieutenant, Midshipman and every other debarking seaman, mimicked the Captain’s gait, it might well have been construed as a mere orthopaedic anomaly, or as the symptom of an injury sustained in some distant naval conflict. Instead, history was made. For the fact that the *entire* crew sashayed onto dry land like a troop of raving madams not only disguised the Captain’s impediment as a new development in naval ceremony, but inspired the islanders – many of whom were relatively new settlers anxious to dispel the rumour that expatriation had dulled their gentlemanly instincts – to adopt, thereafter, precisely the same fastidious bearing in their respective milieux.

To call the first faltering minces that graced these remote South Pacific salons a full-blown sporting phenomenon would be an exaggeration. But they *were* a decisive beginning, if only because the trappings associated with its initial adoption as a pre-prandial parlour game – costume jewellery, cummerbunds, the ambulatory consumption of crème de menthe – are all still very much a part of mincing. In fact, its growth as a sport was built on, and continues to be sustained

by, the exclusive sponsorship of couturiers and aperitif manufacturers. (The sport was amateur until 1968, but from as early as 1952 the top mincers were making twice as much money from endorsements as from their day jobs.)

The man credited with introducing the first rules was Sir Adam Deuchars IV, Chief Administrator of Warwick when the *Japonica* made landfall there in 1906. Historians will recall that it was Deuchars's great-grandfather, Adam Robert Deuchars, who had first lobbied for the colonization of Warwick in 1831, but not until Victoria ascended the throne in 1837 was full permission given to secure the uninhabited monticule.

Deuchars the Elder's original mandate to govern has since passed to successive generations, the most recent incumbent being the 2006 World Mincing Championships' Tournament Director (and long-time advisor to the WMO), James Reginald Deuchars. I was lucky enough to meet James Reginald at the reception given after Sunday's opening ceremony. In fact, I'll come clean and admit that it was during this interview that I gleaned most of what I have already told you about mincing. I was especially fascinated to learn that the man most regularly cited as the godfather of the sport is, thankfully, neither the hapless Captain Glover nor the punctilious, rulebook-waving Adam Deuchars IV. According to James Reginald (as genealogically distant from Deuchars IV as Deuchars IV was from Deuchars the Elder), the man responsible for liberating the sport from the parlours of the bourgeoisie, the man

who, in James Reginald's own words, first "picked up the ball and ran with it" is one Nathaniel Jepson. In 1913 Jepson was forced to winter on Warwick after his whaling vessel, the *Accentor*, had foundered on a reef to the south of the island. Quickly assimilated into the various cliques, salons and at-homes that constituted Warwickian Society, Jepson surprised everyone by displaying none of the truculence that tended, in the eyes of his hosts, to afflict the captains of whaling vessels. On the contrary, Jepson was effusive and open. And he was not merely a tonic to mincing: he was indeed, as James Reginald suggests, its William Webb Ellis.

The decisive moment, explained James Reginald, occurred on Jepson's society debut, at a dinner given by the Chief Administrator. Jepson had arrived early and had been standing sheepishly on his own, some distance from the Deucharses' front gate, waiting in vain for any of the few people whose acquaintance he had been able to make in his short time on the island. Seeing no such person, he eventually took the plunge, striding purposefully up to the porch, only to be stopped at the threshold. "Excuse me sir," said the butler, handing Jepson a small mahogany disc and ushering him inside. "If sir *wouldn't* mind waiting here till *his* turn... I presume sir *will* be mincing tonight?..." Before Jepson could proffer his outsider's bafflement, the butler had wheeled round to attend to some even later arrivals. The porch was crowded and oppressive, and all the guests

seemed to be men. Beyond this crammed vestibule lay a vast hall, the threshold to which was guarded by a second butler who was calling out numbers. Every so often a guest moved forwards and took his place behind a scarlet rope with a brass hook at one end. Announcing the gentleman's name, the butler unhooked the rope, and the guest waltzed double-time into the space beyond, his cute quick steps percussing the floor with an ungulate clatter, shiny leather boots squeaking like rodents. Halfway across, he attempted a pirouette – and narrowly avoided falling, as his wooden hoof skated over the marble. No sooner had he made it to the other side of the hall – gathered into the arms of a female welcoming committee that filled the doorway to the dining room – than another performer was summoned to the rope. Dressed in raiment of impossible gaiety, this gentleman had a somewhat different technique, his legs and hips rotating in such freelance fashion they seemed to be attempting to escape his torso. Nevertheless, the torso followed gamely, with the head in hot pursuit, and the old fruit was borne obliquely across the parlour with the precarious rapidity of an amateur unicyclist, careering past the ladies and collapsing directly into his seat at the dining table.

It was at this point that Jepson recalled the words the butler had spoken – “I presume sir *will* be mincing tonight?...” – and suddenly felt the disc in his hand, which he noticed bore the number 18. Number 16 had just been called; there was still time to make it outside before his own number was called... what, and risk

certain ostracism from the most influential community on the island? Offend no less a figure than the Chief Administrator himself? It would be imprudent to begin social relations thus. His arrival on Warwick had been inauspicious enough: he was known only as a captain who had lost his ship. It was as well for him that non-seafaring people have not the faintest idea of the humiliation entailed in such a loss – which is so mortifying that many captains prefer to go down with their vessels. But these thoughts (which had consumed what little time there still was to make a discreet exit) were dispersed by riotous applause as another guest, number 17, shuffled across the parlour, elbows jammed into his ribcage, arms flailing limply. Number 17 was gathered into the dining room by a roseate dowager, and Jepson now found himself hustled towards the rope. The butler, who appeared at a distance an imposing sentinel, at closer quarters proved an eager and sympathetic squire: “Drink this, sir. Now, just keep your head up, focus on the dado rail and keep it simple.” Knocking back the sherry that had been thrust into his hand, Jepson improvised a token warm-up routine, windmilling his arms and hyperventilating like a shackled escapist about to be lowered into a water tank, before launching himself – and the hyperbole is quite warranted – into the unknown.

It would be no exaggeration to say that all the anxieties of the previous months – dwindling oil yields, the increasing disquiet of his crew, the catastrophic loss of the *Accentor* – were released in a single explosive

catharsis. And yet the actual manœuvre, the specific biomechanical convulsions that Nathaniel Jepson's body produced that evening, are probably less important than the distance it travelled. On approaching the doors to the dining room, Jepson took one look at the swaying anemone of eligible spinsters and thought, "I'm not going in *there*," and so the rookie's tour of duty was extended to include, first, a brief appraisal of the decor, and secondly (and most crucially), a *return to the rope* – which was interpreted as a direct challenge by another gentleman who was just moving into position. What followed, then, was the first *competitive* mince.

And the name of Jepson's opponent? Now, it is often the case that history sidelines its supporting cast, that posterity, having fixated so intently on the triumph of the *victor ludorum*, immediately forgets the name of the beaten finalist. But not in this instance. For Jepson's opponent that evening was none other than the Chief Administrator himself, who, gazing upon this preternaturally freestyle performance and realizing that his rulebook had either to be stoutly defended or else torn up, had crept round to the front of the house and demanded the next mince.

Jepson's other vital contribution, it will have been noted, was the introduction of the "return mince". There were of course other refinements he introduced that evening (another being the holding of the breath, borrowed from the Indian sport of kabaddi), but these were to prove the most significant. From this point on, no longer would mincing be restricted to a single leg undertaken by

guests arriving at the front door and moving through the parlour to the dining room: the “return leg” challenged the notion that mincing was merely an ostentatious way of moving from one place to another. Mincing was no longer something a luncheon guest did on arrival out of etiquette; it became an activity in itself. Henceforth, mincers began to meet at *all* times of the day, regardless of whether any actual luncheon, tea or dinner was served. Jepson’s debut had been the catalyst for transforming a frivolous social convention into a serious pastime. With the impetus of competition, mincing soon spread to the surrounding South Pacific dependencies and beyond, to Tierra del Fuego in the east and Christchurch in the south-west. Like cricket, it flourished in the British colonies, particularly in Burma and Singapore. By 1923 no less a figure than Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the first president of the IOC, was beginning to talk openly about mincing as a *sport* – though incredibly, not until 1946 did its most accomplished practitioners (typically, resting actors, maître d’s and colonial adjutants whiling away the last hours of Empire) first come together and agree on the standardizations that have served it to this day.

Most sports, rather than being conceived “whole”, tend to originate as an idle and disinterested tampering with reality. Golf, for example, was reputedly invented when one shepherd turned to another and wagered he could hit a pebble into a rabbit burrow in so many shots. According to Judith Frow, a sport is born when such activities “slip their quotidian moorings and are pursued entirely for their own inherent qualities... This

autonomy is consolidated by the ‘arena’, ‘pitch’ or ‘field of play’, which reinforces the activity’s detachment from everyday reality.” We need hardly add that any crowd that happens to gather around this field of play further consolidates this autonomy by quite literally turning its back on everyday reality. In the spring of 1913, Nathaniel Jepson turned *his* back on the reality – the whaling reality – he had known since youth, choosing not to seek a passage back to England but to remain on Warwick and oversee the construction of mincing’s first purpose-built arena. And yes, he found love there too, but that is another story.

It is on the site of this old building that the 2006 Championships are being staged. The tournament began with an upset, the unseeded Didier Le Faye (SUI) beating the highly fancied Justin Merrington (USA) in a match that went to a tiebreak after the score was locked at 4–4 in the final set. Given the relative dullness of the 2002 finals (when the WMO was rightly lambasted for allowing pay-per-view economics to influence its seeding), this result was just the tonic these championships needed, even if the match was a little untidy. Both men’s technique buckled under pressure at different stages, and Merrington did not seem to have shaken off the hip problem that saw him pull out of the Bangkok Masters in April. If the WMO has got the seeding right this time, then Le Faye – assuming he defeats the Bulgarian qualifier Miroslav Zorekov in his last group match – will almost certainly meet reigning champion Peter Direction (ENG) in the

next round, a big ask for the Swiss number four. Other results went with form, though events were not without their drama. Dominic Thorburn (NZL) beat Eugene McCulloch (NIR) 5–2 in an intriguing encounter that saw both men complain about the new synthetic surface, which apparently offered insufficient traction compared to the asphalt strip used in the qualifiers. McCulloch took the opening set and was three minces up in the second before his opponent, swapping his Jeffery-West Chelsea boots for a pair of rubber-soled Agnès B loafers, and donning a fresh Comme des Garçon dress shirt dripping with Cinzano endorsements, unleashed a typically flamboyant rearguard action. The Kent-based Ulsterman could find no reply, rallying briefly to take the sixth set before losing the final one to love.

Meanwhile, in Pool C the TK Maxx-sponsored Cuthbert Ladywell (ENG) won a tight and rather catty encounter with naturalized compatriot Jesse Fairfax. There's no love lost between these two mincers, and at one point the umpires literally had to separate them, Ladywell having veered into his opponent's lane. (The mince was rerun.) The match was an hour and twenty-one minutes old when the veteran and former antiquarian bookseller eventually prevailed 5–4, though I understand Fairfax's camp has lodged an appeal with the match officials. (The result is likely to stand; the last time the WMO overturned one was in 1982, when the East German Jörn Kelling was expelled from the competition for using banned stimulants.) The other Pool C match, an all-African affair between Asmerom

Mulneh (ERI) and Gus Pandy (ZIM), resumes this morning, with the Eritrean needing just one more set to complete a whitewash. The match began farcically for the Zimbabwean, who split his Farahs in the opening mince (an incident bound to feature in the light-hearted montage sequence the BBC will undoubtedly put together as an epitaph to these finals), and quickly got worse as he defaulted the return leg for “lifting”. From that point it was downhill all the way. In Pool D, László Jankowiak (POL) blew hot and cold in his match against Álvaro Álvarez (MEX), but was eventually blown away 5–3 by the fiery Mexican. Janko’s reputation is built largely on his stamina and resolve, but on this occasion when the going got tough, the tough just never seemed quite able to get going. At thirty-seven, that is surely the last we will see of the celebrated Pole on the world stage, though there is always the senior tour – an increasingly lucrative option for mincers of Janko’s profile. Elsewhere, the young Sri Lankan Roshan Rwegasira won his second Pool E match against Elquemedo Herrero of Cuba by default after his opponent suffered a recurrence of the knee-ligament injury sustained in February’s epic French Open encounter with Peter Direction. The Negombo-based student, representing his country for the first time in a World Championship, now faces 1998 semi-finalist Jefferson James Cassidy III (USA) in what is effectively a mince-off for a place in the knockout stages (Herrero having withdrawn from the tournament and Direction having already qualified). The American will have

to improve on his performance in the last meeting between these two mincers, when he only just edged out the inexperienced Sri Lankan 5–4.

The best match of the group stage so far – Le Faye’s triumph notwithstanding – has to be the Pool F encounter between Paolo Carlino (ITA) and Valerie Fotheringale (ENG). Both men needed one more win to guarantee qualification for the knockout stage, and both were at the top of their game. Although Fotheringale raced to a two-set lead, the Italian ran out a 5–2 winner. But the match was much closer than the score suggests, Carlino having won all five of his sets by just a single mince, and Fotheringale having won both of his to love. The recent change in the scoring system – each set is now *first to* rather than *best of five* minces – definitely suits Carlino’s attritional temperament. In each of the last three sets Fotheringale took a 3–0 lead, only to lose 5–4. He would have flourished in an earlier era, when there was a break between the end of the outward and the beginning of the return mince, and when style and deportment were favoured over speed and endurance. A knowledgeable crowd clearly thought the Sicilian was rushing the Brit on the return leg, but the reigning Commonwealth Champion – who has been training at altitude in a bid to attain full fitness – was quick to scotch any suggestions of gamesmanship: “I’m aware that in the past Paolo has used every possible advantage to win matches, but I’d just like to say that today I thought he minced fantastically well, and within the rules. His hip rotation was a little out of

sync in the early sets, and I thought I did well to take full advantage of that, but fair play to the guy: he just hangs in there and won't let go. He always gives one hundred and ten percent. He's a credit to mincing." Carlino was equally generous to his opponent: "In Italy, Valerie is a big mincing icon. As a boy I studied his technique. For me to defeat him is the proudest day of my life." And all is not lost for Fotheringale; for, having won the most individual minces of the current third-placed group members, he stands an excellent chance of qualifying through the repêchage. Neutrals would relish a rematch between these two mincers, who left the arena to a standing ovation and shouts of "Minced Valerie! Minced Paolo!". Should both players advance to the knockout stages, they cannot meet again until the final. Stranger things have happened.

As usual I've gone on for too long, but it would be criminal to sign off without mentioning the exemplary TV coverage of these championships. Desmond Kelleher, a useful county mincer in his day, is anchoring for ITV, while the BBC have given Dougie Donnelly the chance to add yet another feather to his presentational cap. Dougie's appetite for sporting confrontation of all kinds is insatiable, and in this author's opinion worthy of an OBE.

– *The Montrose Observer*, 2006