

The Political Squash

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It was hot and humid in Washington, DC. I had two hours before my next medical appointment at Lafayette Centre and needed caffeine. I walked towards M Street, past New Hampshire Avenue and Walgreens, then turned left on 22nd Street and entered The Ritz-Carlton Hotel, where I was met with a refreshing blast of cool air.

I had been to The Ritz-Carlton many times in the past and enjoyed the “Living Room,” a warm and cozy area with nice lounge seating and good service. I ordered a bottle of still water and an Earl Grey tea and helped myself to a copy of the Washington Post. About ten minutes passed when a group of four noisy youths descended into the area when one of them suddenly pointed at me and came over.

It took me a moment to recognise Ramy Turk, the son of Albert Turk, a friend and well-known head of an accounting firm in Egypt. I stood up and shook Ramy’s hand, and as we exchanged greetings, the other three friends of Ramy came over and introduced themselves. The foursome had graduated from GW and Georgetown and were friends living in Maryland and Virginia. Ramy, tall like his father and athletic, had graduated in International Relations and was working at a think tank. Steve Burns was from San Diego, California, graduated from GW in Computer Science, and he, along with Ali Khan, originally from Pakistan and also a GW graduate in Electronics Engineering, had established a startup and raised, according to Steve, over \$4 million in three years. The fourth young man, Yusuf Ali Reza, was from Saudi Arabia, had graduated from Georgetown in Political Science, and was currently pursuing his doctorate.

Ramy, whom I had not seen for a number of years, asked permission to have the group join me. I welcomed them and put the newspaper aside. As I sipped my tea, the young men ordered lemonade and grapefruit juice.

The next forty minutes was a complex discussion about US elections, the Ukraine-Russia war, and the multiple crises in the Middle East. Responding to their eager questions and intelligent comments, I was very impressed by the group's thoughts, insights, and queries.

Finally as I was about to ask them about their futures, the Olympics in France took center stage. Both Ramy and Ali were squash players and had earned a number of championships in Pakistan, the UK, Egypt, and America. They asked why squash is not an Olympic sport despite all the efforts to include it in the Olympic program. They expressed astonishment that squash, a respected, active, and competitive sport, had not been accepted until now by the International Olympic Committee, while table tennis, known as ping-pong, has been an Olympic sport since 1988.

What's worse Ali said, raising his right arm for emphasis, "skateboarding" has become an Olympic sport since 2020. "How can that be?" Ali exclaimed. Steve, with clear disgust, added that it is shameful that "breakdancing" has become an Olympic sport starting this year in Paris, and your squash is not! "Moreover tennis, surfing and badminton are Olympic sports and your squash will never be" said Steve in an angry voice looking at Ali.

Yusef Ali Reza, the young man from Saudi Arabia who was very quiet, in a low tone said, "Why should we be surprised? It's all political." He added squash is denied with all its rules and regulations plus its clear athletic prowess and beach volleyball has been an Olympic sport since 1996 in Atlanta.

Yusef sighed and as he finished his lemonade said that if MBS played squash, it would already be an Olympic sport.

Ramy, looking at his watch, said they had to leave to catch a Kennedy Center performance. As we were shaking hands, he asked pointedly why squash is not an Olympic sport.

I looked at the four young men purposefully and said, "The reason is that whoever is supporting squash in Egypt, Pakistan, and Malaysia, all of whom have great squash traditions and players, doesn't know how to play the game."

"Play the game?" Ali blurted out.

"Yes," I responded. "The IOC needs a plan that includes vision, influence, complex lobbying, and a results-oriented focus."

The four young people looked at me perplexed, except Steve, who smiled and said, "Right you are." Ramy shuffled and they were kind in thanking me before running off to their commitment at the Kennedy Center.

I sat down, poured my own water into my glass, and picked up the newspaper and as I was glancing at the news, there was an item about Israel, and my thoughts turned to how they play the game perfectly. Their vision, influence, lobbying, resources, and results-focused orientation are unparalleled in the US. How has Israel achieved so much with their exceptional toolbox that included the term "anti-Semitic," and how their miraculous abilities allowed them to achieve the impossible.

Reading 'They Dare to Speak Out' by Paul Findley or 'The Israel Lobby' by Mearsheimer and Walt showcases Israel's success. This also reminded me of how the Islamic and Arab world

failed not only at “playing the game” but worse at not even recognising the rules, which is step one of how to play the game.

Egypt, my country, I remembered the last time it played the game successfully was when President Anwar Sadat was alive. He personally understood the rules and not only played the game but also scored until he was assassinated.

As I was paying the bill and leaving the hotel to go to my medical appointment, I wondered when Egypt would play the game again successfully.

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