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Shooting stars: Arcade game Pop-A-Shot allows Joes to beat pros

Story Highlights

The game has taken different forms and takes coordination, rhythm to excel

L.A. busboy Ricardo Reyes has beaten likes of Kobe, LeBron, Carmelo

Several people claim that they're the best, but there's no good way to decide

I have witnessed some unlikely sights in my day, but this was surreal. There on TV was Kobe Bryant, perhaps the most competitive man alive, losing a shooting contest. Not just losing, either, but getting his ass kicked. By a short, bald, middle-aged busboy.

The affair was so one-sided that Bryant, wearing a forced, pained smile, had been obliged to concede -- an act of which I had thought he was incapable. I was awestruck. Who in the world was this little man, this stone-faced marksman who had humbled the NBA superstar at the game of Pop-A-Shot in front of his hometown Los Angeles crowd on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*?

Now, I know what you're thinking: Pop-A-Shot? Who cares about Pop-A-Shot? That's not even a sport. And you're right, it's not a sport. It's something else entirely: a test of manhood and hand-eye coordination and endurance and your ability to function at peak efficiency after sucking down seven Guinneses.

Go ahead and play your billiards and toss your darts, go Big Buck Hunting and strike from that tee of Gold. Flip the cup, toss the pong, lean on that rickety pinball machine, gobble those blinking ghosts and wrench that foosball handle. All these pursuits are enjoyable in their own right, but none offers the rewards of Pop-A-Shot, that rare bar game that provides true athletic bliss: that moment when shot after shot plummets through the net and your hands become a blur and the night slows down and it's just you and the machine and that *swishhhhh* sound repeating like a chorus of electronic angels. That's when it arrives, that intoxicating flood of endorphins -- what other bar game delivers endorphins? -- the kind that allows your sorry drunk ass, right then and there, in some dark corner of the world, to enter the Zone, to channel Reggie Freaking Miller. To allow you to be, for 90 seconds, immortal.

That's why you'll find pro athletes playing Pop-A-Shot at a random Chuck E. Cheese (as Albert Pujols has been known to do) or shooting alone at a Jillian's (as I once witnessed Paul Pierce doing in Indianapolis, his 6-foot-7 frame bent forward, his eyes locked on the rim, oblivious to the busty woman eyeing him from the bar). It's why the essayist Sarah Vowell, in an ode to the game in *Forbes*, of all places, called Pop-A-Shot "the crack cocaine of basketball." Why Drew Magary, in his classic essay about the perfect Father's Day, included heading to Dave & Buster's in a limo to "beat the living s--- out of a random 15-year-old at Pop-A-Shot." Because, c'mon, who wouldn't want to do that?

Part of the game's charm is that most anyone can be good at it. To be great, though -- well, that is another thing entirely. Which brings us to Ricardo Reyes, the Los Angeles busboy who destroyed Kobe, who is capable of making 240 out of 250 shots in three minutes -- or 1.35 shots every second. Reyes is the Rain Man of Pop-A-Shot, its Horatio Alger, its David to so many NBA Goliaths. Not only did he take down Bryant 82-58 in a 30-second match on *Kimmel* last spring, but he also torched Lamar Odom by 49 points, Carmelo Anthony by 46, Charles Barkley by 34 and LeBron James by 30. The reactions of the stars were priceless, ranging from good-natured laughter (Odom) to chuckling disbelief (Barkley) to mild disdain (Carmelo) to discomfort followed by insincere congratulations (LeBron). As for Kobe, well, at the moment when Reyes was about to tie his score, the Lakers MVP swatted his shot. It takes a lot of talent to agitate so much talent.



Watching Reyes, I wondered if a man like him has a gift, the way a great golfer or pitcher does. I wondered if he knows things, is privy to certain secrets of the universe. Which is why, sitting there on my couch on that spring night, I decided I needed to find Reyes, to understand him, to learn from him.

And then, of course, to beat him.

(Watch Reyes beat [LeBron](#), [Carmelo](#), [Lamar Odom](#) and [Charles Barkley](#).)

You'll find this hard to believe, but once upon a time there were glory and fame and riches in Pop-A-Shot. There was a national championship, held one year in Chicago, the next in Dallas, drawing competitors from around the globe and offering tens of thousands of dollars in prizes and boasting beer conglomerates for sponsors. Pop-A-Shot was the official game of the NBA. Steve Alford's dad was a franchisee, Dr. J was known to play, Paul Westphal was reportedly one of the country's best. All because of an old college coach named Ken Cochran.

It was Cochran who, while recovering from bypass surgery in 1981, dreamed up a contraption that let anybody, almost

anywhere, play hoops. Cochran had rung up a 401-118 record while coaching for 18 years at the NAIA level, including a 106-game winning streak at Marymount College in Salina, Kans. He'd been to five NAIA National Championships, but at 48 he worried his heart was telling him to slow down. He needed another business. Basketball was about all he knew, but he knew it well, and he'd noticed something about people who played it. "I'd driven by driveways and courts and in 40 years I'd never seen anyone working on his defensive stance," he says. "It was all shooting."

Cochran's machine was elegantly simple: a backboard with a smaller-than-regulation basket that was 7-10 high and eight feet away. The goal: hit as many shots as possible in 40 seconds with three seven-inch-wide balls, which rolled back down a canvas slide to the shooter. The hook: Score more than 40 points and you got a free game. Cochran introduced the machine at his Heart of America hoops camps and noticed something telling: Even when campers had access to a gym where they could shoot regular hoops for free, they chose to line up and pay \$1 to shoot on the Pop-A-Shot. Capitalism had spoken.

By the late '80s there were more than 5,000 Pop-A-Shot machines around the U.S. sucking down quarters. The one in Bobby Valentine's sports bar in Stamford, Conn., reportedly brought in \$75,000 in two years alone. Sensing his moment, Cochran organized national championships, which drew upwards of 180 players from 40 states and Canada each year beginning in 1988. The event was covered by magazines such as *Tavern Sports* but also larger outlets, including *Sports Illustrated*. In 1989 a 21-year-old bartender from London, Ont., named Gary Kerr made every shot in the finals to set a new world record of 153 and win the title.

Kerr, like many of his ilk, bore little resemblance to an elite athlete in either physique or training methods. He'd honed his skills at the Fabulous Forum, a strip joint in London, often winning \$100 a night hustling other bargoers. He never thought his skill would lead to greater glory. "When I found out I'd won an all-expenses-paid trip to Dallas for the World Championships, I was like, 'Holy crap!'"

Kerr won \$6,800 in Dallas, blew almost half of it on clothes at the Galleria Mall and returned home a legend, at least to people who play Pop-A-Shot at strip clubs. Now 43 and living in the tiny town of St. Thomas, Ont., he finishes the exteriors of houses and was thrilled to hear from a reporter. He hasn't played Pop-A-Shot in ages and says, echoing a common theme among aficionados, "My wife didn't understand it at first." Now he hopes that "she'll realize I was once a world champion at something."

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Arcade game Pop-a-shot is where Joes can beat pros (cont.)

During those halcyon early days, there was surprising street cred to the game. A man named Robert Cox ruled over the state of Kansas, cleaning up at bars, where crowds gathered to cheer him on, fans bought him drinks (he consumed only soda, the better to keep his edge) and many a college and pro athlete learned the hard way that there is a vast difference between shooting mini-basketballs and shooting real ones. "Horrendous" is how Cochran describes Cox's form, which involved pounding shots off the backboard with a near total-absence of arc. In the NBA Cox would be Shaquille O'Neal at the free-throw line. In Pop-A-Shot, he was a god. He wasn't

alone. A host of mini-ball deities presided in the '90s, when knock-off machines flooded into bars (the elegant simplicity of Pop-A-Shot meant it was also very, very easy to imitate). Some featured more balls, or two rims, or longer game times. As soon as Cochran sued one company for infringement, another 20 sprouted up. One of the new breed was the Hoops machine. Similar to Cochran's rig but equipped with 20 balls so you never had to wait for a shot, it was created by a long-limbed former college player named CC Alexander, who just might be the greatest Pop-A-Shot player who ever lived.

Alexander grew up in the South blessed with preternaturally large hands. During Bible lessons his father would call him downstairs to show off for the other men, prompting the 11-year-old boy to palm two regulation basketballs and wave them around in windmills like the Globetrotters' Goose Tatum.

Later those big mitts would allow Alexander not only to throw down tremendous dunks on a real basket as a 6-5 guard at Tiffin (Ohio) University but also to shoot Pop-A-Shot two-handed, picking up and flicking balls both lefty and righty, a style known in some circles as the Octopus. Alexander created a mascotlike character named Shooter and toured the country with his machine, performing during NBA halftimes, at Disney World events and at all manner of corporate gatherings. His fee often topped \$4,000 for six hours -- or so he claimed -- and, of course, he had a gimmick: Come within 30 points of him and he'd ship a new machine to your house. No one ever did.

These days Alexander is -- well, it's tough to figure out what he's doing. After exhausting all the usual sources (Nexis, Google, Peoplesearch) I contacted Travis Stanley, the executive VP of team marketing for the Golden State Warriors, who'd once served on the board of one of Alexander's many grand entrepreneurial ventures. "I've been looking for him, too," Stanley said. "CC's like a gypsy man. Every time he pops up, he's calling me from somewhere else: Southern California, Florida."

If Alexander had an equal, chances are it was Jay Kletecka. Whereas Alexander was all bluster and athleticism, fond of saying, "there's only one player who can beat me, and he hasn't been born yet," Kletecka was straight suburban white bread. He grew up outside Cleveland idolizing Mark Price. Too short for the high school hoops team, he was an excellent free-throw shooter (he once hit 78 in a row at a basketball camp) and a gifted golfer. At age 12, in 1991, he won a free-throw-shooting contest at the old Coliseum, where the Cavs played. The prize: a full-size Pop-A-Shot machine.

For years afterward, Kletecka played in his parents' basement, inviting friends over on Friday nights, and he became scary good. Leaning forward and banking in the balls, he'd hit 800, 900 shots in a row while practicing three hours a day. To increase his score, he added one ball at a time until he could shoot five without any touching each other. Explains Kletecka: "I'd have one in my hand, one in the air, one going through the hoop, one starting to roll down and a final one getting just down by my hand." This created what Cochran reverently refers to as "a river of basketballs" pouring down the canvas slide back toward the shooter. "He's the best I ever saw," says Cochran. "The kid can wear it out."

When he was 25, in 2003, Kletecka set the Guinness World Record -- though of course he also proposed it. Videotaping in his basement, he hit 139 shots in one minute using five balls (you can see the video [here](#)). Considering the grainy quality, dingy basement and Kletecka's ungraceful form, it has to be the least-professional-looking world record video ever. But it's still a record. Buoyed by this, Kletecka made the rounds on TV -- hitting 122 without a miss on Steve Harvey's *BigTime*, then appearing on *Regis and Kelly* as well as *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and *The Best Damn Sports Show*, where his performance last year was ranked number 22 on the show's Top 50 Acts of Random Awesomeness. Now a math teacher and golf coach at West Geauga High outside Cleveland, Kletecka rarely plays Pop-A-Shot anymore. "I know I should," he says, "but life has gotten too busy." Even so, he wasn't particularly impressed when he watched Reyes. "He's good but I'd definitely like to play him," says Kletecka. "No one has come close to beating me yet."

This is a common theme among those who play Pop-A-Shot, a game that can inspire the kind of grandiose confidence usually associated with basement Ping-Pong stars, who invariably believe they could hang with actual table-tennis pros. There's good reason for this, because no one really has a benchmark. There is no Global Association of Pop-A-Shotters, no literature devoted to the sport, not even a website. What's more, some bars reset the high score daily to encourage

spending, leading unwitting patrons to believe they have just broken a longstanding record. And since there are so many different machines out there (each with its own scoring system and setup) and there's no such thing as a professional Pop-A-Shot player -- unlike in darts, pool, table tennis and even handball -- if you practice enough and have a modicum of skill, chances are you could become the best on whichever machine you play. In the whole world. In how many other pursuits can you say that?

My introduction to Pop-A-Shot came, as most people's does, at a bowling alley. Or maybe it was a Chuck E. Cheese. Who knows? Who cares? I enjoyed playing but largely forgot about the game until a few years ago, when my brother, employing the time-honored technique of purchasing something your wife would never allow you to have in your own house and giving it to someone so you can use it as his, bought me a machine for my birthday.

At first my friends and I played for fun. Then, slowly but surely, the game took hold of us: the hypnotic feel of sinking shots, the rhythm, the way that whenever you're dead certain you've hit your upper limit, a higher score is possible. We tweaked our techniques -- leaning, then crouching, then using the backboard, then trying two hands -- and became students of the game. Naturally, along the way, I became quite good. Or, at least I assumed I was, playing in the vacuum of my garage, beating all comers at a bar or inserting a dollar at Dave & Buster's and returning home with a sack full of stuffed animals for my kids. Which brings us back to Ricardo Reyes.

Consider for a moment: How many amateur tennis players get to try to take a game off Rafael Nadal? How many golfers have the opportunity to go one-one-one against Tiger Woods? Well, all you need to do to test yourself against arguably the best Pop-A-Shot player in the world is show up at Barney's Beanery in Hollywood with a couple bucks in your pocket, preferably in quarters.

Last fall, I did just that. It was a warm Saturday before the start of the NFL season, and the place was relatively empty. Barney's looks like your standard sports bar -- a bunch of beers on tap, greasy food, a back corner with pool and air hockey -- until you see the Pop-A-Shot machine. Or should I say shrine. A giant sign reads RICARDO'S HOUSE above a tapestry of photos of Reyes's grinning head, one of them superimposed on a poster of Jimi Hendrix.

Often, L.A. types with oversized sunglasses and V-neck T-shirts recognize Reyes from Kimmel and ask to take photos with him. Some want to talk about how he beat Kobe -- how unlike the other NBA stars, Kobe looked like he was trying quite hard, leaning forward, eyes locked on the rim, making his first 12 shots yet still losing by such a wide margin. And then, invariably, they want to see Ricardo play.

So did I, of course. We headed to the machine, and, as we went, I sized him up. He did not exactly scream athlete. About 5-6, he has skinny arms, protruding ears and a halo of thin brown hair. In his T-shirt that read STAFF, jeans and white tennis shoes, he gave no hint of extraordinary coordination, performed no pirouettes while whisking away jalapeño poppers.

The machine at Barney's is called Shoot to Win and differs from the standard Pop-A-Shot in several significant ways. For starters, games are more like marathons at three minutes long (provided you reach certain score thresholds), and players get bonus points for accuracy. During the first minute the basket is stationary, as is the case in Pop-A-Shot, but during the second and third minute it moves from side to side, adding an intriguing element of timing. Watching us was AJ Sacher, a manager at Barney's who's accompanied Ricardo on all his appearances, which have included two on ESPN (during one of which he beat the combined score of both hosts while blindfolded) as well as the Kimmel show, on which, after the last of his five appearances last spring, he was surprised with a new Ford Mustang. (An interesting side note: there was supposed to be a sixth Kimmel opponent, Ron Artest, but then Artest showed up for his interview with Kimmel wearing only boxer shorts. The Lakers handlers, sensing disaster, whisked him away from the studio before he could film his showdown with Ricardo).

Right away it was obvious why Reyes made for such great TV. Unlike the CC Alexanders of the world, he was humble and

charmingly oblivious to celebrity. He told me he is not a fan of the NBA, was not particularly thrilled to meet the players ("People say you meet Kobe, you meet LeBron, but to me is just another job") and cannot really explain his skill beyond saying, "right now, Pop-A-Shot is my power." (He has never played much real basketball, though he used to be good at soccer.) His has been a blue-collar life; he moved to California from Mexico City 20 years ago, raised three children and works five shifts a week at Barney's.

When he began playing 10 years ago, Reyes did so only because he needed to do something on his breaks and didn't much like pool. At first his scores were in the 300s, then the 400s. Night after night, once the bar closed, he took his hard-earned tips and fed them into the machine. When he came home, his wife couldn't believe it. "Why are you losing all your money in that machine?" she'd ask. He didn't have an answer she'd understand, but the truth was, it made him feel good. He loved refining his game, aiming for new standards. He loved feeling unbeatable. And he loved the perfect simplicity of the game, how he controlled all the variables. Of course, when Kimmel presented him with that Mustang, he finally had a suitable answer for his wife. "When she see my car, I say, OK, there is the money." He gives a shy smile. "And she's happy now."

For TV producers, Reyes is the American dream: writ small, an immigrant and common man who comes on in a busboy's apron and quietly humbles NBA stars. Of course it also helps that watching him shoot is akin to seeing a mini-basketball-flinging cyborg sent from the future. Just as Michael Phelps, with his long torso and pliable ankles, was born to swim, Reyes was born to play Pop-A-Shot. He transfers balls from his left hand to his right seamlessly, never mishandling one, and then flips them up in short, compact shots, with an economy of motion that recalls a man stirring a bowl of cake batter. Compare him to the 6-10 Odom, whose Inspector Gadget limbs, while a great boon in real basketball, are the kiss of death in Pop-A-Shot: Each shot requires him to fold and unfold all that arm. On Kimmel, Odom eventually took to trying to finger-roll his shots into the basket. (Reyes, asked to break down the flaws of his NBA opponents, did so clinically, deeming Odom "too big," saying LeBron "missed too much" and assessing Kobe as "good but very, very slow.")

A couple of months later I approached Bryant during a Lakers road trip and talk to him about his game against Reyes. He laughed at first, saying "the guy was a total ringer, so I just went along with it" and claimed he had not been trying that hard against Reyes (even though that didn't look to be the case), and that there was "no correlation at all" between Pop-A-Shot and real basketball. Even so, Kobe then turned serious and, when the prospect of a rematch was broached, say, "I'll wear his ass out if we played again." When asked if he'd need to prepare first, Bryant would shake his head vigorously. "I don't need no practice," he'd say. "I'll play against him right now and wear his ass out. Wear. His. Ass. Out." It was impressive confidence, for sure, but perhaps misplaced, especially if there is indeed "no correlation" between the games, as Kobe claims. One might even say that coming in cold and defeating Reyes would be akin to never practicing at the game of basketball and expecting to beat an All-Star -- say, one like Bryant -- in a game of one-on-one. Greatness, after all, is greatness.

I found that out the hard way. Over the course of the afternoon, Reyes and I played maybe a dozen times. He posted a high score of 630. Me? I never broke 525 -- later pushing that up to 546 -- which I was told was likely the highest ever at the bar by someone other than Reyes. And yet I was still more than 100 points below Reyes's alltime best of 649.

At the end of the evening I left the bar humbled. Sure, I'd beaten all other comers, often by 200 points, and bested Barney's other busboy repeatedly. But I hadn't stood a chance against Reyes.

Surely, however, there's someone out there who would.

The phone rang.

"Hello, this is CC. I hear you're looking for me."

It took over two months, but I'd found the mysterious Alexander. He told me he'd been working on his latest business, and that he'd lost his dog, and that there was some reason why he'd had to change jobs. Or something like that. It was hard to keep up with Alexander, now 50, who unleashed a torrent of words upon me over the ensuing hour, but this much became clear: He was dead-certain he could beat Reyes and Kletecka. "The only thing I can say, respectfully, is you would have to combine both of them into Superman to even have a chance against me," Alexander said. "The guy who did the record, it was nice to watch and he hit shot after shot after shot, but as you know, there's a difference shooting in your backyard versus having a hand in your face. When it comes to Ricardo the waiter, I think it's very entertaining but the problem is, with those guys it's like I'm in the league and they're junior pro. No matter what they say, no matter what you write, there's no one who could ever touch me at this game."

Gary Kerr, the old-time champion from Ontario, was similarly confident, saying of Reyes, "With a little bit of practice, I think I could beat him." And of course, Kletecka was so certain of his superiority that he asked me for Kimmel's contact info. The more I talked to all of them, the more I wondered: Why couldn't there be a showdown, a title-unification bout of sorts, just like in boxing? Four men -- maybe throw in Kobe for entertainment value -- and one machine. You'd have past and current champions, a rainbow coalition of Pop-A-Shooters, black, white and Hispanic, famous and infamous, bourgeois and proletariat, boisterous and laconic. Once and for all, we could determine a world champion. There would be endorsements, book deals, maybe a league! When I called Cochran, he was already one step ahead of me. "In this computer age, you could have a state and regional setup," he said, getting excited. "You'd have a final four for men and final four for women." He paused, becoming wistful. "I tell you one thing, if you had a world championship, they'd come out of the woodwork to play."

Well, who was I to sit idly by? It was time to make it happen. I proposed a showdown between the four men. Since they're spread across the continent, I suggested using a machine commonly found at Chuck E. Cheese and Dave & Buster's called "Super Shot" that now seems to be the most widely-available iteration of Pop-A-Shot (which is sadly no longer available in coin-op form). I was optimistic. I was pumped. I was also, it turns out, naive. See, just as the wide variety of mini-basketball machines out there means there can be a wide variety of champions, it also means there is no such thing as a neutral playing field. And, of course, who wants to play anybody else on their home field, with their rules and their balls?

Alexander was the first to get back to me. Playing on the Super Shot machine, he wrote in an e-mail, would be a "joke" since the balls and hoop are "not the TRUE size." Also, he didn't think there would be enough balls, so he proposed playing on a machine with 20 of them ("so no one has to wait for balls"). Which is to say, CC Alexander proposed playing on his own machine. "Under these guidelines I would participate and show you what the world already knows or anyone who has seen me or Shooter shoot [knows], that I have NO PEER at this game even with my best years behind me."

Kletecka was more open to the idea but stressed that to play on a machine other than the original Pop-A-Shot was to rob him of his expertise, as it would Gary Kerr (just as Ricardo would be out of his element on any machine but a Shoot to Win). And the thing was: All of them were right. On their own machines, each of these guys would likely beat the others. Which, naturally, is why each one wanted to play on his own machine. And I didn't blame them; I'm pretty dominant in my own garage too.

The reality was that I couldn't crown a true mini-basketball champion, or at least not just one, not now. And maybe that's for the best. After all, part of the magic of the game is its ability to make any one, on any given night, in any given dive bar, feel unbeatable.

Plus, if you really need a benchmark, there is one guy whose score you can probably top, with a little practice and a few fistfuls of quarters. You may have heard of him. His score is 58, name's Kobe Bryant.

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