Rick Reilly discovered that there are several variations of Rock Paper Scissors and plenty of rules. As a parent, you try to be fair. So, at our house, when there was a massive dispute that we couldn't settle between my middle son, Jake, and his brother or sister, I'd always say, "OK-- Rock Paper Scissors."

And the tears would stop and both kids would smile a little and then I'd count, "OK -- one, two, three, shoot!" And every single time Jake would win.
And as he'd run off happily with the last cookie or the found football card or, later, my car, I used to think, "Man, that's the luckiest kid I ever met."

Until one day, years later, I was in Las Vegas, when a poker announcer named Phil Gordon bet me $10 he could beat me in Rock Paper Scissors.

Rock Paper Scissors -- best out of ten -- and he'd give me the first two. And then he proceeded to fricassee me seven out of eight.

"How can that be?" I swore. "It's just pure luck, right?"

Wrong. Turns out Phil Gordon was a pro. In fact, Gordon hosts a $10,000 Rock Paper Scissors tournament in Las Vegas every year. It was the equivalent of having Betty Crocker walk up to you and go, "Wanna bet me in a bake-off?"

Gordon said I had a "tell" every time I'd go to throw Paper. He said I'd form it at the top of my arc and he'd see it and simply put down Scissors. He said newbie males always play a lot of Rock, so he countered with a lot of Paper. It reminded me of a bit from The Simpsons, in which Bart and Lisa are going to play Rock Paper Scissors for the last cupcake.

Lisa, thinking: "Poor, simple Bart. Always throws Rock. Every time."

Bart, thinking: "Rock! Good ol' Rock! Nothing beats Rock."

Gordon also said rookies rarely throw the same hand three times in a row. So anytime I played, say, Scissors, twice in a row, he knew on the next throw he could safely choose Paper and have zero chance of losing and 50 percent chance of winning.

"It's not luck," Gordon said, snatching my ten-spot. "It's skill."

And it hit me, right then, that Jake knew all those rules, too. It wasn't luck, it was skill. And that I was the crappiest parent since Jose Menendez.

It really gnawed at me how bad I was at RPS, so when TLC informed me that there was a world championship in Toronto every year -- put on by the World Rock Paper Scissors Society, no less -- I entered it immediately ($50, Canadian) and vowed to win it.

OK, not win it. But beat the knuckles off some people. OK, win at least one match.

Pretty soon I was inside a world I never knew existed. For instance, I never dreamed I'd read a quote like this one from Dave McGill, who won a $50,000 RPS tournament in Vegas: "God gave me a gift. It'd be a shame not to pursue it."

Wow. Really, Dave? Your fingers are a gift from God?

I never knew I'd know the names for all kinds of three-throw RPS gambits, such as:
The Avalanche -- three Rocks in a row.

The Bureaucrat -- three Papers in a row.


The Bible -- seven straight Papers.

The Guillotine -- seven straight Scissors.

I never knew I'd wind up learning all the different variations of the game around the world.

• In a lot of countries, it's called RoShamBo.

• In Indonesia, they play Man Elephant Ant. The Man stomps the Ant. The Elephant crushes the Man. The Ant gets inside the Elephant's brain and drives it mad.

• In Philadelphia, some people play a two-handed game called Microwave Tin Cat. Microwave bakes Cat. Cat shreds Tin. Tin blows up Microwave. Not a good game, though, because using two hands means you can't hold your beer.

• My kids invented Bird Worm Gun. Bird eats Worm. Gun shoots Bird. Worm crawls inside gun and, uh, gums it up so the mechanism can't fire. OK, so they were six.

And I never thought I'd know all the official, certified RPS rules, including:

• No touching your opponent's throw. For instance, no taking your Rock and crushing their Scissors. No cutting up their Paper with your Scissors. No covering their Rock with your Paper. Apparently, your opponent has the right to then form Fist, and punch you with it.

• No launch pads. This is when you slam your right-handed throw into your open left palm. Very bush league. That was going to be a personal hardship, since that's always the way I did it.

• No throws are allowed except the Big Three. This would mean no Bird, Well, Spock, Water, Bomb, Matchstick, Texas Longhorn, Lightning, God, or Fire, a Copenhagen specialty in which league players can throw Fire once a month, killing everything. You can't go down that slippery slope. Pretty soon you've got Napalm beating Fire, Nuke beating Napalm, Nova beating Nuke, that sort of thing.
I learned, too, that people take this very seriously. Women get manicures. Competitors dress up. A man named Antony Maanum of Overland Park, Kan., keeps his hands in oven mitts during tournaments. His hands are just that hot.

I learned that there are long, heated philosophical arguments at international RPS conventions over things like:

• Does Rock "smash" Scissors or merely "blunt" them?

• Can a pair of scissors really cut an entire piece of paper with one snip or should, in fact, it take two wins by Scissors to defeat Paper?

• Should prosthetic arms be allowed? (World RPS Society president Doug Walker says no. "It opens the possibility for infrared technology to send signals to the arm to instantly fire a throw a millisecond before it hits, giving it an unfair advantage," he once wrote. No, he really did.)

You laugh, but the stakes can be enormous. Once, there was a fabulously wealthy Japanese electronics firm that decided to auction off its set of fabulously valuable paintings by Picasso, Van Gogh, etc., which would produce a fabulous commission for the auction house that got the fabulous deal. The CEO heard proposals by the two biggie houses -- Sotheby's and Christie's -- and found both of them to be worthy. To settle the stalemate, he decided they should RPS for it. The auction houses sweated out what to do. Sotheby's decided it was just a game of chance and went with Paper. Christie's consulted the eleven-year-old twin daughters of an employee, who suggested Scissors because "everybody expects you to choose Rock." Christie's won the contract and the millions.

"Chance?" Pah!

LIFE OF REILLY

RICK REILLY, 52, has been voted National Sportswriter of the Year 11 times. His new book -- out May 4, 2010 -- is called "Sports From Hell: My Two-year Search for the World's Dumbest Competition." It's the account of his search for the dumbest sport in the world.

Not to give anything away, but a good bet would be either Ferret Legging or the World Sauna Championships. It also includes embarrassing attempts by Reilly to try Nude Bicycle Racing, Zorbing, Chess Boxing, Extreme Ironing, the World Rock Paper Scissors Championships and an unfortunate week on a women's pro football team.

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