

PLAYBOY

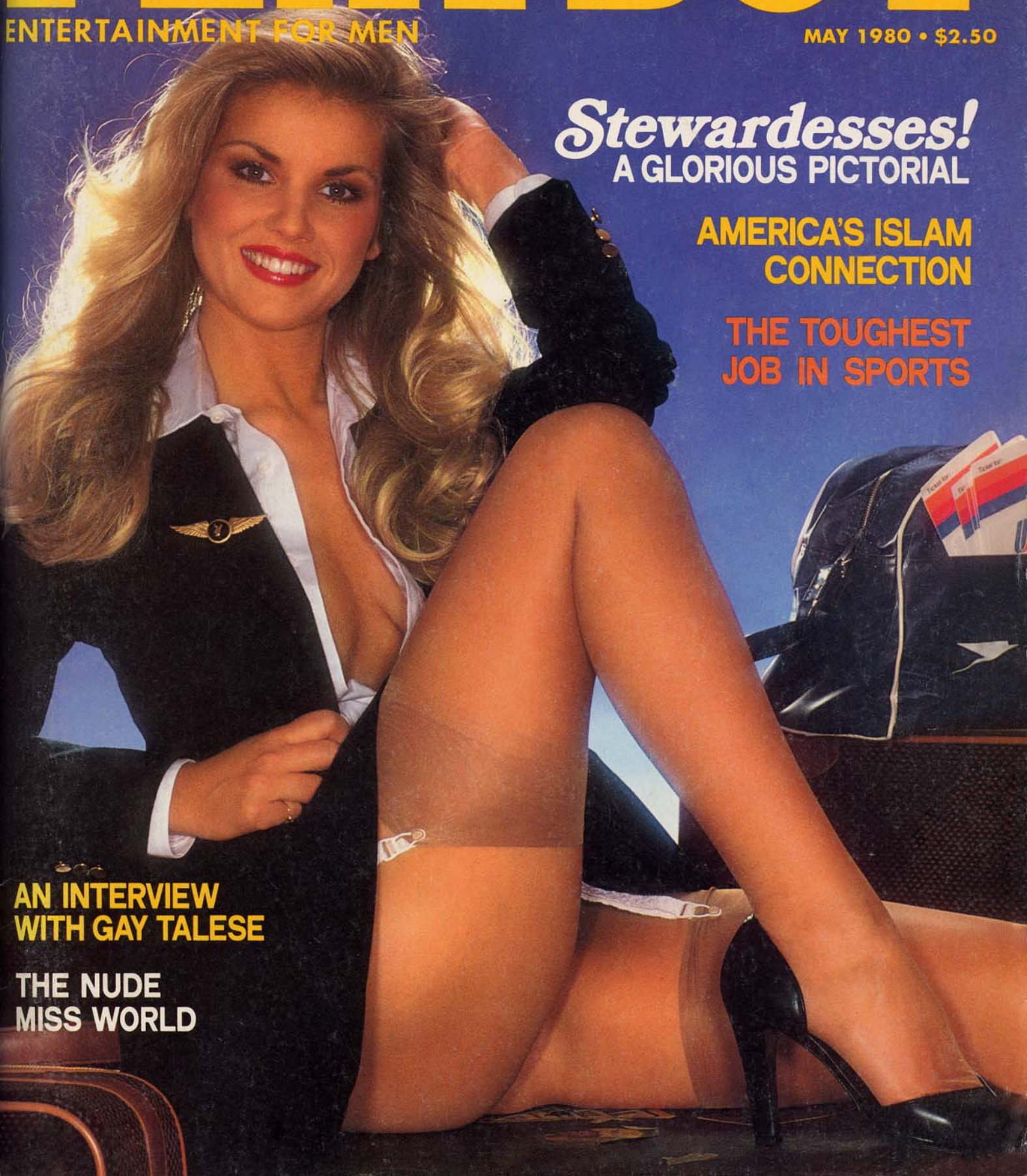
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THE TOUGHEST
JOB IN SPORTS



AN INTERVIEW
WITH GAY TALESE

THE NUDE
MISS WORLD

THE TOUGHEST JOB IN SPORTS

*finally, an
answer to the
toughest question
in sports—who
ranks first
in the old
balls game?*

article **By JAY STULLER**

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RUSHING HEAT and humidity flooded Manila's Philippine Coliseum on this October morning in 1975, enveloping the 25,000 spectators and the two weary and pained fighters in the middle of the ring. Muhammad Ali and Smokin' Joe Frazier were taking it to the mountain for the third time, both resolved to tear out the other's very soul and annihilate a rivalry that had spanned five bitter years. Only Ali, that child of the heavens, would touch the summit.

His body heavier with age, Ali still fired those flashing and vicious left jabs, now backed with real power, and they snapped Frazier's bobbing but unguarded head in the first three rounds. Then Frazier, crouched low, began waging his own personal inquisition in the sixth. Like a starving and desperate wolf, he ripped at the champion's chest and kidneys, unleashing that legendary and evil left hook to Ali's jaw. The fight festered into a noble but wicked war until the 14th, which Ali later described as being "like death. The closest thing to dyin' that I know of." Ali barely stumbled off his stool for the last round, but Frazier's manager, Eddie Futch, saw his fighter as a spent shell lying cold, with not a wisp of smoke remaining. "Joe, I'm going to stop it," said Futch.

"I want him, boss," said Frazier, whose eyes were swollen shut.

"Sit down, son, it's all over."

Indeed, at the age of 31, it was essentially all over for the former heavy-weight champion. He had fought only 35 professional fights, won 32, 27 by knockout, and, after losing one more fight, would be resigned to the less punishing vocation of singing and dancing. This self-described "fightin' machine," this man of inestimable heart and will, was through in a sport that's been called modified murder for damn good reasons. Frazier knew countless pugs who had absorbed too many blows to the skull and who now shuffled through a world they perceived with half-somnambulant minds. They slurred their speech, and Frazier wanted no such fate.

But what more could be asked of a man in peacetime? Or in the world of sport? What athletic task could compare with entering a confined space and facing men like Ali or the brutish George Foreman in the ancient and ultimate test of man versus man, a duel of the fists?

For Frazier, fighting Ali is a hell of a lot less terrifying than swimming. He would rather be tied up in the ropes and pummeled by Earnie Shavers than go near the water. To him, Mark Spitz is one tough mutha, a conclusion formed during Frazier's memorable performance in the *Superstars* competition, in which he nearly drowned a few seconds after hitting the pool. For Frazier, who fears no man or beast, there are several sports he considers far more difficult and dangerous than his own.

Hockey goalie? "Lawdy," says Frazier, whistling through his teeth at the thought of a frozen puck rocketing his way in excess of 100 miles per hour, "I don't want nothin' comin' at me that I can't stop. That's why you don't see no black hockey players. Blacks don't fool with sports that put you on ice, on snow, in the air or in water. You won't find us skiing, swimming, skating or parachuting. Those are too dangerous, man. Now, I wouldn't mind playing football, runnin' with the ball. But then I wouldn't (continued on page 246)

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want 11 guys jumpin' on me. I'd get up and want to fight and one of them would have to drop. But I'd take any of them on one on one."

They call Robert Brazile Dr. Doom around the National Football League. The Houston Oilers linebacker is 6'4" and 238 pounds of speed, agility, power and zealous enthusiasm. He is clearly one of the hardest hitters in the league, a man you don't mess with. "You tell Joe Frazier to come get me," says Brazile. "I take *him* one on one . . . if I can wear my helmet. I'd play goalie in hockey, but I don't want to do nothing where I get hit in the face. I'll fight Joe, you tell him that, but I'm wearing my helmet."

Tennis pro Arthur Ashe would love to mix it up in the ring with a fighter of his own weight—say a Sugar Ray Leonard or a Roberto Duran. "But I'd never be a pitcher in baseball," he says. "Man, Dave Parker would line one up the middle and it would take my head off."

John Garrett, goalie for the Hartford Whalers of the National Hockey League, thinks tending the nets is a piece of cake, but you could never get him behind the wheel of a race car. Ace driver Richard Petty, however, thinks being a goalie "looks awful dangerous." Rams quarterback Pat Haden thinks Petty is fooling with fire. Houston Rockets forward Rick Barry thinks he could get enamored of speed but, despite being a large man of 6'8" and 215 pounds, is like Brazile. "I don't want to get hit in the face, either," says Barry. They all think downhill skiers ought to be locked away for their own safety.

So what is the toughest job in sports? What is the most ball-busting, nerve-racking sport or position that demands the most of a man or a woman? What draws upon every resource of physical skill, preparation, intelligence, mental cool, gamesmanship and all the other elements that go into athletics? Is it catching hockey pucks in the throat? Having

blitzing linebackers pour through the line like a tsunami and tear you into dog meat before you can even set up to pass? Is it catching a knuckle-ball pitcher one night, nursing those bruises for 22 hours and then catching a 101-mph flame thrower while trying to concentrate on your slumping batting average? How about risking death in a race car? Quarterbacks get slammed to the turf, but they don't go up in flames.

When the PLAYBOY editors asked me to try to determine the toughest job in sports, I knew I was in for trouble. The topic has fueled bar debates for years. I have one friend who firmly believes that professional bowlers are the Greek gods of athletics. Says I have a closed mind to their unbelievable skills. Another touts baseball hitters and worships at the shrine of Ted Williams, leaving his mind as open as that of a Moonie.

The toughest job in sports is obviously that of sportswriter, especially on an assignment like this. I fully expect *jai-alai* players to write hate letters in Basque, motocross riders to send boxes of dirt C.O.D. and rugby players bottles of flatulence, such is their range of expression. But the editors assured me that this was not a political issue and that people with opposing views would not be allowed equal time in the pages of the magazine. If I were to meet an irate reader in a bar, however, I'd be on my own.

For the sake of limiting the controversy to a small-scale conventional war, I decided to enlist the aid of experts. We would determine a set of measurements—20 or so traits that defined toughness—and apply them to a handful of sports. No sweat.

My first contact was George Plimpton—the Bogey Man, Bozo of the Bruins in the hockey nets, the Paper Lion. George would know the toughest job in sports.

"Every sport has its moment of crisis," says Plimpton from his New York office. "But rating them wouldn't mean anything. The ultimate is, of course, auto racing. But, no, the toughest thing I ever did was play the triangle with the New York Philharmonic. If you make a mistake, you destroy the whole thing. You can't make an error." Thanks, George.

Since so much of athletics deals with the mind, I called Dr. Bruce Ogilvie, a 59-year-old sports psychologist at San Jose State University. Dr. Ogilvie has probed the brains of tens of thousands of athletes since 1953, in questionnaires, lengthy and repeated interviews and counseling sessions. He's been an advisor to numerous college, professional and Olympic teams, helping coaches judge the mind set of athletes and helping athletes cope with their own special brand of psychic problems. Ogilvie works with the Portland Trail Blazers and the Los Angeles Lakers and has spent time with the Houston Astros and

