

Extremely High Hopes

Full-contact hoops played on trampolines? The idea's so crazy that it might work

BY JACK MCCALLUM

TWELVE FEET off the floor, just about at eye level with the top of the backboard, Sean Jackson, a.k.a. Inches, has a decision to make. Should he put down a conventional slam? Or does he have sufficient hang time to do a 360 and put the ball between his legs before dunking? Inches decides that he does, and seconds later a studio audience of about 250 has witnessed Slamball's first official Mac Nasty, Jackson's name for his patented dunk.

You, too, will be able to witness Inches's feat, plus those of Ghetto Bird, Tank and Lilgetdown this summer when Slamball, billed as the world's first extreme team sport, will air on TNN. The six-team round-robin competition was held recently in a specially constructed arena in Los Angeles—specially constructed since even a highflier like Jackson needs a trampoline to get that much air. Competitors have been sworn to silence about the results. Find a player though, and he will tell you about Inches's dunk, and probably one he made himself.

Slamball looks like a live-action video game, which is exactly the point. "My generation feels disenfranchised from conventional team sports," says Mason Gordon, 27, Slamball's James Naismith. "This is a sport for those kids who were brought up with computer games but still like action." Coming across a Slamball game, as actor Ben Stiller did during the taping, one will suddenly see a player pogo-sticking off the floor and depositing a dunk from well above the basket. The players wear padded headgear and Rollerball-esque pads. Balls can be played off the Plexiglas surrounding the court. The effect is surreal. Stiller, who was filming a movie at a nearby studio, was transfixed.



Slamball looks like a live-action video game, which is exactly the point.

So was former Philadelphia 76ers president Pat Croce, who has joined the Slamball project as an adviser to Tollin/Robbins Productions and Telepictures Productions. Croce has become the game's unofficial commissioner and full-time older-guy cheerleader. "Hit him! Deck him!" Croce screamed during the action.

Slamball is played with 10-foot-high baskets on a court 55 feet wide and 94 feet long. But there is an element of hockey too: Players can be checked when not in the Slam Zone, the area near the basket formed by four large trampolines. "I played a lot of games like this at the Y," says ex-NBAer Reggie Theus, who did color commentary. "Take it to the hoop, and get the crap knocked out of you."

Pat backing Croce is a Slamball adviser and the new sport's unofficial cheerleader.

tion is almost continuous. In the game's typical confrontation, an offensive player bounces off the wood (one hop is allowed here, whereas many hops are allowed in the NBA) onto one of the tramps and challenges the last defender, called the stopper. The stopper is allowed to goaltend and make contact with the offensive player. Springing high off the tramp—getting "ginormous air," as play-by-play man Pat Parnell describes it—is crowd-pleasing, but often the battle is won by the quick jumper, the player who springs to the hoop and gets off the slam before the stopper is at the apex of his defending jump.

One thing Slamball is not: pro wrestling. "We began with the idea that there would be fighting, some scripted back stories and much more posturing," says Mike Tollin, a director (*Summer Catch*), producer (*Varsity Blues*) and the man for whom Gordon was working as a gofer when Gordon drew up the game. "Fortunately, everyone who saw the test tapes said, 'Get rid of that stuff.' So we did."

Croce, 47, has more or less adopted Inches, counseling him that fan-friendly players are the key to success. "He's my new Bubba Chuck," Croce says, using a nickname of Allen Iverson, to whom Croce was close when he ran the Sixers. The 5' 11" Jackson, 32, has soaked up every word. "I've been hooping on the playground my whole life, but I know this is my future," he said.

Well, there's no guarantee that Slamball is America's future, and—Croce notwithstanding—the game isn't likely to attract the interest of the graybeard crowd. But times have changed. "People said there was no room on the mountain for snowboarders," says Tollin, "and now they're winning gold medals." □