

## THE SPORTS OF KINGS

A memorable line from a Mel Brooks movie was “It’s good to be the King.” But not necessarily. What follows here will be a review of early 16th century European history – not in a scholarly way, and certainly not what you learned and forgot in high school. Indeed, it was easy to forget because it was a bewildering time of wars and treaties, shifting alliances, plagues and poisonings, libertine kings and politically arranged marriages. There were schisms in the Catholic world, the Protestant Reformation and Counter-Reformation, inquisitions, voyages of discovery and revolutionary developments in science and medicine. In Italy alone, it was the time of Savonarola and Machiavelli, the Borgias and Medicis, Boccaccio and Cellini and all the famous Renaissance painters and sculptors. Who could possibly remember it all?

In the following drama, the main actors will be two feuding kings and eventual brothers-in-law Charles V of Spain and Francis I of France (best known as Francois Premier). Born six years apart, respectively in 1500 and 1494, Charles was a Hapsburg, Francis from the House of Valois and Burgundy and their rivalry shaped European history. Both monarchs were competitive, combative and lusty – equally active on battlefields and in bedrooms. Francis was rugged, Charles sickly and over some three decades they fought eight wars, mostly over Italy’s wealthy city states which held the balance of power in Europe. Although constant warring drained their finances, that didn’t stop their relentless quest for dominance. Of course, Francois Premier is remembered as the Father of the French Renaissance – the king who brought Leonardo da Vinci and his Mona Lisa to Paris, who enlarged the Louvre and built fabulous castles at Chambord and Fontainebleau.

Fortunately for Leonardo, he wasn’t asked to paint a flattering portrait of his patron for Francis was famed for his large nose – called “le roi de grand nez.” Charles had scores of artists and they had the challenging task of making the Emperor and his Hapsburg relatives look good – not an easy task because most of them had protruding lower jaws – perhaps a result of royal inbreeding. Charles’s prognathism was so severe that his speech was effected – he was a mumbler. His mouth hung open and his swallowing was impaired, but not enough to reduce his appetite for red meat – long before the Heimlich maneuver, he’d flush everything down with huge mugs of warm beer. In 1519 Charles and Francis – and the English dark horse Henry VIII, another sportsman -- competed for the title Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Charles’s bribes to the seven greedy electors far exceeded the French and English bids so the title and the territories that came with it fell to the King of Spain. For the next forty years

Charles V was the most powerful monarch of Europe, although as Voltaire said, “the Holy Roman Empire wasn’t Holy, or Roman or an Empire.” Although Charles and Francis were frequent rivals in war and politics, when one was sick, the other was always ready to loan one of his best court doctors – which leads us to the first of three vignettes that might help explain their characters and the times they lived in.

#### THE “JEW DOCTOR”:

This story may sound apocryphal but it has a claim to authenticity since it was written in 1575, just about a half century after the supposed event.

*When Francis de Valois, king of France, was seized with a very tedious sickness, and the physicians of his house and court could give him no ease, he said that every time the fever returned, that it was not possible for any Christian physician to cure him...He ordered a courier to be dispatched to Spain, to [ask] the Emperor Charles the fifth, to send a Jew doctor, the best of all the court. . . . There was no little laughing in Spain at his request, and all concluded that it was no other than the conceit of a man with fever...They sent him a physician newly turned Christian, hoping thereby to comply with the king’s request and when the “Jew doctor” arrived at the French court, in order to break the ice, King Francis jokingly asked whether the Jew doctor wasn’t tired from waiting so long for the Messiah to appear. But the Spaniard wasn’t amused and indignantly replied that now he was a sincere Christian. Well this wasn’t what Francis wanted to hear. Then said the king, be gone to your own country in good time, for I have Christian physicians enough in my own court and house. I took you to be a Jew, who in my opinion are those that have a natural ability for cures. And so [the king] took leave of him without allowing [the doctor] to feel his pulse or examine his urine, or [ask] the least word concerning his distemper, and forthwith sent to Constantinople for a Jew who recovered him only with milk of a she-ass.*

The story makes several important points:

1. During the 16th century Jewish doctors were in short supply in Europe – but not in the Ottoman Empire where they prospered. In fact the ruling Sultans were amazed that the usually sensible European Kings were so eager to expel their Jews who, after all, were talented and productive. Indeed, many Jewish doctors served as court physicians in Constantinople.
2. The few Jewish physicians who remained in Europe retained a certain mystique because reputedly they were skilled in kabbalistic treatments, folk remedies and could

read Arabic medical texts. Even as Jews in general were reviled, royal and ecclesiastical elites revered -- and sometimes feared Jewish doctors.

3. Even for conversos – New Christians -- life could be hard because they always were suspected of secretly Judaizing.

For example, let's consider the fates of two 16th century Jewish doctors. In 1553 Michael Servetus (a.k.a. Villeneuve) was burned at the stake in Geneva for his public stance against Calvinism; later, for good measure, he was burned again in effigy by the Catholic Inquisition. More than four centuries later when modern scholarship proved that Servetus was descended on his mother's side from a prominent Jewish family of Aragon, he was not burned a third time. Similarly, the corpse of the famous Portuguese *converso* doctor Garcia d'Orta (1501-1568) was exhumed twelve years after his natural death in Goa. A relative had confessed under torture to Judaizing and implicated his cousin, so the doctor's bones were dug up, an auto-da-fe performed and his ashes thrown into the sea. The Inquisition meant business.

#### THE FRENCH KING'S "CONTINENCE"

The 19th century French novelist Honore Balzac once wrote a raunchy short story about Francois Premier. ("The Continenence of King Francis I" can be read on the Internet or look for it in volume two of Balzac's "Droll Stories.") Balzac described events in 1525 after Francis was defeated and captured by Charles at the Battle of Pavia. He'd fought bravely, continuing after his horse was shot from under him, but 10,000 French soldiers and mercenaries were killed – their pikes no match for Spanish muskets. Francis wrote to his mother: "All is lost save honor – and my skin which is safe." His skin may have been intact but, as we'll soon see, he had other body parts to worry about. Francis was moved for safe keeping to a fortress in Madrid where he remained for about a year. Be aware that this is not the official history but is a product of Balzac's ribald imagination. These are his words in translation:

*Emperor Charles V kept him carefully locked up...in one of his castles in which our defunct sire, of immortal memory soon became listless and weary, seeing that he loved the open air, and his little comforts, and no more understood being shut up in a cage than a cat would folding up lace. He fell into moods of such strange melancholy that his letters [home] knowing the great lechery of the king, determined, after mature deliberation, to send Queen Marguerite [his sister] to him, from whom he would doubtless receive alleviation of his sufferings, that*

*good lady being much loved by him, and merry, and learned in all necessary wisdom.*

*But the queen was worried about what might happen in the cell and sent to Rome for advance absolution from the pope for whatever petty sins might be committed in order to cure the king's melancholy. The pontiff, no stranger to such matters, promised salvation for the queen's soul and the king's body which he said would be without prejudice to God. The ladies of the court all said that they'd happily go but they distrusted Charles V who had so cruelly created this deplorable abstinence -- for the lack of amorous exercise was so vexatious to a prince who was much accustomed to it. The queen said that she wished she had wings to fly to him, but alas, the trip by relays of mules over snow-covered mountains would be long and treacherous and, meanwhile, the king found himself pressed by unsatisfied desire than he had ever been before, or would be again. In this reverberation of nature, the king opened his heart to the*

*Emperor Charles, in order that he might be provided with a merciful specific, urging upon him that it would be an everlasting disgrace to one king to let another die for lack of gallantry. The Castilian showed himself to be a generous man. Thinking that he would be able to recuperate himself for the favor granted, out of his guest's ransom, he hinted quietly to the people commissioned to guard the prisoner, that they might gratify him in this respect.*

[Captain Alarcon who was assigned to the job saw an opportunity for he had designs on a French estate and title.] *When the captain came into the chamber of the French king, he asked him respectfully if it was his good pleasure to permit him an interrogation on a subject concerning which he was as curious as about papal indulgences? To which the prince, casting aside his hypochondriacally demeanor, and twisting around on the chair, gave a sign of consent. The captain begged him not to be offended at the license of his language, and confessed to him that he, the king, was said to be one of the most amorous men of France, and he would be glad to learn from him if the ladies of his court were expert in the science of love. The poor king, calling to mind his many adventures gave vent to a deep sigh, and exclaimed that no woman of any country knew better than the ladies of France the secrets of this alchemy; and at the remembrance of the savory, gracious, and vigorous fondling of one alone, he felt himself the man, were she within his reach, to clasp her to his heart, even on a rotten plank a hundred feet above a precipice.*

*[Now the captain] began to defend the Spanish ladies, declaring that in Castile alone was love properly understood...and if the Lord king would wager one of his best and most profitable manors in the kingdom of France, he would give him a Spanish night of love...which would draw the king's soul from his body. "Done" said the king jumping up from his chair [and he agrees.] The captain who was acquainted with the Donna of the Cardinal Archbishop of Toledo, requested her to smother the King of France with kindness, and demonstrate to him the great advantage of the Castilian imagination over the simple movement of the French.*

*To which the Marchesa consented for the honor of Spain, and also for the pleasure of knowing of what paste God made kings, a matter in which she was ignorant, having experienced only of the princes of the Church. Thus she came passionate as a lion that has broken out of his cage, and made the bones of the king crack, in a manner that would have killed any other man. But the above-named lord was so well furnished, so greedy, and so well bitten, that he no longer felt a bite; and from this terrible duel the Marchesa emerged abashed, believing that she had had the devil to confess.*

*[The next morning the captain came to claim his reward, but was abashed when the king said that] the Spanish ladies were of a passable temperature and their system a fair one, but that when gentleness was required they substituted frenzy...in short, that the embrace of a Frenchwoman brought back the drinker more thirsty than ever, tiring him never; and that with the ladies of his court, love was a gentle pleasure without parallel, and not the labor of a master-baker in his kneading trough. Fearing a trick and not knowing whether the Marchesa had "over-Spanished" the king, the captain offered a second chance and the king was too courteous and gallant a knight to refuse.*

*So after vespers, the guard passed fresh and warm into the king's chamber, a lady most dazzlingly white – most deliciously wanton, with long tresses and velvet hands, filling out her dress at the least movement, for she was gracefully plump, with a laughing mouth, and eyes moist in advance; a woman to beautify hell, and whose first word had such cordial power, that the king's garment was cracked by it. On the morrow, after the fair one had slipped out after the king's breakfast, the good captain came radiant and triumphant into the chamber. As sight of him the prisoner exclaimed: "God grant you joys like to mine!...By'r lady, I*

*will not judge between the love of our lands, but will pay the wager.” “I was sure of it,” said the captain. “How so?” said the king. “Sire, it was my wife.”*

When not involved in this variety of sport, Francis I spent his time scheming to get freed. He promised to concede land and arranged to have his two young sons brought to Spain as ransom – one of them became his eventual successor Henry, of whom I’ll speak again later. Part of the deal was that Francis would marry Charles’s oldest sister Eleanor whom he’d met during the last weeks of his long captivity. It took four years before the marriage was consummated and then Queen Eleanor had to put up with her husband’s open visits to his various mistresses.

Although he’d signed the humiliating Treaty of Madrid, as soon as Francis was back on French soil he got the pope to agree that the pact was invalid because it was made under duress. He allied with Suleiman the Magnificent (yes, the same Ottoman sultan who’d previously provided him with the “real Jew Doctor”) and eventually the Ottomans conquered much of Europe reaching the edge of Vienna before they were defeated by Charles V in 1532. King Francis died in 1547 at age 53 – a victim of the bedroom, not the battlefield -- evidently the milk of a she-ass wasn’t effective against his tertiary syphilis.

Emperor Charles V had several illegitimate children but was more discrete in his amorous affairs than his French brother-in-law – although, reputedly, his confessor urged him not to be led astray by “your wicked sensuality.” This same confessor also advised Charles’s against his habitual overeating. As he wrote, “I once wished your Majesty to do some penance for old sins, but if you would change this injunction into a firm resistance against gluttony, it will be to you as meritorious as flint and scourge.” Charles paid no more mind to his confessor than to his physicians who urged him to eat wholesome rather than spicy foods. That was unacceptable and, as we shall see, he favored the advise of any quack who suggested a less drastic remedy.

I’ve mentioned that Charles V had the hereditary protruding “Hapsburg Jaw.” He also suffered from epilepsy, small pox, asthma, dysentery, hemorrhoids, depression and as one of his doctors reported, “some slight indication of the French disease” – syphilis. Worst of all was his crippling gout which, of course, often was called the “rich man’s disease” because it was caused by excess intake of purine-laden food. Court life featured lavish meals and Charles never shirked his gastric obligations – and opportunities. After a lifetime of gluttony and a sedentary lifestyle, his first attacks of

gouty arthritis came by age thirty, then increased in frequency and severity so that late in life he needed a cane or was carried about in a litter.

The Emperor's daily routine was to arise at three or four in the morning – he had a sleep disorder and never rested for more than four hours. He'd have a snack when he woke up. At about 5:00 AM he had a light breakfast of capon stewed in milk and sugar and washed down with cold beer. After a mid-morning nap and then attending mass he proceeded to his midday meal – the court said that he went directly from mass to mess. It consisted of about twenty dishes --not tapas - - but large portions of organ meats like kidney, liver and heart. At about eight in the evening the light fish meal might feature a large dish of oysters or anchovies or sardines and around midnight there'd be a late snack with more rich foods. As described by a courtier, this last supper consisted of four courses of six dishes – a piece of roast, a slice of calf's head, a pate, some almonds or pine nuts. He used his fingers to eat, held his plate under his large chin, said not a word and paid no attention to the crowd watching him.

One member of his retinue lamented, "The main trouble lies in his belly and his ruinous gluttony, which is hateful to us, and which is such that even during his strongest attacks and torments of ill health he does not limit his eating and drinking of harmful things. Then the court is outraged, it cries out and rants against both the emperor's gluttony and fickleness -- and the indulgence and willingness of his accommodating physician." But what the Emperor wanted, the Emperor got. When his doctors' bleeding, purging and cupping failed to ease his pains, which sometimes would last for weeks on end, he listened to anyone who offered a panacea. Evidently he didn't have a "real Jew doctor" because they'd all been expelled – so I don't know whether he ever tried she-ass milk. However, he favored a herbal concoction called China Root which had recently been introduced into Europe from Turkey. Some of his doctors doubted its efficacy, but the Emperor believed that it helped so many others also took the royal remedy.

Yes, court life could be stressful for emperors and kings and it's a wonder that Charles lived to age 58 before he died, probably of malaria. He prided himself in outliving both Francis I and his son Henry, but in his last years the Emperor was so exhausted and disabled by gout, that he abdicated his thrones and moved to the gentler climate of Spain where he spent his last years in a monastery – not exactly leading a monkish life, but with a skeleton staff of thirty carrying him about in a Sedan chair as he gardened, shot pigeons and continued gastric overload. Some 450 years later, the tip of one of the Emperor's mummified fingers was examined and the diagnosis of gout was confirmed by microscopic evidence of uric acid crystals and tophi. (NEJM 8/3/06)

Suleiman the Magnificent was the Turkish equivalent of Francis and Charles, their sometime ally and enemy and he also suffered from gout. Although I don't know the details of his Mediterranean diet, his personal doctor from 1536 to 1553 was Moses Hamen – a well respected Jew not only as a physician but as a philosopher and political adviser. Perhaps he was the same “Jew doctor” who was sent to heal the ailing Francis I with she-goat's milk. But there was jealousy among the sultan's court physicians and when Moses Hamen used a new method of rubbing an opiate ointment into Suleiman's aching leg, a Muslim rival complained that although it might provide temporary relief, in the long run it would be harmful. Moses Hamen was demoted, became depressed and died soon afterward. Another example of the perils of court life, even for favored physicians.

Finally, here's a medical encore which involves the next generation of kings of France and Spain – Henry II of France and Phillip II of Spain. They were just as quarrelsome as their fathers and, you may recall, Henry had been ransomed at age 6 in order to spring his father from the prison tower in Madrid and remained in captivity for six years. Years later after his father's death, he succeeded to the French throne and in 1558 after a major victory over Charles V, Henry arranged for a three day celebration of the peace treaty.

That ended the forty year struggle between the Hapsburgs and the House of Valois and to seal the deal, there was an arranged marriage between Henry's thirteen year old daughter Elisabeth (her mother was Catherine de Medici) and Charles's son Phillip II. In fact she was Phillip's third wife but he was too busy to attend the ceremony in Paris. He huffed that “Kings of Spain do not go after their brides.” So he sent a proxy to represent him at the magnificent wedding at Notre Dame. Later there was a formal ceremony in Barcelona and apparently he gave up his mistress and they lived happily for about nine years when Elisabeth died in childbirth.

Undaunted by Phillip's absence at the royal wedding, King Henry II, by now a robust 40 years old, wasn't about to let that spoil the occasion. He loved to joust and arranged for a three day tournament to be held at the Place des Vosges -- but on the last day, the lance of a young guardsman accidentally pierced the King's visor, splintered and lodged in his right eye. There was extensive soft tissue injury but no evidence of a skull fracture. Neither the king's barber surgeon Ambroise Pare (who often is credited as being the father of modern surgery), nor other court physicians could do anything more than remove a few splinters and, of course, bleed him vigorously.

The situation was so desperate that, once again, a courier was sent from France to Spain to ask for medical help – this time not for a “Jew doctor” but for the leading Spanish court doctor, the famed anatomist Andreas Vesalius. Although he arrived only four days after the injury, it was clear that nothing could save King Henry who died a week later, probably of sepsis. Vesalius performed an autopsy and concluded that serious brain injury could occur even in the absence of an obvious skull fracture so that ended jousting as a royal sport. Now they play polo and, I suspect, perhaps some of the other “sports” described above as well.