

## **Practice Makes Perfect**

**by Grace van Haaster, Haileybury**

### **Middle Division**

Jordan suspected that his NetWatch's alarm going off to wake him up in the morning was probably the thing his daily routine had most in common with other people his age. The similarities stopped there, however. Unlike other 15-year-old boys, he wouldn't hit the snooze button and roll back over to sleep. He didn't have a school uniform glaring at him from across the room, or a bag waiting with its mouth open to be packed. Jordan got out of bed, automatically ignoring his reluctance after months of constant 5am wake-ups, and pressed a button on what passed for his kitchen bench.

There was another difference between him and normal people; he lived in this one room. It was comfortable and had everything he needed, but that was all. In Jordan's life, he didn't need a Gamecast 5.0 or vNeo, even though he could afford to buy both of the leading gaming consoles if he wanted. Or, rather, if he was allowed. But in Jordan's schedule, there was no time for 'fun'. The only games he could play were to enhance his reflexes, and they quickly became repetitive and simple. It was much more entertaining to practise proper games with his team.

A pre-made breakfast dropped out of a chute; as always, Jordan's breakfast was bland and without variety. It was essentially a mixture of the healthiest foods possible, chosen for their vitamins and minerals which would aid his performance. He ate what he needed; no more, no less. But Jordan had to admit that he was never hungry afterwards, and he'd become fitter after starting on this diet. He had nothing to complain about.

As he ate, the bed curled itself up, becoming a sphere in order to save space. The bench itself would slide into the wall once Jordan was finished eating. The first time it had happened, Jordan had jumped in fright, but he had become used to it after his years spent living in this room.

Glancing around the room once more, Jordan's eyes fell upon the one object in the room not provided to him by the CWDI (Committee for World Dodgeball Involvement); a framed image of him and his old friend, Kade. He winced at having left it out in the open; if the Auto-Coaches had seen it, he would have been in unimaginable strife.

Jordan gently picked up the photo and slid it onto the bench; it would be protected from prying eyes inside the wall. His mind was occupied with thoughts of only two years ago, when he'd spent every day riding bikes and stick-

fighting with Kade. Of course, when the Committee discovered Jordan's 'talent' for dodging and throwing, he'd been yanked out of school and slowly cut off from all his outside social ties.

But it had been enjoyable at first. Kade had been allowed into the training sessions, practising his reflexes and throwing balls at targets like the others who had been selected. However, he'd gradually come to less and less of the sessions, eventually only seeing Jordan for short, monthly catch-ups, and even that had now stopped. The last time he'd talked to Kade had been two, six, maybe even nine months ago. All of his time was now focused solely on training for the World Championships.

Jordan had watched old news stories about youth playing sports competitively in the time he'd had for technique research. Many had highlighted ruthless parents who pushed their children 'too far', kids being trained by professional sportspeople at young ages, and youth being injured as a result of their too-tough training. He sneered scornfully, absent-mindedly rubbing one of his many bruises, remembering the weak arguments. Ruthless parents? Try not seeing *your* parents for half a year. Kids too young? Seven-year-old children are old enough, try watching a 4-year-old being put into an advanced soccer program just because they can kick a ball straight. A couple of scratches making sport too dangerous? Jordan walked out of the training arena with swelling bruises the colour of a cloudy midnight sky every day, and he was fine! The people who authored those articles in the 2010's and 2020's had no idea what 'sport' meant.

He left the room, not bothering to lock it as the Committee workers would after the routine check. The patters of other teenagers' footsteps echoed around the plain hotel, all of them heading to the same place he was; the training ground. Jordan didn't know them very well. That was probably a given, though, seeing as they had barely any contact with each other or anyone else, nor any time to get to know each other.

Unlike the hallways of a school, these corridors weren't bustling with life, nor was there a steady background drone of chatter that became louder as you walked further into the midst of the students. Nobody stood in groups, facing the world together. In here, everyone was out for themselves. There was no such thing as friends or enemies, just teammates on the playing field and acquaintances in the hotel.

The CWDI were like gods here; they could give you advantages or disadvantages, promote you or throw you out. They decided who was weak and who was a survivor. It was up to you which one you tried to be: weakness would

get you thrown out, but that allowed you to return to normal life; strength might get you on the Committee's good side and possibly even better food. Both came with risk, but they were the only options.

Jordan had quickly decided to be a survivor. He wanted to make the final team. He'd made this decision and he would stick to it. But despite his resolve, he'd still had misgivings. Realising his thoughts were taking him down a dangerous track, Jordan gritted his teeth and banished them to the back of his mind once more. Focus without distraction was key to winning this game.

Arriving at the training arena, he joined his team and waited with them for everyone to arrive. The arena was as foreboding as its name suggested, its tall, arched roof and empty, unused stands emanating grandeur and barely withheld menace, reminding Jordan of a leopard watching prey. But the arena wasn't the leopard here; the Auto-Coaches were, and his team's waiting silently, as always. "Warm up," it ordered them once all the team members had arrived. It was the first thing Jordan had heard anyone say all day. But, of course, the Auto-Coach wasn't a person; the words had been pre-programmed and spat out through speakers. Thus, it was the same sentence as always, said with the same robotic hum as always, and they all jogged off around the arena as they always did.

When they returned, they knew what they were doing next, but still waited for the Auto-Coach to give the order. "Stretch," it said, its voice mechanical despite its creators' attempt at a human voice. Jordan went through the routine without fully focusing on it, instead priming his mind for the beating they were about to receive. It was Tuesday. Tuesday meant stamina training, which in turn meant jogging continuous laps while the Auto-Coach hurled balls at them. Well, more like *shot*. These were specially fitted with a targeting system that allowed for higher throwing accuracy. Sometimes, Jordan wondered what would happen if an Auto-Coach tried to shoot one of the normal balls. Often, imagining this scene was the only thing that would get him through the worst days.

But after months of this gruelling training, he was having to rely less and less on these techniques. He was becoming used to being pushed beyond what he'd thought was physically possible for him, growing stronger and more resistant to what he'd found agonising in his first months here. Jordan and his team went through the training session without complaint, their physical strain only hinted to by their sweat and agonised expressions. He studied the others intently, predicting who would be thrown out of the team next. The girl over there, with the red hair—

Ara—she was struggling. And that boy, the quiet one with long black hair whose name nobody knew or remembered, he wouldn't be here for long either. Jordan would find out if he was right at the end of the week.

He frowned, realising how much he'd changed since joining the program. The old Jordan wouldn't have analysed and criticised other people; he'd have gone up to them and helped them. This training was changing him. But maybe it was for the better. After all, someone with a different mindset wouldn't have been able to go up against the strongest and fastest dodgeballers in the world. They would have backed down as soon as the training got tough. Jordan was going to make the team, he knew it. He deserved it. And no matter the cost, social, mental, physical or otherwise, it would be worth it.