

Surviving with your wits intact

Football, freshly squeezed juice and a well-thumbed Playstation. Our correspondent details the essentials for getting through August

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Friday July 25 2003, 1.00am BST,
The Times

HISTORICALLY, survival guides are bastions for lazy thinking, shoddy writing and bad comedy. Articles about Edinburgh in particular abound with advice revolving largely around deep-fried foodstuffs, the hills, the penny black and everything else that is pretty much utterly irrelevant. I obviously consider myself way above such tawdry concerns of the hack and therefore will clumsily attempt to do a little more than telling you to avoid street theatre, of which I enjoy a certain proportion, and criticising students handing out flyers, which I think is a reasonable and vital part of the process of selling a show.

My perennial Edinburgh flatmate, John Oliver, and I have a plan to get us through this year's festival unscathed. In previous years our main mode of escape has been PlayStation football. Controlling tiny sporting men into the early hours is the finest way to end any day. Particularly a day that has been dominated by reading reviews, avoiding people, sitting on the lavatory and performing. It becomes tricky only when the tiny sporting men cease to do your bidding and light begins to spill through the curtains, sparking a frantic rush to get into bed before the impending dawn can go full blown.

In both 2001 and 2002 computer football was augmented with supporting struts of insular pleasure. Two years ago when I was in the throes of my first solo Edinburgh show and John was enjoying the relatively stress and inspiration-free environment of a package show, we found comfort in lists. In sticking big sheets of paper and back-to-front posters on the walls of our lurid sitting room — as much to hide the shocking pink that lay beneath as to form a canvas. However, once the paper was fixed in place we wrote lists. The lists could be anything: "People we hate", "Comedians who are s****", "People who need to shut up". There was not a massive amount of generosity of spirit emanating from these tallies. It really helped us, though.

Not much is more comforting than getting in after a particularly pointless exercise in crowd control, picking up a felt tip and writing "the audience" under the heading "People who need to shut up", making your way to the PlayStation, switching it on, picking up a controller and settling in.

Last year John and I were both performing solo shows. John had left the nursery pool of the Comedy Zone and was finding the wide open waters of solo performing a little choppy. I, of course, had a bigger boat than John, a boat I wasn't sure I wanted to be in and a boat whose course I seemed unable to control. The point being that we were s****ing a lot. An awful lot. Once more the PlayStation was unpacked and controllers passed out. Once more the tiny sprinting footballers calmed us.

Last year, however, rather than writing lists, we made juice. Watermelon, pineapple, apple, orange, strawberry, any combination you can think of. Getting home after a performance that has made you forget why you ever thought your show was remotely watchable is made so much easier when waiting in the fridge is watermelon and strawberry juice less than three hours old. After pouring a glass and picking up a controller you feel that you may actually be the future of comedy once more.

Sport in general is important to our experience of Edinburgh. Aerobic (flying rings), mini-golf and always, like a calming hand on your shoulder, football. Kick-about matches on the meadows are often hastily convened on days when there is slightly more blue than cloud. People surprise you in these makeshift games, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Generally people are

pleasantly surprised by my quick feet and are often let down by John failing to deliver on his flashes of early promise. David O'Doherty, a man with a head seemingly too large for his body, is a phenomenal player, while Danny Bhoj, with a normally proportioned head to torso ratio, has a game that seemingly consists only of pace and ineffective touches of flair. Russell Howard, a great new comedian, is the most naturally gifted footballer I've seen but has a propensity to be distracted by food, while Andy Zaltzman remains stoic and determinedly old-fashioned as a defender.

For the past two years John and I have employed a policy of avoidance (people, parties, agents) and indulgence (computer football, real football, waffles) and it has served us well. This year, however, we are ready for Edinburgh. Not ready in the sense of having a finished show. Not ready in the sense of psychologically prepared for the brief and utterly disproportionate amount of media coverage. But ready in the sense of having tracked down and bought every film we can think of that contains slow-motion sporting triumph over adversity, ideally backed by some manner of stirring music. Edinburgh cannot hurt us now. Negative reviews cannot upset us. Low audience numbers will cause us no concern. Walk-outs will be welcomed. All because the boys in *Escape to Victory* put up with more than we can ever imagine.

It began last year with the stirring *Remember the Titans* (a film of such perfection that John momentarily forgot about his impending financial loss) and is continued this year with the futile courage of *Tin Cup*, the once-hip jive talk of *White Men Can't Jump*, the documentaries *When We Were Kings* and *Hoop Dreams*, both ready to lift us from the depths to the very pinnacle of human courage. *Field of Dreams*, *Chariots of Fire*, *Rocky*, they are all coming to our aid. Like half-forgotten friends returning in the final reel to save the heroes from insurmountable odds. You play sporting footage in slow motion, put music behind it that makes you shiver, and you have a film I will pay money to own.

This then is the plan: a juicer, a PlayStation, a football, waffles and paninis, little men doing as they are told, a glass full of juice and a scene of sporting courage ready in the DVD player. Come to me now, Edinburgh, and bring your slings and arrows, your potshots, your misguided ambition and your insularity. Bring it all and do your worst for I am prepared. I am ready.

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