

SLEAZY
DOES IT

game ON

We are shouting over the music. "So, what do you know about the Game?" "Not much," says the man we'll call Rick. "Just the basics. I'm here to learn." Unmoving, gazing down at me — he is much taller, and annoyingly handsome — he says: "You'll have to speak up, I can't hear you." As I lean in close, preparing to raise my voice, I realise I've been had.

Rick has just given a Demonstration of Higher Value, or DHV as it's known in Game lingo. This means that by making me lean towards him rather than vice versa, Rick has implied (or so he supposes) that I am inferior to him. In the world of the Game, he is one step closer to "closing", should he want to. He flashes a rare smile through devastating stubble, and might as well say "gotcha". I feel like slapping him.

Rick is one of five "students" taking part in a boot camp for ➡➡➡

The Game was an instruction manual for the sexually desperate, offering 'pick-up artists' a pseudo-scientific approach to bedding HBs (hot babes). Now seduction schools have sprung up in its wake. Amy Turner joins one group determined to get lucky. Photographs by Muir Vidler



Playing the field: in
West End club, two 'master
pick-up artists', Rob King
and Beckster (both facing
the camera), instruct
students on how to
approach their quarry



pick-up artists (PUAs). Each has paid £487 to spend the weekend tramping the streets of central London by day, and grooving and schmoozing in sticky, sweaty clubs by night, while learning and honing the techniques of the Game. They are taught by master pick-up artists (MPUAs), skilled in the art of seduction. In this predatory world, they're keen on abbreviations: non-Gamers are AFCs — average frustrated chumps. ASD is "anti-slut defence", female techniques to avoid initiating sex; to stop them seeming slutty to their friends, or to themselves. LMR stands for last-minute resistance — you might get as far as a kiss, but she won't let you undo her bra, say. FMAC is the fundamental rubric underpinning the Game: find, meet, attract, close.

The Game is not actually a game, per se. It's more a strategy for approaching women and luring them into bed. For many, it becomes a lifestyle. It all began with Neil Strauss's bestselling autobiographical book, *The Game*, published in 2005. Strauss, a geeky, shy journalist living in LA, longed to be able to meet and talk to women but found them intimidating. After a friend introduced him to the covert world of PUAs, Strauss sought advice from the best, found it worked, and wrote about his exploits.

The Game is based on a pseudo-scientific combination of social conditioning, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), blatant cockiness and old-fashioned misogyny. Since Strauss's book, the so-called "seduction community" has gathered an ever-swelling following, and pick-up schools have sprung up all over Britain. Many girls will recognise some of the favourite canned PUA lines: "What's best, being wanted, or being needed?" is a popular opener. Typical techniques include "punishing" a woman for spurning your advances, by turning your back on her, or offering a gentle insult — "your smile is crooked"; canned openers to win a girl's attention; performing psychological games — "the best-friends test", or palm readings. Strauss described personally Gaming Britney Spears during a flagging interview for *Rolling Stone* magazine. After pulling a few "simple, psychological gambits" on her such as the number-guessing game (people nearly always think of seven), the grumpy Spears "was looking at me entirely differently now. I was someone she could learn from, someone who offered value". "This is the best interview of my life," Spears says, and gives Strauss her mobile number. He never calls.

Those who "do" the Game swear by its efficacy, but still relatively few people know about it. The film rights were recently bought by MGM, and the film is being scripted by David Levien and Brian Koppelman, writers of the hit frat-appeal movies *Rounders* and *The Girlfriend Experience*. Is the Game about to go mainstream? "The thing



Here comes the science bit: one of the instructors, Jordan, prepares the young hopefuls for the 'day game' — chatting up women in broad daylight. 'Pupils have paid £487 each for this 'weekend boot camp'

is," says Alex, a photographer friend who first mentioned the Game to me a year ago. "it does work. I don't do it all the time but it's good to have Game strategies to fall back on." I've known Alex for years and he's never had any trouble getting girlfriends, even before he started doing the Game. "It's something extra in your repertoire that makes you stand out."

The boot camp is run by "Kingy", aka Rob King, 28, director of the company PUA Method. Rob is a former computer-programmer, but gave up his day job a year ago to teach PUA full-time, and business is booming. "Look at it this way: I do a boot camp almost every weekend for up to six people, who pay £487 each. If you want the seven-day, one-to-one residential course that's

£3,597, and I'm fully booked at the moment."

We meet on Friday night by the Eros statue at Piccadilly Circus, hilariously. The five students wear their going-out best: shirts, Topman blazers, leather jackets, over-gelled quiffs. They are all in their twenties. We head to a bar, the Piccadilly Institute, which is dead in the early-evening no-man's land between the end of the working week and the start of the weekend's hedonism. Jon is 31, with short-cropped hair, ear piercings, a grey printed T-shirt, jeans and a leather wrist cuff. He's been gaming for about two years. At school he was geeky and shy, bullied for having buck teeth, and scared of girls. "This carried on into my twenties. I was deeply unhappy. Then my dad died and I took a good look inside myself and

realised the change had to come from within me."

The students are hanging on Rob's every word: "What women like to talk about is emotion," he shouts. They nod hungrily, writing it down. "Get them talking about themselves, show them you're interested in more than their looks. If they touch their hair, that's an IOI [indicator of interest]. I don't tend to kiss girls in nightclubs, I find it tacky. If you want to, that's up to you. Here's a good way to close a phone number: 'You're the coolest girl I've met all night.' This shows you're meeting other girls too. You follow it up with, 'How best to get in touch with you?'"

The boys can achieve three types of result, or "close": a number close (to call and arrange a date later), a kiss close, and full close, which is sex. One of the ways to get results, Rob explains, is by teasing the girl, thereby Demonstrating Higher Value. In Strauss's book, this is rather nastily called "negging": a hinted insult, such as telling her she has lipstick on her teeth. This is intended to knock the woman's confidence, encouraging her to earn back your interest, allowing you to seduce her.

Rob gives them some canned "teases" — he doesn't believe in negs, he says later. "Why would you want to make a girl less confident?" He tells them to practise a tease on me. "I like your hair, is it a wig?" asks Ed, a good-humoured lad with an indie-band look and northern accent. Another, Matt, says: "I like your style. You remind me of my grandmother." They stare from me to Rob expectantly.

The boys disperse. Rick is by far the handsomest, and confident to the point of arrogance. He doesn't want his real name mentioned because his father is a wealthy businessman and well known in his field. All of the students' names have been changed, at their request. Next to Rick, in fact next to anyone, the others seem nervous and nerdy. Why is Rick here, I wonder? "Basically, these guys [he indicates Rob, Jon and another MPUA coach, Jermaine, who has just arrived] could pick up any woman in any room. That's where I want to get to. I want to be able to walk up to the most beautiful supermodel and know I can take her home." Jon comes over and suggests Rick talks to a nearby table of girls. Rick says there's no point, as he doesn't find them attractive. Jon tells him

it's worth it, for practice. Rick "isolates" and talks to two of the girls, gets them laughing, teases them a bit, then closes one of their numbers. As he gets up to leave, the girl looks ecstatic. Rick walks away looking bored. Will he call her? "Definitely not," he says.

Later, out in the neon-lit dark, we head to Leicester Square and stand outside Burger King. Throngs of tourists wander idly past, drunken stags and hens stumble about, groups of skin-tight, slapped-up girls cat-call, incongruent suits hurry in-between. In the midst, the group looks shifty. Rob gathers the students round: "We're going to do a series of exercises to get you warmed up," he says. "I want you to find a group

things in public they wouldn't normally do.

The next few exercises involve asking the time while visibly holding your watch or phone, asking the time without making any eye contact, then asking a girl to join you for coffee, but refusing to go if she accepts. While the boys are off finding their targets, Rob and Jon begin gaming — also known as "sarging" — for themselves. It is fascinating to watch the masters at work. Jon strikes first, with a pair of pretty social workers on their way to post-work drinks. He walks up to them and asks: "Excuse me, do you know where London is?" They pause warily, then dissolve into giggles.

Next morning we meet at Green Park Tube.

Everyone's worse for wear and we're a man down. Hollyoaks Pete achieved a full close after the club last night and has cried off, presumably feeling he'd got his £487-worth. Handsome Rick got two kiss closes, northern Ed too. "I could have gone all the way," he says. "But I decided it wasn't right. She was a bit of a Barbie type. So far from the type of girl I'd normally go for." Scissorhands and Squaddie didn't manage much, but remain optimistic.

It's classroom time. We head to a plush rented office nearby. Jordan, another MPUA, says he was once suicidally depressed by his lack of luck with women. The Game changed his life by giving him confidence. "Don't be put off if you approach a girl and she appears cold," he says. "The amount of times I've approached HBs ('Hot Babes') and there's been no

attraction — after 10 minutes of talking they're all over me." Rob, who is leading the seminar, says: "This is particularly true of Eastern European women. My girlfriend is Slovakian and I met her on the bus. She looked sad and she was the prettiest girl on the bus. I thought, this'll be fun, so I sat next to her and just started talking. She didn't look at me once — no reaction at all, just kept staring out of the window. I didn't mind, I actually thought it was quite cute. And it meant that if she was like that with me she'd be like that to other guys as well, which showed she was good girlfriend material. Eventually she laughed at something I said, and I got her number."

Rob and his girlfriend, Monika, live together in London. They've been together a year. ➔



'The thing is,' says Alex, a photographer friend, 'it does work. It makes you stand out. But I'm not sure it's good to take it to extremes'

of girls and ask for the time. Last one back gets a forfeit, and they get progressively worse."

The boys head off, bemused and wary. Pete, 23, is first back. "That was quite easy," he beams. Pete is Hollyoaks handsome in a tight black T-shirt. He's a beginner. He says he keeps getting stuck in the "friend zone" (this is when all the girls you meet want you as a buddy, not a bedfellow), and wants to be more confident. Matt — who wears brand-new nightclub-ready black shoes and has a hairdo like Edward Scissorhands — is next, and looks pleased with himself. Then northerner Ed, then Rick. Last is Joe, a cripplingly shy 24-year-old South African squaddie. His forfeit is a game of pat-a-cake with Rob, intended, he explains, to get the boys doing

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SHORT
STORY
AWARD



A passion for the best of short fiction unites the judges of The Sunday Times EFG Private Bank Short Story Award 2012. Entrants to the third year of this prestigious award will be competing for a £30,000 prize, the richest reward for a single story in the world, and the attention of a distinguished literary panel. We are proud to announce that the author and broadcaster **Lord (Melvyn) Bragg** returns to the judging team for a second year. Fellow judges include two distinguished short-story writers:

Edna O'Brien, who received critical acclaim for her recent collection, *Saints and Sinners*, and the author/playwright **Hanif Kureishi**, who has written two collections of stories. They are joined by the novelist **Joanna Trollope** and the literary editor of The Sunday Times, **Andrew Holgate**. Many readers will have enjoyed hearing previous selections of our shortlisted stories read online and at events across the country. The actor and short-story devotee **Ian Hart**, who recently read at Latitude in association with WordTheatre and The Sunday Times, is also judging this year. **The winning selection** will be decided under the non-voting chairmanship of **Lord (Matthew) Evans**, former chairman of Faber & Faber and chairman of EFG Private Bank. Judges will look for an outstanding story of 6,000 words or under from a fiction author whose work has been previously published in the United Kingdom or Ireland. From a shortlist of six, the winner will be announced at a dinner at The Sunday Times Oxford Literary Festival 2012. This year, the prize has increased and the five runners-up on the shortlist will each receive £1,000. **Last year, the award was won** by the young American writer Anthony Doerr; on the shortlist were the Booker prize-winner Hilary Mantel, Gerard Woodward, Yiyun Li, Will Cohu and Roshi Fernando. "It's been a pleasure to see the work of dedicated established and emerging writers being valued in this way," says the award director, Cathy Galvin. The deadline for entries is Friday October 28. For an entry form, visit: thesundaytimes.co.uk/shortstoryaward

Top (from top): Melvyn Bragg, Hanif Kureishi, Ian Hart.
Below (from left): Joanna Trollope, Edna O'Brien,
Andrew Holgate, Matthew Evans



Bad romance: as the alcohol flows in Tiger Tiger club near Piccadilly Circus, one student closes in on an unsuspecting group of girls (bottom right)



Monika doesn't mind him sarging girls. "When we're out together we have competitions to see who can pick up first," he says. Doesn't Monika think it's all a bit sinister? "I think it's a good way to improve somebody's life. I like how he teaches them to communicate with women and have fun. Every man who is trying to talk to a woman is a little bit Gaming."

Rob is good-looking, softly spoken and charming in a non-sleazy way. He says he was always unlucky with women and the few who did approach him probably did so "largely thanks to my looks". He got his first "below-average-looking" girlfriend at university; she was Swedish and "didn't speak much English, which probably helped. I had opportunities when I was younger, and I would say my looks contributed to that, but it was never with girls I actually liked. I could never do anything about it. I was always at the mercy of other people".

There is a manipulative edge to the Game, and a nastiness in how it seems to view women as an obstacle to boys' fun. Melinda Tankard Reist, author of the feminist book *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls*, says that if a woman finds out she has been gamed, it could go against the player; "Using deceit and manipulation to trick a woman are hardly the qualities women value in a man."

"A friend of mine realised belatedly that the man she was seeing had been trained in the Game," says Reist. "She told me, 'I was dating a book, not a person.' She says she felt 'crushed' to learn that each date, and little things that happened, corresponded with a page of the book: she could almost chart the relationship by it."

The shocking thing is, it does actually seem to work. I witnessed several PUAs doing the shoe routine: "I love a girl who wears great shoes." At this the girl is supposed to present her shoes. "It shows you've got good taste in underwear," the PUA says. It's astonishing and

depressing how many girls are willing to publicly vouch for the quality of their knickers. "I've always got gorgeous underwear," announces one platinum blonde in cerise stilettos. This is an IOI, just as Beckster promised. The next move is smelling their hair. Gross. I ask one girl, a plump, pretty brunette with massive eyes, did she know she'd just been Gamed? "What's that?" she asks, puzzled, and looks crestfallen when I explain. "I thought he liked me."

Over the course of the weekend, two of the boys had had sex, two had "closed" kisses, and one, the shy squaddie, had been dragged into the girls' loo, presumably with sexual intent. He scarpered, terrified. We chat on the phone afterwards; I feel sorry for him. "I will keep practising, hopefully with time I will get better. I am already getting more confident. I got a phone number on Sunday."

Rob says so much of the Game isn't just about women, it's about inner peace and finding confidence. "Yes, we teach guys how to pick up women, we give them training rules," he says, "but it's much more than that. You can have this whole bravado thing, but if that runs out, it's the end of the line. Real change comes from self-acceptance and loving themselves, that's what we try to teach." Could he teach women, then? "I have done, I've taught three women. It was fairly successful, yeah."

If it were all about confidence and building self-esteem, I'd almost be willing to believe in it. Then, as we're walking down the street, Rob asks me about my boyfriend: "Are you with him for convenience, or do you really keep the passion alive?" It's a line called the Boyfriend Destroyer, and I falter. Had again ■



Experts from PUA Method divulge some of their top 'pulling' tips, at www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/thegame