

## AT AGE 7, MCELHINEY'S A MASTER

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Matthew McElhiney of Bradenton and Jimmy Lyons of Jacksonville battled on the court for more than an hour to decide the Southeast regional racquetball champion last month.

It was 10-10 in a tense third-game tiebreaker when McElhiney drilled a winner to end the match.

That's when Lyons asked McElhiney to step outside.

Uh-oh.

Sports is filled with potentially volatile situations. Was this one of them? Did Lyons hope to settle the score with his fists?

Lyons and McElhiney walked to the edge of the parking lot and stood face-to-face for a moment. Then Lyons stepped toward his rival.

``Tag," he said, ``you're it."

``Awww!," McElhiney groaned, dodging one car, then another in pursuit of Lyons.

McElhiney is seven years old; Lyons is eight. But, believe me, both play a mean game of racquetball.

Matthew begins play in the Junior National Racquetball Championships today in Dallas. He was fifth in the tournament's 8-under division last year. Winning it all this time around is not out of the question. He currently is ranked No. 2 in the nation in 8-under.

McElhiney may be the next racquetball champion in this a town that has built a reputation over the last five years for producing racquetball champions.

Allan Engel currently sits on that throne. Not surprisingly, Engel, 17, who will be a senior at Manatee High School

in the fall, is McElhiney's hero. A four-time national junior champion and the 1990 state open winner, Engel spends several afternoons a week practicing with Matthew.

“I can beat him,” Matthew said of Engel.

Well, sort of.

When McElhiney and Engel play, they play by Matthew's rules, which means he gets as many bounces as necessary to hit the ball before it crosses the service line. It's called “no-bounce” or multi-bounce” in racquetball and it is the rule many 8-under tournaments play by.

Engel is allotted his one bounce.

“I hit the ball as hard as I can and he gets to every shot,” Engel said. “He runs me all over the place. He's got tons and tons of potential.”

Matthew first picked up a racquet at the age of four.

He tagged along with his parents, Ralph and Donna McElhiney, both teachers, during their workouts at a local fitness center.

“It was kinda boring just sitting around the club not doing anything,” Matthew said. So he picked up a nearby racquet.

He played his first tournament at age five and finished fourth that year in the Orange Bowl, which racquetball considers its world championships.

Last time he played his father, who himself is an accomplished player on Florida's adult beach volleyball circuit, Matthew won, 15-5.

The kid can play.

But should he compete?

“As long as he likes it, as long as he's having a good time, then it's all right with me,” says his father. “I don't see him as a future Olympian or anything. That stuff doesn't matter to us. As long as he has people like Allan around him, then I think this is good for him.”

“I don't think anybody is too young to develop a competitive attitude,” Engel said. “Competition teaches you a lot about life, about how to win and how to lose.

“I've been competing since I was nine. I see a lot of myself in him.”

And nothing but good can come of that.

McElhiney, Engel and Cassie Peirce are the three Manatee County representatives playing in Dallas.

Engel, still eligible to play in the 16s, instead has moved up to the 18s, where the tournament champion earns a spot on the men's national team. That translates into a year's worth of all-expenses-paid travel to tournaments around the world.

Caption: Photo/Mikula: Matthew McElhiney, left, sharpens his skills with Cassie Peirce.

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