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# Control Freak: How an injured esports athlete got back into the game

By Imad Khan



AZIZ “Hax” Al-Yami knew that this could be his final tournament, his last chance to prove to the world that he could be the best. He was sitting in a dark room at the Ritz-Carlton in McLean, Virginia on April 3rd, 2016, meditating for the upcoming match. The ballroom was hosting a massive tournament, with a \$13,995 prize pot, and over 1,700 people in attendance, with tens of thousands more tuning in online

His left wrist was covered in scars. Along the pinkie-side were two areas of discoloration; one along the side and one on the underside, parallel to a large blue vein, his median nerve. A final third scar ran between his thumb and index finger. The dark patches of hardened skin were shadows of past incisions that would never fully heal.

The game he plays requires fast hands, needing quick jolts of movement to react to his opponent’s attacks. Al-Yami had always felt some pain, especially after long hours of practice

and competition. But it was at a tournament in Texas a year prior that it culminated into a seizing pain that left him feeling as though his hand would separate from its wrist. He had gone through three surgeries since that initial injury and neither were enough to allow him to play comfortably.

The chances for a fulltime professional career were over for Al-Yami. The pain in his left hand was too great to practice for long stints, let alone play professionally with the backing of brands and sponsors. But the idea of fizzling out like Derek Rose or Brandon Roy, athletes before him with amazing promise that had their careers cut short due to an early injury, was not something Al-Yami wanted. He didn't want to fade into obscurity with fans debating what could have been. He had enough in him for one more tournament, and Pound 2016 was it.

Al-Yami could hear his name being called. He was up against a top player from NorCal. As he made his way to the stage, those in the crowd were chatting, wondering if Al-Yami was still the same player he once was. Al-Yami heard none of it. His mind was focused on the next match. He didn't care about making a grand show for the audience, he was too busy mapping out the upcoming round. For Al-Yami, play that's less than perfect is unsatisfactory. He knew what he had to do, and was considering each option his opponent would throw at him, thinking of ways to respond in the most optimal manner.

On stage, there was an old and chunky CRT television in front of him. The TV's screen bulged out slightly, and the audience member taking video on their phone could see the flutter of the screen being juxtaposed against the framerate that it was being filmed at. Al-Yami took the chair to the right and sat down. He unraveled his GameCube controller, the input device used to interact with the video game Al-Yami has dedicated his life to perfecting. His opponent did just as him. The two plugged in their controllers into the Nintendo GameCube beside the television and the match began.

KIDS have new athletic idols. In the past while it might have been professional athletes like Michael Jordan or Derek Jeter, kids now look up to professional gamers like Lee "Faker" Sang-hyeok and Jordan "n0thing" Gilbert. While the latter two, who prefer to go by their gamer tags, aren't athletes in the traditional sense, they are treated as such. This is the world of esports, or competitive video gaming, a relatively new form of competition and entertainment that has teams of video game players competing at the very highest levels for world championship status. Both Sang-hyeok and Gilbert are sponsored by major esports teams with brands like HTC, Intel, New Balance, and Red Bull backing them, have millions of fans around the world, and have earned millions throughout their careers.

According to Newzoo, a video game industry marketing and analyst firm, the esports industry will be worth \$1.5 billion by 2020. It's probably why the Kraft family (New England Patriots) will be investing \$20 million dollars into Overwatch League, why the Golden State Warriors have bought into the North American League of Legends Championship Series for \$13 million, and why the Philadelphia 76ers purchased Team Dignitas and Apex for an undisclosed amount. The New York Yankees have also partnered with Echo Fox, a team owned by three-time NBA champion Rick Fox. While Echo Fox wasn't willing to go on the record with the amount the Yankees invested, it was definitely more than \$1 million.

Compared to traditional sports, the esports footprint is small. But given that the average age of the esports fan is 26, and largely male, compared to 28 of traditional sports, “tap[ping] into this increasingly elusive demographic is one brands find hard to resist,” according to Nielsen, a global performance management company.

It’s why traditional sports teams are investing so heavily. The average baseball fan is currently in their mid-fifties, but if the Yankees can carve out a stake in esports, it will not only widen its portfolio of brands, but will tap into a demographic it hasn’t been able to attract.

And the demographic is more than 26 and male; it’s also international. Esports fans span across the globe with strong scenes in South Korea, China, and Brazil. Other markets are quickly developing like Japan, India, and Mexico. And just like in club soccer, a South Korean player can play for an American team expanding a brand’s reach. Having one team or brand have worldwide fans, and not be geographically limited, is one that sports teams and brands find highly compelling.



At an early age, Al-Yami showed great promise. He was 11 when he attended his first “Super Smash Bros. Melee” tournament. It was at the Pokémon Center, now Nintendo New York, at Rockefeller Center. He had gone there initially to compete in Pokémon trading card game tournaments, but started gravitating towards the suite of televisions and Nintendo GameCube’s, with kids crowded around and competing in “Melee.” In his first tournament, Al-Yami was beaten handedly. But there he made friends, and soon found himself going to the Pokémon Center often after school to play.

"My mom was always there. She didn't let me go to tournaments by myself for about a year," Al-Yami said.

The friends that he made at the Pokémon Center told him of events at local gaming and card shops and venues that would host more serious tournaments with buy-ins and the chance to win some prize money.

"I remember that year there was a really young kid with a bowl haircut going to tournaments," D'Ron "D1" Maingrette, a Smash Bros. commentator, said. Maingrette met Al-Yami at the age of 12 in 2005, and was impressed by Al-Yami's play at such a young age. Maingrette was 20 at the time.

"The first time I played him in a Fox vs Falco match, I'll never forget how crisp his combos were with Falco. Like, he literally down-aired shined me across the stage perfectly with Falco. I was so confused—like, what in the world is happening here?" Maingrette said.

Doing something like this requires immense precision and timing. "Melee" runs at 60 frames-per-second, meaning the image of the game refreshes on the screen 60 times in one second. Pulling this off, or a similar technique like a double-shine into wavedash requires Al-Yami to press buttons at 1/60, 7/60, 10/60, 18/60, and 30/60 of a second. Over the years Al-Yami got better at these types of advanced techniques and would practice until he could pull it off over 90 percent of the time.

But Al-Yami's mother, a banker, and his father, a journalist for the United Nations, were wary of Al-Yami staying out late at "Melee" tournaments, especially considering his age.

"People like me, DJ, and Alucard would have to take the subway to take him all the way to his house, then [we would] go home, if it was like 2 a.m.," Evan "PB&J" Holland, owner of crew and streaming channel Smash Studios, said.

The guys around Al-Yami didn't care that he was so much younger than them. They respected his talent as a player. While Al-Yami was not a savant, he was incredibly dedicated and would be highly competitive in tournament.

"I don't think I believe in the term 'prodigy,' said Al-Yami. "I think all a prodigy is is someone who knew the formula for success at a young age." Still, Maingrette, Holland, and the rest of his crew would escort him home to appease his parents without hesitation. His dedication to the game made him deserving of the extra effort.

THE average esports fan might be in their mid-twenties, but the players they're cheering on tend to be a lot younger. That's because of the fast reflexes required in games like "Counter-Strike: Global Offensive," a team-based first-person shooter where headshots must become millisecond knee-jerk reactions, tend to favor younger players with more plastic minds.

As players work their way up the online leaderboards, it's not uncommon for many to reach the

heights of a competitive game by the time they turn 16. It's then that teams will start reaching out to players, and if two teams are interested in the same player, a bidding war can occur. Salaries can start at \$60,000, with options for tournament winnings, sponsorship reimbursements, and revenue from streaming online for their fans on sites like Twitch.tv.

It's here that a player will usually drop out of high school, move out to California where many of these teams are based, and live with their teammates to start scrimmaging.

But the life of a professional gamer is not sitting in front of a television with a controller in their hand while downing potato chips. Players that play team-based games like "League of Legends," "DotA," or "CS:GO," opt to live in a large house, usually in Los Angeles, with the rest of their teammates. There, they will live, interact, and scrimmage together in preparation for upcoming tournaments. Teams will have a player manager that will ensure players are getting enough sleep and exercise as well as eating properly. This is all to ensure that all their focus is on practice.

These games are tactical and require players to wear headsets for constant communication. And the better the team chemistry, the better they'll perform.

Games like "Street Fighter" or "Super Smash Bros." are more akin to boxing or MMA. These are individual players going at it one-on-one. In this case, it's more common to see individual brands like Red Bull or headphone maker HyperX sponsor players individually. And it's in many of these cases, while a certain amount of money does come in from sponsors, a good portion of their living comes from tournament winnings.

It's hard to pinpoint an average for how much a fighting game player makes. Like boxing, a game like "Street Fighter" can have one tournament dole out over \$200,000 to the overall winner. These generous prizes are due largely in part to strong support from the game's publisher, Capcom, and the main hardware sponsor, PlayStation. But a game like "Super Smash Bros." lacks the same level of sponsorship and publisher endorsement. In this case, winnings are largely dictated by tournament attendance. If a tournament is attended by 1,000 competitors at \$20 per entry, the winnings will be proportionally divided between the top-8 finalists.

That's not to say there isn't good money in a game like "Super Smash Bros.," it's just that only the absolute best can make a comfortable living.

It was in 2014, at the age of 20, that Al-Yami's left hand completely fell apart.

"I had this freak accident in this guy's house in Texas," Al-Yami said. It was while trying to perform a waveshine, a highly technical move that requires the player to quickly move his thumb in a diagonal sweeping motion, that had his wrist seizing in pain.

"The way that I jerked my wrist, I felt like this explosion in my wrist, and I just knew that something wasn't right," Al-Yami said. Al-Yami walked over to the nearest CVS to buy a splint. "My hand felt like it was going to fall off. It didn't feel stable. I actually had to hold my hand in my other hand," Al-Yami said.

At this point in his career, Al-Yami was ranked sixth in the world, and at the cusp of breaking into “god” status. In the “Super Smash Bros. Melee” scene, the top players have been referred to as the five gods. The hyperbolic title was given to these players as they would only lose to each other. It was incredibly rare for a player ranked sixth and above to overcome any of the five gods.



Upon returning to New York, the MRI revealed that Al-Yami’s pisiform, a small pea-sized bone in the wrist, had developed arthritis and that he had acute basal thumb arthritis as well. After a surgery in March of 2015 to remove his pisiform and a subsequent one a few months later, the pain was still there.

Becoming frustrated by the lack of progress, Al-Yami opted to find a different surgeon. A third surgery commenced in December of 2015 to repair the extensor carpi ulnaris (ECU). It was there that the full extent of Al-Yami’s wrist damage came into focus.

It revealed a small tear in the ECU tendon, his TFCC (triangular fibrocartilage) cartilage pad was damaged, and the FCU (flexor carpi ulnaris) tendon was fused with scar tissue and calcification from the initial pisiform injury.

There was no guarantee that going in to repair any of the aforementioned problems would result in any permanent fix. All of his issues could quickly flare back up, making any surgery moot.

Al-Yami was still able to play, but not for long stretches. He would have to rest for days at a time

for a good day of play. There was a burning sensation around his FCU tendon. He would feel slight pain from typing on a keyboard, but lifting anything even slightly heavy would cause excruciating pain. Any sort of flexion that activated that tendon would cause pain and it was becoming increasingly clear that Al-Yami needed another surgery, not to play “Melee,” but to live a pain-free life.

Al-Yami needed to find a doctor that was willing to remove his FCU tendon.

PIERRE de Coubertin announced on a winter evening in 1892 Paris that the Olympic Games would be reestablished, reviving the ancient series of games, the last of which took place an estimated 1,624 years prior.

If 1892 Paris was the birth of the modern Olympics, 2024 Paris might be the genesis of a new sport, one on digital battlefields with keyboards and mice being used as sporting mediums instead of javelins and throwing discs. The Paris bid committee has been in talks with the International Olympic Committee to allow video games to be official medal sports at the 2024 games.

While it might go against the idea of sport, it’s not outside of the bounds of the IOC’s mission statement. It states that the goal of the Olympic movement is to build a more peaceful world by educating youth through sport minus discrimination, “in a spirit of friendship, solidarity, and fair play.”

The IOC steers clear of defining what is and what isn’t a sport, which has allowed the committee to open up the games to sports like curling in 1924 and table tennis in 1988.

And the move to esports makes sense. Viewership for the 2016 Olympic games in Rio de Janeiro saw a 28 percent decline in viewership when compared to London’s 2012 opening ceremony.

In 2016 esports viewership was estimated to be at 292 million. By 2019, it’s estimated that viewership will increase to 427 million. At the "League of Legends" World Finals held at The Birds Nest in Beijing, unique viewership topped out at 60 million, a 39 percent increase from 2016.

It makes sense, considering "League of Legends" has over 100,000,000 active players, more than 1 percent of the global population. It doesn’t mean that all esports will be allowed into the games. One of the most popular games, "Counter-Strike: Global Offensive," is a team-based first-person shooter. In it, players use military style weapons to shoot their opponents and rack up kills.

“We want to promote non-discrimination, non-violence, and peace among people. This doesn’t match with video games, which are about violence, explosions, and killing. And there we have to draw a clear line,” Thomas Bach, president of the IOC, said in an interview with the South China Morning Post.

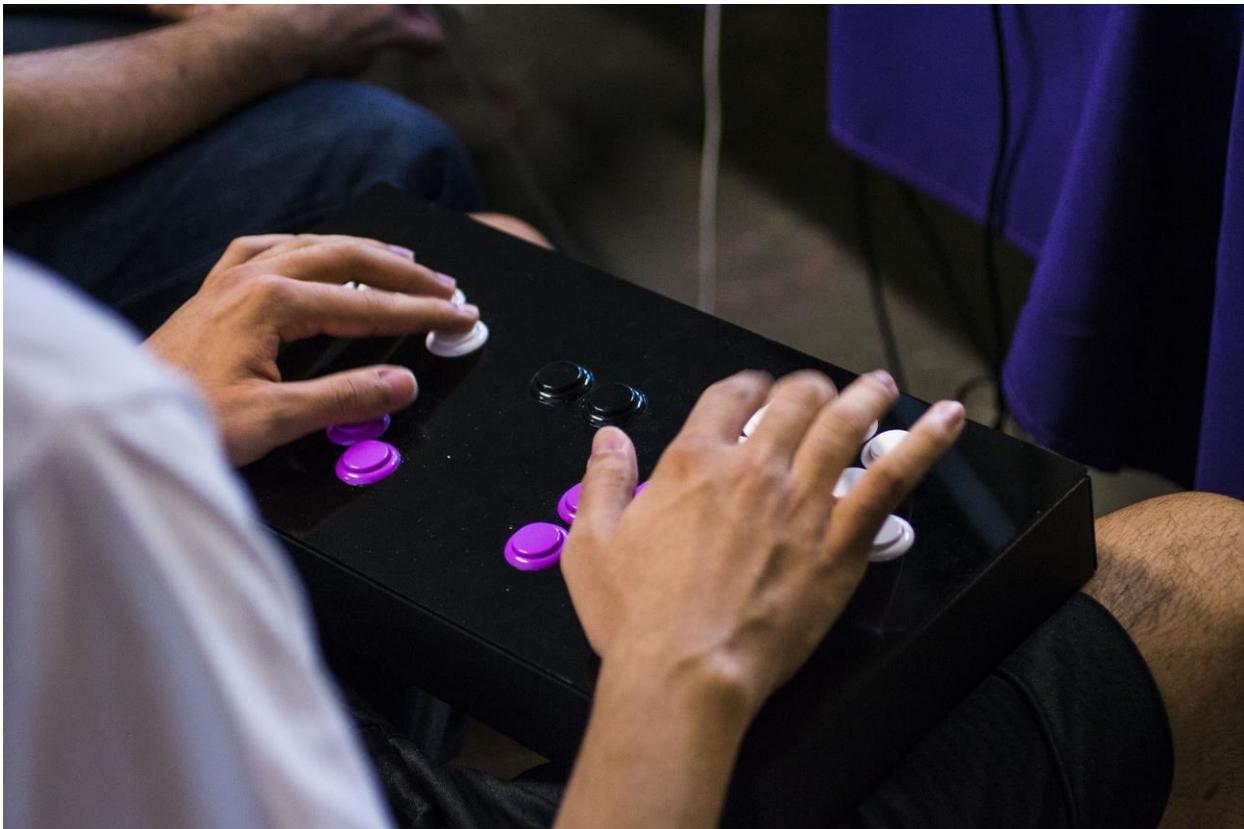
Depending on how violence is interpreted, it could mean that “League of Legends,” “DotA” or

“Overwatch” would not be allowed, as all games include some varying degree of animated cartoon violence.

Even fighting games like “Street Fighter,” “Mortal Kombat,” or “Super Smash Bros.” would be barred if violence was interpreted so liberally.

That would mean the only games that would be allowed at the Olympic games would be those based on traditional sports. Games like “FIFA,” “Madden,” or “NBA2K” would be the safest option for the IOC. But it would also hinder its viewership potential. None of the traditional sports video games have ever broken into the top-10 on the video game streaming website, Twitch.

If done incorrectly, the IOC’s esports aspirations will need to be reeled in.



Dr. Edelstein, the surgeon who performed Al-Yami’s third surgery, outright said no. He was unwilling to perform a procedure to remove Al-Yami’s FCU tendon, one considered vital for wrist flexion.

Undeterred, Al-Yami started going down the list of orthopedic surgeons available under his insurance plan. He faxed out letters detailing his situation and what he wanted done, and each doctor either refused or never replied. He ended up contacting over 100 surgeons in what was becoming an increasingly desperate attempt.

“What I learned is all these doctors think the same: they're almost like clones of each other,” Al-Yami said. Al-Yami felt that each doctor was giving him the same response and not looking into his specific needs. Al-Yami was willing to sacrifice a certain level of wrist movement; all he needed was the pain to subside so that he could hold a GameCube controller and compete.

With all the doctors in the New York and New Jersey area within his insurance plan exhausted, Al-Yami started contacting doctors not covered by his insurance, some as far away as the mid-west. In his meandering around the internet, he found a video of Dr. Ratliff, a top-rated surgeon out in Clifton, New Jersey. He copy-and-pasted the same letter he had been sending to every other surgeon, and to his surprise, Dr. Ratliff replied a day later. After their first meeting, Dr. Ratliff agreed to perform the surgery.

“I think him being so well informed on what was going on with his hand and wrist and forearm,” was, according to Dr. Ratliff, the main reason he decided to move forward with the surgery.

During a pre-operation appointment in December of 2016, Al-Yami pulled out a GameCube controller for Dr. Ratliff to see. Al-Yami demonstrated some of the techniques he would need to perform at a competitive level.

Dr. Ratliff told him that he would perform the surgery, but that there was no way he could ever play “Melee” again.

AL-YAMI never saw himself becoming a professional Melee player. While he was in high school, esports was not what it is now, and the idea of a professional gamer was a foreign concept.

“I was planning on playing Poker for a living. For a few years I played a lot of Poker online. Obviously, it wasn't legal for me to play in real life or online, so I played online under an alias. I was pretty damn good. That was my income in high school. That, and I would buy and sell expensive sneakers,” Al-Yami said.

Al-Yami’s father, being of Saudi Arabian decent, believed in a more traditional career path. He wanted his only child to go school, get into a good college, and land a decent job. But Al-Yami was more interested in video games than school. He found that video games could impart better critical thinking skills than whatever assignments his teachers claimed would do the same.

“It's all bullshit. You don't learn anything in high school. It doesn't matter where you go. You're better off learning on the internet or something,” Al-Yami said.

Al-Yami graduated from the prestigious Bronx High School of Science in 2012, but he did not enjoy his time there.

Al-Yami knew that college wasn't for him, but at the behest of his father, he applied to Baruch College.

“I went to college for one class and fell asleep,” Al-Yami said.

The only thing he was passionate about was Melee. The plan was to play Poker professionally as a means of supporting his “Melee” hobby.

But as esports continued to gain more popularity, and top “Melee” players were being picked up by major esports teams, being given livable salaries, health, and travel expenses, Al-Yami was in a position to become an attractive hire. Of course, his plans were later hindered by his deteriorating wrist. And as Al-Yami was leaving that appointment with Dr. Ratliff, he knew that his chances for a “Melee” career were over.

It was the first time in a long time Al-Yami remembers crying. But in that grief, it struck him. He recalled at Evolution 2016 earlier that summer, one of the largest fighting game tournaments of the year, he had met Dustin Huffer, a co-owner of Hit Box, a fight stick manufacturer. Huffer’s team were in the process of designing the Smash Box, a controller that flattened out all the buttons on a GameCube controller as if it were a keyboard.

Al-Yami emailed Huffer asking for a prototype controller, and Huffer quickly obliged. Having a player with Al-Yami’s popularity within the Smash community would be a great boon to his new controller.

Al-Yami had found the means to his salvation.

Al-Yami presented the Smash Box to Dr. Ratliff. The flat design allowed Al-Yami to use all of his fingers. There wasn’t a joystick that required his thumb to slide from left to right. All movements were reduced to quick button taps.

Dr. Ratliff felt the controller could work for Al-Yami and gave him the approval to start practicing with the controller.

“For somebody who's trying to get somebody back to being able to do what they want to do, that's the most exciting thing. And if he's that motivated, it's fun to try to help him achieve that,” Dr. Ratliff said.

In many ways Dr. Ratliff admires Al-Yami’s tenacity and will to compete, even if it is in video games. “I think that someone's passion for a game, or anything else, is a beautiful thing and pursuit of being the best at something is an ideal that I can relate to,” Dr. Ratliff said. “I am not a competitive gamer but I have competed in various things my whole life so I understand the motivation.”

Dr. Ratliff played soccer and basketball growing up, but transitioned over to track. In medical school, he ran the New York marathon twice and unofficially ran the Boston marathon twice as well. While the 2011 Pittsburgh Marathon was the last marathon he competed in, he did run the Vancouver half-marathon in May and the Brooklyn half-marathon in October.

"I like competition and I like trying to make myself better and compete against myself," Dr. Ratliff said.

Dr. Ratliff graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a degree in environmental engineering in 1999. "I was drawn to the variety and practicality of environmental engineering. Solving real world problems like water contamination or beach erosion was exciting to me at that time and I thought those projects would be much more fun than working in a biology lab over a petri dish," Dr. Ratliff said. While Dr. Ratliff was taking on his engineering workload as an undergraduate, he also took pre-med courses. He enjoyed the math involved in his engineering coursework, but ultimately decided to make the move to medicine for its practicality.

After taking a year off after MIT, Dr. Ratliff was eventually accepted into Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx. He landed on orthopedics for its similarities to engineering. "Going into medicine, it's a little bit more lax and more grey-area than when you're an engineer—I did enjoy that—but I also was drawn a bit into the mechanics of orthopedics," Dr. Ratliff said. Where other doctors might have seen impossibilities or felt confusion to perform an FCU tendon removal for Al-Yami, Dr. Ratliff saw it differently. "I don't know that it's controversial as much as something that nobody thinks about or does. So, that's sort of where his problem was. This is not something that is really a thing," Dr. Ratliff said.

The procedure itself isn't hard, there's worry that once done, the loss in flexion strength would be permanent. Doctor's that had refused to take up Al-Yami's case might have been concerned that he may not fully understand what the procedure could do to him.

"With Aziz, he came into it with lots of research and he fully understood what people were concerned about and what he wanted to do. I sort of think that's the whole purpose of people arguing about informed consent. If he is informed and he is willing to go forward with this, and I can do it, I don't think it has to be something that we decide we have to withhold from him," Dr. Ratliff said.



THE flexor carpi ulnaris is a muscle in the forearm that runs along the pinkie-side of the wrist towards the elbow. It allows the hand to flex outward, or abduct, and flex inward, or adduct. It essentially allows the hand to wave from left to right.

The FCU can induce pain in the wrist if it becomes overworked. In this instance, a pain will run along the outer side of the wrist and can radiate through the forearm. In this instance, bending the hand in any way will cause pain. The act of holding something, even as light as a mug, and curling it with the wrist, can cause excruciating pain. In this instance, the ulnar nerve can be compressed, and the pain will shoot directly through the nervous system.

The types of activities that could induce this kind of damage include excessive use of scissors, lifting heavy objects, tennis, hard rock climbing, and swimming.

With the removal of the FCU tendon, which connects the FCU muscle to the wrist, it's essentially dangling inside the forearm. At this point, it has little to no function. It doesn't mean, however, that the person will be totally incapable of doing basic tasks. Any kind of heavy lifting with the wrist will be out of the question, but rotating the hand and wrist are still possible. Other muscles in the forearm are still there and can accomplish many basic movements and gestures.

And even using a video game controller or a pair of scissors will still be possible without an FCU tendon. But it will only be for very short periods of time. Anything prolonged will cause pain and possibly more damage.

WITH the surgery over and a success, Al-Yami spent his recovery time experimenting with the Smash Box. Al-Yami began practicing movements, thinking of ways to better improve the Smash Box. He began a dialogue with the development team in Las Vegas on changes he felt should be made to make the Smash Box tournament worthy. But during their back-and-forth, Al-Yami stopped communicating with the team altogether.

The Hit Box team grew worried. The sudden cease in communication was odd. But on January 19, 2017 Al-Yami uploaded a video updating his fans on his current state. Al-Yami announced that due to creative differences and logistical issues, he would be parting ways with Hit Box.

“He basically wanted Dustin to give him half of the company,” said Shawn Huffer, brother to Dustin, the inventor of the Smash Box, and the one who sent Al-Yami the prototype controller to begin with.

It was an odd turn for Al-Yami, one who viewed the Smash Box as his ticket back into “Melee,” but who, according to Shawn, was willing to halt progress at a chance to become a part-owner of the project and the company.

In the video Al-Yami stated that he wanted the product to be perfect, and given the current state the Smash Box was in, it was nowhere near ready for high-level competitive “Melee.”

“This was stuff that Dustin Huffer was not willing to do. This became apparent to me as he continually shot down every suggestion,” Al-Yami said.

The problem was that the Smash Box was already in pre-production. Certain aspects of the controller had been finalized with manufacturers in China. And other than small tweaks, a major change would incur a massive cost.

In the video Al-Yami announced that he would be working with students at Rutgers’s University to create his own box style controller called B0XX. “Basically everything that we'd been sharing with him in the event of trying to help him out, and save his hands, and make it so that he could play Melee again,” Shawn said. “You know when you get the wind knocked out of you? Punched in the gut feeling—like that kind of a deal.”

Within the Smash community, the focus had shifted from the potential of the Smash Box to Smash Box vs B0XX. Many of Al-Yami’s fans sided with him, as he was a professional player, a mini-celebrity in this world, and commanded authority. The Huffer brothers were seen in a lot of ways as outsiders that came in with a novel idea, but one that couldn’t even convince a top-professional who needed their controller the most.



SINCE “Super Smash Bros. Melee’s” release in 2001, it has only been played with a GameCube controller. There had never been another option. But with the idea of box-style controllers, ones that turn the analogue joystick, and maps it to buttons like on a keyboard, it brought up many questions on tournament legality.

Because of the thumb-stick on the GameCube controller, small minute movements could result in different, if subtle, actions on screen. Moving the thumb a millimeter off can result in a less than optimal result.

It’s because of this inability to be absolutely precise all the time that makes “Melee” a game that’s impossible to play perfectly. The human thumb will invariably not move the stick at an absolutely precise angle every single time.

But with a box style controller, now the analogue stick has become buttons. It’s then possible to allow a player to hit perfect spots or angles if they hit the correct buttons.

This has caused some tournaments to ban box-style controllers entirely. Some would argue that the poor ergonomic nature of the GameCube controller means that eventually all top players will suffer to debilitating hand and wrist pain. But others would argue that while there are GameCube controllers in play, having a controller that could allow for absolute precision would be unfair.

This has prompted to a lot of experimenting. Box style controller developers have intentionally added handicaps to their controllers. Instead of allowing a combination of buttons to hit a perfect

angle, they've hindered it to some degree or percentage less. It's enough to make the controller competitive at a high level, but not perfect.

Even then, some tournament organizers are unconvinced. And for players that are opting to use box-style controllers, there will need to be an active education and promotional campaign explaining both the ergonomic and competitive advantages, while also explaining the built-in disadvantages to keep things fair.

AL-YAMI refutes that he demanded 50 percent of the Huffer Brother's company for helping design the Smash Box. He stated that he was working 12-hour days practicing and thinking of ways to refine the Smash Box, that he wanted to become the lead designer, and that through his endorsement, sales of the Smash Box would jump "several hundred percent."

Al-Yami admitted to demanding 20 percent of the company, still a sizable amount. But since he had nowhere else to turn to, he told Dustin that he was willing to continue working with the team, pro-bono.

"I came back a few days later and I said 'you know man, I don't want a penny. Just let me redesign it. You have to let me redesign it or I can't use your controller,' Al-Yami said.

Accusations began being hurled against the two parties via Twitter and YouTube videos. Dustin called Al-Yami arrogant, greedy, and narcissistic, words that upset many of his fans. One accusation even claimed that Al-Yami would intentionally try and sabotage the Smash Box by making videos detailing how it would be unfair for tournament use.

After an article was published on esports publication DBLTAP strongly criticizing Al-Yami's behavior and using cherry-picked chat-logs, Al-Yami fought back with a video of his own. He stated that the Smash Box was an inferior product and that anyone who invested into the Huffer brothers' Kickstarter campaign would be a wasting their money.

"He almost killed our project. He nearly killed what we were doing simply because of all of the power that he had," Shawn said.

The Huffer Brothers did meet their Kickstarter goal of raising \$50,000 and plan on shipping their final Smash Box out to backers soon.

While Al-Yami does acknowledge that they were once friends, he didn't intend to hurt the Huffers. Ultimately Al-Yami feels if it wasn't his competing controller, it would have been someone else's.

"Let's say I shamelessly said 'guys, their product sucks. I'm going to put out a better—a much better one. I'm also doing this for the money so the money goes straight to me now. But the product is much better.' Whose product are you going to buy? You're still going to buy Hax's product."

THE match began. Al-Yami jumped down from the top platform with his Fox and violently

started shining and drilling his opponent's Ice Climbers. In nine seconds, he had already racked up 65 percent damage on his opponent and pushed him to the end of the stage. Because Ice Climbers are actually two characters, Al-Yami was dealing with both at the same time, hitting away his opponent's Popo in the air and jumping down to attack his Nana on the ground.

Al-Yami kicked his opponent so far off stage that he couldn't recover. But Al-Yami's opponent had three more lives, referred to as stocks, remaining; and his character reappeared for another chance. But as soon as he touched the ground, Al-Yami immediately shined him towards the side of the stage and shined him off. It was a three-second stock.

"The best performers are in this flow state where everything is just happening. They're just letting it all happen. They're not thinking through any of the individual steps. That's when you perform at your best," Al-Yami said.

The crowd and commentators were shouting in disbelief. It was a level of such precise play that Al-Yami was like a computer, reading his opponents inputs as they were being made. The crowd had already started chanting "four-stock!" wanting to see complete annihilation—a perfect game.

"I was omniscient. I could see everything—everything he was going to do, I knew I was going to four-stock him, there was zero doubt in my mind," Al-Yami said.

And as his opponent was on his last stock, he jumped his character off the stage, admitting defeat.

Al-Yami coined a term for this state of being. He theorized that there's an unachievable limit in competitive "Melee," where if two players are playing perfectly, the first one to land a hit would be the one to win. He coined this unachievable peak as 20XX.

And at Pound 2016, for a moment, he had achieved it.

IN a boxing match, stretches of muscles will undulate underneath skin and become visible. An uppercut that sprays sweat across a tapestry of flashing bulbs makes the moment seem ethereal.

An outsider looking may only see destruction. Two athletes subjecting themselves to bruised faces, snapped ankles, and broken wrists only to prove one is better. But that is sport. It's an exercise in vapidty to keep us entertained and distracted with feats of athletic excellence.



To a degree, most top-level professional athletes and teams can beat each other on any given day. It all comes down to their headspace before a match. Brazil winning the world cup one year could also mean the same team getting knocked out in the group stage four years later. And that one good day could be the difference between riot police throwing tear gas at mobs of angry fans in Rio de Janeiro, or as in the case of a North Korean coach, a prison camp. National pride, braggadocio, life-altering winnings; it can all be reduced to whoever had the best day.

And rewind to when that player was sitting in their locker room, hunched over, foreseeing victory through closed eyes. Not predicting, but knowing that his opponent will jab right, and he will dodge for a final uppercut. It's transcendence, if only for a moment.

"It's a treat when it comes out in tournament, especially on the big stage."