The Lock Busters

They’ve never met a padlock — or six-pin paracentric cylinder — they couldn’t crack. Live, from the lock-picking championship of the world.

For a lock picker, the world is a different place. Take, for example, a typical suburban house, with a bicycle in the front yard and a five-pin Weiser bolting the front door — a basic pin-and-tumbler lock, employed by millions of home owners.

When most people see that lock, they see security. But a lock picker sees a game. And maybe 15 seconds with a rake pick and a tension wrench. As for the Kryptonite to the railing out front? Please. Ten seconds, tops, with a Bic Round Stic ballpoint.

Or take a jewelry store on Main Street. The world sees the shatterproof Lexan windows and stone walls. Sure, you could melt the Lexan with a lighter or turn that wall into lava with a few strokes of a battery-powered thermal lance, but that’s not fair, that’s forced...
Phone. He's hacking an expensive, high-security, dimpled Mul-T-Lock using only a file key and a steak knife handle. Behind the bar, a pair of lawmen is speculating about what of the newsboys is an undercover cop. By the pool table, a gaggle of Dutch programmes probes the bathes of a combination padlock with a broken tape measure, while behind them a German cyberpunk sells a hand-milled Kryptonite skeleton key to an American satellite engineer; 100 euros — cheap.

Standing above them all, with a beer Stein in one hand and a cigarette in the other, is Arthur Bibli, a private dick from Hamburg and one of the most successful lock pickers of all time. Even in this crowded, smoky room, you can’t miss him; he’s the one standing 5’6” in sneaker boots, with a lozenge-shaped mustache crossing over the broad shoulders of his double-breasted suit jacket. Bibli’s Fabio-the-Barbarian look stands out.

So does his record. Although he’s never won a Dutch Open, he’s won most everywhere else, earning him Germany’s ultimate lock-picking accolade: Master of the Universe.

“Arthurmeister!” booms Arthurmeister. Across the room, beer mugs clink at the cry of his name. The Master of the Universe ranks reflects his cumulative lock-picking score – it’s a title that the lock sport commissioners bestowed on the world points leader. If Bibli wants to keep it, he has to keep winning.

Tomorrow, his sights will be set on topping the current Dutch Open champion — a slight, mustached man in a T-shirt and acid-washed jeans named Julian Harpt. Back in Germany, Harpt works as a rainmaker, piloting his twin-prop to seed thunderheads with silver iodide.

“For me, a lock is an intellectual puzzle, like chess,” Julian the Champ yells in Bernstein-accented English. He yells because two men behind him have started piling a steel safe with a railroad-tipped drill. “But when you break a lock, when you crack that first puzzle, when you feel pins click and the cylinder go – it’s like a drug,” he continues. “So then you want to try a harder one!”

Arthurmeister throws an arm around Julian the Champ and laughs as only a Master of they wasted 60 bucks,” he says. “People trust their lives and safety to these locks. But most locks are garbage. Look around, they’re easy to open. Not knowing that doesn’t make you safer.” Tobias rolls his eyes and waves his head incredulously. “I mean, what do people want — security through ignorance? Wake up.”

This ramped 59-year-old ur-nerd isn’t in Sneek to compete. He’s staying in this “godawful miniature prison” to give a PowerPoint presentation (“Vulnerabilities of Master Key Systems”) and to videotape the newest attacks against the latest locks. So he’s perfectly happy to offer a few friendly tips to a fellow American who’s new to the sport and struggling to learn the ropes.

“You’re retarded,” Tobias says, watching the neophyte wrestle with the pins. Tobias takes the lock and looks inside to make sure it isn’t broken. It’s fine. “I’ll tell you how they teach it in covert-entry camp,” he says, laying a hand on the poor picker’s shoulder. “First, I stick you in a cage. Then I lock the door.” Tobias struggles and smiles. “End of story. Trust me, it works,” he says. “Death is a fantastic motivator.”

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Diamnted picks, snake, rubes, combs, shallow picks, and handmade tension wrenches of black spring steel — the tools are readied for battle. It’s 10 o’clock the next morning in the tournament hall. The competitors sit before their instruments. The rules are old-school, head-to-head. Each person gets a different lock. Eight minutes to open your lock, then switch locks across the table and begin again for another night. That’s a round. At the end of each round, whoever has a shorter combined time is the winner. The rounds continue until it’s only two, then one.

It’s lockdown against space engineer, programmer against undercover cop, French commandos against American college student. Julian the Champ, who grips the lock in one hand as he picks it with the other, dabs his fingers on his pant leg and tries to remain calm. Arthurmeister prepares his vise. Amazingly, although last seen at 4 am manning the kog and shouting his own name, Arthurmeister is downstairs looking fresh.

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FOUR WAYS TO OPEN A LOCK

1. KEY
   - The traditional method. Notice that the pins align along the shearline, allowing the cylindrical plug to turn and open the lock.

2. PICK
   - With a torque wrench and a pick, the pins can be moved up manually.

3. RAKE
   - With luck, the pins will open when swept with a rake. Torque on the wrench keeps the pins open after they catch.

4. BUMP KEY
   - Tap a specially cut key, and the pins pop apart.

in a double-breasted suit and vest, a key insignia on his red silk tie. His meaty hands are shaking and his eyes are bloodshot, but the Master of the Universe is ready to rock.

"Three, two, one, go!" The pickers grab their tools and begin. Most combine the tension wrench with a rake—a tool with multiple heads that can be dropped quickly over all the pins at once. As they work, they stare down at the table or into space. They're visualizing, using the pick like a catfish uses its whiskers, mapping the dark recesses by feel. It's a cold hard world inside the keyhole.

There are special pins, mushroom, telescopes, wedges. Pins designed to fool people, pins that don't cooperate. And always, there's the pressure of the clock.

"This isn't pressure," Tobias says. "Try real-world covert entry. Either pick the lock fast or you get shot or arrested. End of story."

"Opens!" says Julian the Champ.

"Open?" yells Arthurmeister.

Round after round, the competitors fall away, until finally, inevitably, only two remain. They sit down across from each other at a table. The spectators and fallen competitors gather around.

A lock is placed in front of the Champ. He scoops it up and scrutizes into its mysterious darkness. It's a Lipe 8062C, a five-pin cylinder with a straight keyway. It's tough, but fair.

Arthurmeister receives his sister lock, the Lipe 8362C. It's a six-pin high-security model. Several of the pins are mushroom-shaped. Working them with a pick is difficult, made all the more so by the keyhole. It's para-centric, shaped something like a thalidomide tightening bolt, and expressly designed to hinder the motion of a picker's tools. In technical terms, the 8362C is a bitch.

Arthurmeister sticks out his cigarette and tightens the demon lock in his vice. Then he rubs his hands and leans over his challenge like a hungry giant. Go! The opponents wedge in their tension wrenches and begin.

Not much is happening at the tables. It's like watching a chess match, only without the chessboard. But to a knowledgeable lock picker, this is an optic showdown. "Intense," whispers Tobias.

Hardy works his picks in his cupped hand as if he's applying lipstick to a hard puppet. Arthurmeister screws away at the monster in his vice like a dentist on Neuradrine. The tools of the trade look like toothpicks in his oversize mitts.

"Open!" cries Arthurmeister. He smoothes his plumeage back and sits upright in his throne, triumphant.

The other lock pickers gasp. Someone claps. Arthurmeister has picked the 8362C in only 20 seconds. It was a rake pick on a super-tough lock, an opening that uses lock almost as much as skill.

Meanwhile, Julian the Champ can't pick his lock at all. The clock runs out at eight minutes.

Julian looks up through his tangled eyecrosses. "Oh, Arthur," he sighs. He mutes his teeth and grins like a bear. They switch locks. The Champ has to beat Arthurmeister's time or he loses. It's almost impossible. Julian works at the 8362C intensely, but 20 seconds is not time enough. It's over. He stands, defeated. His opponent inhales him in a bear hug.

The crowd claps and hoots. "Arthurmeister!" they yell.

"Booo!" Arthurmeister booms back. The Master of the Universe leaps to the bar to celebrate, more, again. And a new Dutch Open champion is born. • • •

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