



Winning the Husband Game

by Doug Johnson

*You **cannot** win a game if you don't understand the rules*

This booklet started out in my mind as 'Top tips for husbands'. I got married in October 1975, and I have found that the most challenging, and the most rewarding thing I have ever had to do is to be a good husband. My wife tells me regularly that she thinks that I am the best husband in the world, so I started asking myself: *'What I am doing that is working'*.

In my performance coaching I often spend time with husbands and wives trying to be of some help to them on their journey. I get asked by husbands: *'But what must I do? Give me something to do'*. My response is normally that this is a heart issue and that if you sort out your heart, the rest will follow. However, there are some things we can do, and more importantly, there are 'rules' behind these things, that if we understand them, we have a better shot at winning the game.

In my workshops on [Managing Conflict](#) I address the fact that sport is *managed conflict*, or *conflict with rules*. If you don't understand the rules of the game you will never win. So, if you want to win the husband game, then you need to:

1. Learn the rules.
2. Develop your skills.

Learn the Rules

Football, soccer, baseball, cricket, golf, tennis. All of these have different rules. Some are simple, and some are complex, but if you don't understand them you will never be a winner. The Husband game has very specific rules.

Develop your skills

Put the hours in. Practise, practise, practise. Build muscle memory by doing the right things again and again.

These are not theories. You can check with my wife. This is what I attempt to do. Of course I am not always 100% successful, but I give it my best shot, and I win most of the time.

I have decided to keep this to my top 10, so this is not exhaustive, but hopefully it will get you thinking. You can do what you like with what I say, and you will probably not agree with some of it, but I can guarantee it has worked for me, and you won't know if it works until you try it.

Why do I do what I do?

There are two reasons to do something:

1. Because my wife wants me to do it.
2. Because I want to do it.

These might sound the same, but they are not. If I do something reluctantly because I know that is what my wife wants, then I will struggle often with my attitude. If, however, I do the same thing because I want to do it, and it is the right thing to do, then I am making the decision, and I am managing my own life.

Question: How many times a day does your wife say 'Thank you' to you?

Let's get to the rules!

Rule #1

Be kind

"A kind word is like a spring day." — Russian proverb

The rule: Be consistently kind

This is something my wife and I discussed many years ago and we made it a foundational rule in our marriage: No matter what is happening – be kind.

Definition of 'Kind': *Having or showing a friendly, generous, and considerate nature.*

If you want to change your life, read through these synonyms of 'kind' every day for a week, and keep them in mind when you interact with your wife. You will never be the same.

Synonyms: Kindly, good-natured, kind-hearted, tender-hearted, warm-hearted, soft-hearted, good-hearted, tender, caring, feeling, affectionate, loving, warm, gentle, mellow, mild, considerate, helpful, thoughtful, obliging, unselfish, selfless, altruistic, good, cooperative, accommodating, attentive, compassionate, sympathetic, understanding, big-hearted, benevolent, benign, friendly, neighbourly, courteous, agreeable, pleasant, nice, amiable, hospitable, well meaning, well intentioned, public-spirited, well meant, generous, magnanimous, indulgent, tolerant, charitable, gracious, lenient, humane, merciful, clement, pitying, forbearing, long-suffering, patient, liberal, openhanded, lavish, bountiful, unsparing, unstinting, beneficent, munificent, giving, philanthropic, handsome, princely, bounteous, benignant.

Being kind is not difficult if you are aware of it, but being *unkind* is something we can just slip into. Living with someone else can be frustrating, annoying, challenging, difficult, and if we let it, it can affect our attitude.

We practise kindness every day as we interact with the world. We are kind to colleagues, guests, clients, suppliers, staff, students, and people we randomly meet.

Many men I have observed over the years are kinder to their colleagues at work, or even their dogs, than they are to their wives.

Be kind

Rule #2

Preferences vs right or wrong

If you want someone that thinks like you, marry your drinking buddy down at the pub

Just buy an extra toothpaste tube

The rule: Don't make preferences a right or wrong issue.

Some men seem confused about the fact that their wives do not think the same way as they do. This is by design. You will always marry someone who thinks differently from you. You will probably have the same values, but you will think differently. It is the *combination* of the thinking, the perspective, and the view of reality, that makes for better decision-making and choices. Problems arise when we make the way we think a good or bad, or a right or wrong issue.

In 80-90% of marriages, our preferences on how to raise children will be different. I know what you are thinking: '*How to bring up kids is a right or wrong issue.*' Is it? Maybe it is just our preference based on how we were brought up. If you don't sort this out before the children arrive then you could really struggle.

How is the house, and especially the kitchen, organised? Where do things go? How do you decorate? When do we do certain things? What time do you go to bed. What time do you get up? What do you do on your days off? These are all preferences, and because you think differently, your preferences will be different.

Here is my approach to life with my wife: It is very simple: *I don't get a preference*. Whatever my wife prefers she gets. Does it make sense to me? That doesn't matter. Is it important to me? Tough. Here is brutal truth: The moment I said 'I do', I forfeited the right to have a preference.

My wife and I have our own toothpaste. Why? Because we squeeze it differently, which can be irritating for both. Our solution: Separate toothpastes. There are more important things in life than how we squeeze toothpaste.

If you make preferences a right or wrong issue, then the day a *real* right or wrong issue arises, that needs a serious discussion, you will struggle to communicate.

Sort out your right and wrongs

Rule #3

Embrace the suffering

Every minute of every hour of every day of every year for the rest of my life

The rule: Put the yards in.

Anything you do in life that you want to excel in requires suffering.

- Being a good sportsman.
- Being a good musician.
- Being a good businessman.
- Being a good husband.

All of these require that we train and practise for many, many hours. We can embrace this or fight it. You will never excel in any of these if you don't work at it. It is insanity to think that this applies to every area of our lives except the Husband game.

You thought you married your wife because you loved her, but the truth is that you married her for the **opposite** of love. No man looks for a wife with the attitude: Let me find someone who I can lay my life down for, every minute of every hour of every day of every year for the rest of my life! No. We find someone who is good for us, or who meets our needs, or who we like, and we marry them. It slowly then begins to dawn on us that what we signed up for and the reality are very different.

It takes between 20 and 25 years to really learn to love someone.

Embrace the privilege of laying down your life for her. It is a privilege. Know this deep down in your heart: *It is not about you*. It is never about you. You do not have the right to make it about you.

Making a cup of tea for your wife when you feel like making a cup of tea for her is not love. Making a cup of tea for your wife when it is the last thing you feel like doing, and still doing it with a good attitude and with kindness, that's love.

See my book 'Think like a leader' for a more in-depth look at this topic.

Embrace the suffering

Rule #4

Show affection

Every wife needs to be hugged frequently

The rule: Never miss an opportunity to show affection to your wife, especially when there is no underlying motive (nudge, nudge – wink, wink).

Life is incredibly stressful. The stresses in the Husband game and the Wife game are different, but they are just as real. If you are expecting your wife to have empathy for what you are going through without you doing the same, and if she is expecting you to have empathy for what she is going through without doing the same, then you have a recipe for disaster.

Do this on a regular basis:

1. Put the phone away.
2. Switch off the TV.
3. Close the laptop.
4. Hold her.

No ulterior motives. No expectations. No agenda. No 'give and take'. Just hold her because she needs to be held.

Some people are not comfortable showing affection in public, but you should show affection when you are alone.

Affection can be a fun thing. You can make it a fun thing. My wife and I live in a tiny house, and I work from home, so we are in contact all day, every day, 7 days a week. Every time I engage with my wife, which can be hundreds of times a day, I smile, and I am happy to see her.

In my book 'Think like a leader', and in my performance coaching, I tackle the topic of **maturity**. Spoiler alert: There is nothing I can do to change my wife. It is not in the rules of the game. My job is to create an environment in which she is free to grow and change. If I don't create that environment, she will struggle to change and grow. If I create the right environment she will grow. My choice.

Be affectionate

Rule #5

Do it NOW

How important am I?

The rule: If your wife asks you to do something, drop everything you are doing and do it immediately.

When I was young there was a cartoon strip in the daily newspaper called Andy Capp. His motto was: *Never do today what your wife can do tomorrow.* Funny cartoon, but terrible advice for the Husband game.

In one of my [workshops on conflict resolution](#) I address the underlying causes of conflict in a marriage. One of these is: Centricity.

Centricity asks the question: '*How important am I?*'

The fact of the matter is that what is important to you is not important to your wife, and what is important to your wife is not important to you. The million-dollar deal you are working on is not important to her. What is important to her is the blocked sink. The blocked sink is not important to you. What is important to you is the million-dollar deal.

In the Husband game what is important to me is irrelevant. The only thing that should matter to me is what is important to her. Even if I do what my wife wants, but I do it in my own time, then I am sending the message to her that she is not important.

This is one of the hardest things I have had to work on over the years. I do not have a quick response time. In addition, it happens that my wife would ask me to do something for her, and because I did not respond immediately, I would forget. This meant that she had to nag me about it. Not good!

Obviously there are times where I can't drop everything, but most times I can.

Just do it

Rule #6

Surprise her

It's the little things

The rule: Go out of your way to find ways to surprise her.

Back in the mid 70's I worked with a man who told me he had a simple rule: *Never do anything for your wife, because if you do something for her once you will have to do it for the rest of your life.* It struck me back then, even though I was a young man who had just recently got married, that this was the worst advice I had ever heard.

NPD – Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Narcissistic personality disorder is a mental health condition in which people have an unreasonably high sense of their own importance. They need and seek too much attention and want people to admire them. People with this disorder may lack the ability to understand or care about the feelings of others. But behind this mask of extreme confidence, they are not sure of their self-worth and are easily upset by the slightest criticism.

Not many of us husbands are narcissists, but most of us are selfish.

"Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" is a well-known phrase from the United States Declaration of Independence. What is not well understood is that the thinking behind this is that happiness comes from helping others to be happy, and not in pursuing happiness itself.

So how do we do this? We make it a habit of finding ways to make our wives happy. Do kind things that surprise her. Not big gestures - simple things around the house. If you are not a spontaneous person, then put it in your diary. Pay attention. Worst case scenario is when you do something for her because she is mad or upset and you want to make up for being a moron.

I give my wife breakfast in bed every morning. This is not a surprise gesture but is kind and she does appreciate it most of the time. However, the really important thing is not that I make her breakfast, it is that I make sure that everything is spotless when I am done. Knowing my wife like I do; it is sort of pointless for me to make her breakfast and leave the kitchen in a mess! My aim every time is to make sure that it is cleaner than I found it.

What are you going to do today?

Rule #7

Protect her

It is you and me against the world

The rule: Protect your wife.

Intriguing and accurate pictures for me of a man and a woman are:

1. The wife is a breast.
2. The husband is a shield.

The breast is designed to nurture, and the shield is designed to protect. A shield is designed to take a beating, but a breast is not. I understand that my primary function as a husband is to protect my wife. She is the breast, and I am the shield.

If there is a physical threat, then instinctively we know that we need to jump in and protect. However, it is very unlikely that this will be a physical issue. It is generally an ongoing social and emotional issue. I need to understand her and know her limitations, and then I need to be deliberate and attentive about helping her manage her world.

There are many things I need to protect my wife from, but the top 3 are:

1. My parents and family.
2. Her parents and family.
3. Her children.

There are many jokes about sons-in-law and mothers-in-law. Have you noticed that there are no jokes about mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law? This is far too serious to joke about. As husbands we are often blissfully unaware of the dynamics between extended family members, and if we are aware, we don't take it seriously. One of the reasons we don't take it seriously is because if we get a beating we suck it up and move on, because we are designed for it – we are a shield. What we fail to realise is that our wife is not a shield and she can easily get damaged. The day I said 'I do' my priority moved away from my family to my wife. From that moment I can no longer side with my family. My allegiance and my role have changed.

My children have always known in no uncertain terms that my wife is my priority and that if they want to mess with her they have to go through me.

The best thing you can do for your children is love your wife. For me, the primary evidence of me loving my children is that I love my wife.

Protect her

Rule #8

Check your Insecurity Gauge

Monitoring my reactions

The rule: Make sure you never react out of insecurity.

An insecure player will negatively affect the whole team. If they don't understand the rules, or they haven't developed the skills, the team will be at a disadvantage. When I am insecure I don't react well.

One of the most difficult things for a husband is to take 'advice' from his wife. It somehow feels that, even if she is just trying to be helpful, that she is accusing us. Often she *is* accusing us, and has an attitude that goes with it, but none of this should effect how we respond.

There are many reasons we can respond badly because of our insecurity, but the one we are addressing in this booklet is that we are insecure because we don't know the rules of the Husband game, and we haven't developed the skills. Most of us are confidence players, and when the confidence is not there then we struggle to get into the game. I am a performance coach, and as a coach I would say to you: 'get back to the basics'. The 10 rules in this booklet will be a good start.

Another thing you can do is *welcome* your wife's input. Once again, you are now on the front foot because you are initiating this. Know your strengths and weaknesses and ask your wife to help you. For this I use a tool called [LEMON Leadership®](#). I know my own strengths and weaknesses, and I know my wife's strengths and weaknesses, and I rely on her to see what I don't see. Not easy, and not always comfortable, but with a bit of practise it can be done.

We all have insecurities. Part of growing up is getting over them. Next time your wife tells you what to do, monitor your behaviour and don't react out of insecurity.

Be nice, be kind

Rule #9

You are not your wife's boss

What is a husband?

The rule (for me): I never tell my wife what to do.

The word 'husband' comes from the word 'husbandry'. If you look up the definition you will see that it means, among other things: *The management and conservation of resources*. In other words, I am accountable for everything that happens in the home. My wife is responsible to help me, but I better ask nicely, and appreciate it when she does, because I am not the boss of her.

In my book '[Think like a leader](#)' I devote a chapter to the meaning of 'Headship', and what it means to be the head of something. I also look at the fact that leadership is all about influence, and my role is to influence my wife without bossing her around.

My approach: Just because I am the head of the home, does not mean that I have the right to tell my wife what to do.

My wife has her own game, and the rules for her game are different from mine. She has to decide whether she is going to learn the rules of the Wife game, and then whether she is going to develop Wife game skills, but that has nothing to do with me.

Never telling your wife what to do is different from letting her know and discussing what needs to be done. This obviously needs a conversation. She is in the same boat as you. She can decide to do what she needs to do because she has been told what to do and she is obligated, or she can decide what to do because she wants to do it, and because it is the right thing to do.

There is an additional layer to this that has even higher stakes. The layer is that you have expectations of your wife that have never been discussed. Comparing her to your mother or other women is almost an automatic thing to do. You will do it, and your family will do it. If you don't have the dialogue then she will go through life with the uneasy feeling that she is not meeting some invisible standard.

Check your attitude, and have the conversation

Rule #10

Pick it up, clean it up

A dog, a maid, and an electric blanket

The rule: Don't be a slob.

Someone once told me that they don't need a wife. They just need a dog, a maid, and an electric blanket. A dog to keep them company. A maid to clean up after them. An electric blanket to keep them warm.

This was obviously a joke, but behind it, somewhere in the recesses of many husband's minds, is the thought that their wives are their maids. Most husbands think that they have a divine right to leave mess all over the place, and it is their wife's job to clean up after them. Some even think that wives enjoy doing this, and that it makes them feel useful.

We looked at headship in the last chapter, and I go into it in detail in my book, but the summary is: I am accountable for everything in my household. In other words, I am accountable for the tidiness and cleanliness of the house. My wife is responsible to help me, but I had better ask nicely, and appreciate it when she does, because I am not the boss of her.

This does not mean that I must start doing the housework! It does mean that I need to change my attitude.

Here is an exercise:

Next time you shave or trim your beard, set the timer on your phone, and see how long it takes you to clean up. I guarantee it will take less than a minute. You cannot be so important that you can't spend a minute cleaning up after yourself. If you are a husband then you are, by definition, married. If you are married then you are a legal adult. If you are an adult, then grow up, grow some, and stop behaving like a 4-year-old.

Hang up your clothes

Conclusion

I have only given you 10 rules of the husband game, and I have only given you rules that I understand, and that I have put into action.

You don't have to do them. You can do whatever you feel like. The question is:
Do you want to stumble around in the game, or do you want to win?

It's about the end game

For many things in our lives it is about the end game:

- Finishing that marathon.
- The applause at the end of the concert.
- Scoring the goal or hitting the home run.
- A wife that thinks you are the best thing that ever happened to her.

It is then that you look back and think: *'It was worth all the effort'*.

The phrase you want to hear your wife use the most often in your life is 'Thank you'.

Your choice!

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