

Pauncho and Lefty

I am (actually my belly is) Pauncho and my prosthetic is Lefty. I tip the scales at around 150 kilos (300 pounds sounds like a lot) and I'm 6'1 (1.85 meters seems short).

I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes over ten years ago when my right foot got very red and my leg swelled up. My blood sugar was over 800 in the emergency room. Fast forward to 2010; my left foot looks like Gary Coleman, small, shriveled and black. My blood sugar is over 1000 in the emergency room. This was the highest some of the ER workers had seen. It's good to surprise people in the ER and survive.

I was given a below-the-knee amputation; BTK for short. I wonder if they call it something else in Kansas¹.

Two months and three hospitals later I'm home. During my recuperation I was visited by three prosthetic firms. One was almost 20 miles away and the other two averaged 35. All of them made sure to send somebody that had the same limb missing as I. I can imagine the size of the sales bullpen, 2 righties and lefties (leg and arm), armless, legless, no arms and one leg (left and right), no legs and one arm, and finally a quadriplegic.

A year later I get a prosthetic thanks to DARS (Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services). I had to get public assistance because most health insurance doesn't cover even half the cost of artificial limbs. Mine cost more than my car and I drive a used 1996 Camry; granted the leg has thicker rubber on the road. Credit and curses are now given where they are due. Lefty and Pauncho are together, let the wild rumpus begin.

I had two stories that I wanted to test out. First, in the mid-eighties Rich Hall, author of *SNIGLETS*, had a sports radio call-in show routine. Mixed in with a frantic call about a 35-pound hamster was a question about baseball. If a guy with an artificial leg got to first could he detach it and take a really long lead?

Baseball was out of the question but I have a natural slow-pitch softball physique. Softball is a game of singles or home runs for me. If I don't make a home run I'd be too winded to turn for second. I got to play catcher because Lefty is stainless steel and NOBODY wants to try to slide into a steel pole that supports over 200 pounds. There might have been some sympathy for an amputee but I made no secret it was diabetes instead of something REALLY sympathetic like cancer, birth defect, or war.

I played normally the first couple of games. I live by the comedic rule of three. It took me two more games to get a single (bad pitching led to home runs and good beer led to strikeouts). Finally I was on first base with my kneepads. I had established the pads because mud + blood doesn't equal funny. I got away with it because of the sympathy angle.

I got to the base and bent down like I was winded as usual when the pitcher faced the next batter. But I leaned a little farther down, undid the catch, and started letting out the line. I had tied

some fishing line to Lefty in case I got to second. When the pitcher got the ball I went down on all fours and started crawling halfway between the bases and did a knee stand in a cloud of dust.

The first and second basemen called for the ball but the pitcher decided to tag me out himself. As he was coming for me I wagged my finger at him and pointed out Lefty still safely on bag one. That started a huge conference at home plate; the pitcher, the infield, the managers, and the umpire. During the confab I crawled to second base, drug Lefty to me, and planted both feet on the bag. This counted because no matter what happened I had not been tagged and the umpire never called time.

They gave me the base but I could never do it again. I agreed and gave them links to Rich Hall's routine. I had to endure a couple of weeks of guys sliding spikes up. It was OK because my modeling career died at birth.

Lefty gave me an opportunity to test out a cliché. One version is "***more nervous than a long-tailed cat in a room full of rockers.***" The one that I wanted to try after I could drive and walk was "***busier than a one-legged man in a butt-kicking contest.***"

Butt-kicking contests are real. They are more secretive and less cruel than dog and cock-fighting. My grandfather exposed this underground martial art to me when I was 8. He lived in Mexia, a small east central Texas town near Waco. Now it's known as Anna Nicole Smith's birthplace.

Papa (what I called him, I called my grandmother Mimi if you must know) took me to this contest because in the country boys were secretly shown almost all adult activities between 8 and 10 to see what would stick. Grandfathers did it so fathers could plead ignorance and avoid any child abuse charges by the usually citified wives.

One Thursday night he put me in the Hoopty supposedly to go to the Dairy Queen. Hoopty might have always had a bad connotation but I called it that because I made that sound when we went over bumps. I took every opportunity to ride in the truck because I got to sit in the front (only) seat. Remember, I am 8 and it's 1967.

These things happen on Thursday because the weekend is in sight and Friday and Saturday are date nights. Also you won't lose your paycheck because you don't have it yet. Papa explained this and the exhibition I was about to see. He compared it to a combination of professional wrestling and Looney Tunes cartoons; there might be some blood but nobody gets hurt or mad at each other.

We stopped at a Maverick convenience store. Papa told me to stay in the truck. This was unusual because I ALWAYS got to get out and pick out a comic book EVERY time my grandparents stopped at a Maverick stop'n'shop. I pointed out this aberrant event with the debate skills of an eight-year-old boy: I whined and cried. The man changed from a doting grandfather to an adult dealing with a child and gave me the choice of waiting in the truck or walking home. After ten minutes he came out with a Styrofoam cooler.

He got the flashlight out of the glove compartment, handed it to me and told me to open the cooler. I took the lid off and shined the light into it. The cab lit up from the reflection of the ice, the

white Styrofoam and the bottles of beer and Big Red, a regional cream soda I was addicted to at the time. I asked for a bottle but I was refused again and he told me to look at the inside of the lid. A piece of paper was taped there. I looked at my grandfather, he nodded, and I pulled the paper from the lid. It was a map.

I was to be the navigator. I was experienced with road maps that expanded all over the backseat during the day, not one drawn by hand at night by flashlight on the back of a flyer for a country band. Luckily dark country roads and a 20-year-old truck do not lend themselves to the term 'barreling'.

Usually I was given the role of navigator so I would learn letters, numbers, and compass points. This was a mobile nature hike. I had to look for longhorn skulls, paint cans, and rusted gas station signs. The distances were marked as "a piece" and "yonder."

We knew we had arrived when our headlights hit the whitewashed boot. As I went through the trucks I saw a ring of Coleman lanterns surrounded by a crowd. As I got closer I could hear rustling, two different child's toys, and then cheering.

I got to the inner circle and finally associated actions to the sounds I was hearing. Two men were in the ring of light trying to either kick each other's rear or attempting to get the other guy on the ground by tripping. Each contestant had a pair of squeeze toys secured to his butt by a belt from above and thigh straps below to prevent flapping.

One guy would have rubber ducks and the other used the bulb part of a bike horn. This was for scoring purposes. Two blasts from your toy and you lose. There were two winning strategies; grab your opponent from the front, spin him and take your shot while he is standing or trip him with a low roundhouse kick and hit him while he was down. Rounds had no time limit but I don't remember any round lasting long.

My grandfather did not participate but some of the men talked about how good or bad he had been, depending on the flow of conversation. I saw money changing hands after every match. On the way home I was curious about everything except the athletic(?) competition; the ice chest, the map, and the gambling. I didn't ask why they did it because everybody including the losers seemed to be having fun. Nobody needs to explain violent fun to an 8-year-old boy in Texas.

Papa answered all my questions. I couldn't wait for show-and-tell in September. He said I couldn't talk about it outside of a match. I made that promise and kept it for over 40 years. I never went to another gathering but on the anniversary of my grandfather's death I had been going to isolated convenience stores, finding a Styrofoam cooler in a special place, and mentioning the right phrase as I checked out just to get those hand-drawn maps. I learned about the convenience stores from hanging out in WAY out-of-the-way bars and honky-tonks.

I started looking for the contests after the softball stunt. Softballers and denizens of out-of-the-way honky-tonks rarely mix. If somebody found his way into an OTW honky-tonk after a game he would surely be drunk and lost. The player would be shown the door and given directions back to the 1990s.

Lefty and I had been hanging out at an OTW for month before I got the location of a stop'n'shop. I had been wearing a sock on the foot portion of Lefty to hide his blue steel hard-on. I have a limpy gait but that was easily explained with a drunk-touch-football story.

The squeaky toy technology had not changed since I was a boy. The ring lighting had gotten brighter and a few El Caminos and Rancheros had found their way into the parking area. If any cell phones were needed or rang they and their owners were taken to the nearest numbered road.

I went to a couple of matches to bet and scout the talent. After all a couple of generations of wars had happened since I last saw one. The strategies and average age of the contestants had stayed the same. The younger ones were my age (40s) and the oldest ones were a Jack Lalanne 70. Nobody had a Lefty and a few of the participants walked like me.

I put my money up for the next match. The organizers matched me up with a guy my approximate size. After I got the rubber duck apparatus on my butt he started a frontal assault. Luckily I got him in a clinch, introduced Lefty to his right ankle and the ring echoed with two bike horns. When he got to the organizers they gave me mean looks and I couldn't get another match.

I totally understood but I could still get a cooler to watch and bet on the contests. Then one night I was invited to go against this South African Olympic sprinter. I bent over and offered my ducks.

ⁱ There was a serial killer in Kansas that called himself BTK (Butcher Torture Kill).