

SPORTS FROM HELL

My Search for the World's
Dumbest Competition

Rick Reilly



Doubleday

Also by Rick Reilly

Hate Mail from Cheerleaders

Shanks for Nothing

Who's Your Caddy?

Slo-Mo!

Missing Links

Life of Reilly

Sports **from** **HELL**



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DOUBLEDAY / ESPN BOOKS

You can sum up this sport in two words: You never know.

—Lou Duva, boxing trainer

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Acknowledgments

It takes a lot of smart people to let a dumb guy write a whole book about stupid sports. For instance, how could I have experienced the utter exhaustion of playing a three-mile golf hole straight down a mountain full of explosives without the help of Ryan Klassen and Joel Haley? How would I have entered the world of illegal Jarts throwing without the aid of Jeff Baltas? How would I have risked my walnuts in ferret legging without the three women at the Richmond Ferret Rescue League—Rita Jackson, Marlene Blackman, and Meagan J. Rhoten? (Please write me back, Spazz.) Without Kat Byles, I wouldn't have had a clue about how to cover a homeless soccer game. Without Ossi Arvela, I'd have had a stroke trying to figure out how to compete in the World Sauna Championships. Without a hand from Graham Walker, I'd have been stumped at the World Rock Paper Scissors Championships. I shudder to think what would have happened to me at Angola State Penitentiary without Angie Norwood, Gary Young, and Warden Burl Cain. Or Jody Taylor of the (now squashed) SoCal Scorpions women's pro football team. (Yes, Jody, the doctors think some of my vertebrae will grow back.) Thanks, too, to Danitra Alomia at the World Beer Pong Championships. Hope you get that Budweiser smell out of your hair. And cheers to London's Tim Woolgar, who not only explained chess boxing to me (it took hours), but then starred in it. And thanks to the best agent a man could have, Janet Pawson of Headline Media in New York, her trusty sidekick Michelle (Wood) Hall, Bill (Liam's Dad) Thomas at Doubleday, who went along with the madness, and Melissa Danaczko, who had to make sense of it all. Lastly, warehouses full of thanks go to the gorgeous and patient and ingenious researcher/organizer/travel agent TL (The Lovely Cynthia), who made the idea of traipsing all around the world looking for stupidity seem like a brilliant idea.

Sportswriting can be about as tough as fur boxers. I've spooned the strawberries and cream at Wimbledon, slurped the mint juleps at the Kentucky Derby, sneezed into the azaleas at the Masters. I've sat on leather pressroom couches in front of glorious big screens from Dubai to Del Mar while pages of athletes' quotes were hand-delivered to me. I've been courtside at the Final Four and on the field for the Super Bowl and nearly had Mary Lou Retton land her famous 10s at the 1984 Olympics on my foot. I've covered all the sports everybody aches to attend.

Do you know how BORING that gets?

After thirty-one years of covering crap like that, I wanted to try covering some sports that were completely new, totally obscure, and mind-warpingly ... dumb. The dumber, the better. I wanted to see if I could search the planet and find the single stupidest idea for sporting competition the world had ever devised. The thrill of victory, the forehead slap of "Why do you people DO this?" My motto was: If your sport is really moronic and witless, I'm the guy to write about it.

So, accompanied by my curvy girlfriend, Cynthia Puchniarz—aka TLC (The Love of Cynthia)—a former Glendale, California, high school teacher, former Miss Teen California, and current research wizard, I set out in January of 2006 to do it. But first, over many, many tequilas, we decided on some ground rules:

- 1. It had to be an actual sport.** Meaning: It had to be something people actually tried to win, something people cared about it, something open to anybody. There are dozens of "Try to Fly Off the End of the Pier" contests, bagsful of "Who Can Come Up with the Dumbest Craft to Sail the Dry River" regattas. Pah! It had to be dumb to everybody but those who played it. In fact, our rule of thumb was: If you would get punched if you told a guy his sport was stupid, it qualified.
- 2. It couldn't be stupid for the sake of being stupid.** For instance, the World Shin Kicking Championships, which involves two combatants, their hands on each other's shoulders, kicking each other very hard in the shins. Seemed to have real stupidity potential. But then we saw this quote, from a shin-kicking official, who was trying to get shin kicking into the 2012 Olympics: "There's no need for dope tests—if anything, stupidity is encouraged." That nixed it. You can't KNOW your sport is stupid.
- 3. It couldn't exist mainly as tourist bait.** It couldn't scream out, "Yes, this is a dumb sport and that's why the boys in marketing invented it, so YOU would come and spend all your euros!" The British are just awful about this. Take bog snorkeling, in which one dives into a disgusting muck-filled trench and swims 120 yards, with the proviso that one

can't pull one's head out of the water. Besides, when one does come out, one finds one is still in Mid Wales, so one just keeps swimming. Or cheese rolling, which involves letting a giant Double Gloucester cheese wheel roll down a hill, triggering a hundred or so drunk twenty-two-year-olds—falling ass-over-Guinness—in an attempt to be the first one across the line after it. In 2008, eighteen of the fifty contestants were injured.

You know what I say?

Good.

4. **We had to actually watch people do it.** There have been some wonderfully spackled-brained sports that no longer exist. Take the World Housekeeping Championships, for instance. Held at the Opryland Hotel, it was started in the 1970s by seventeen hotels in the Nashville area to promote pride in maid service. The maids fought to the last mint to see who could win titles in: Blindfolded Bed Making, Pillow Stuffing, and Slalom, which featured two-person teams pushing brooms to steer soaps and other amenities through an obstacle course of “wet floor” signs. How great is that? All that was missing was the Knocking Loudest at 6:07 A.M. While Ignoring the Do Not Disturb Sign competition.
5. **It couldn't even be slightly famous.** For instance, one sport I was dying to cover that first was noodling, which is the art of catching fish with your bare hands—the perfect solution for those fed up with the high cost of poles and worms. This was right up Dumfries Drive. Noodlers have even been known to die doing it. We made plans to shadow a noddler—any noddler—in the big yearly noodling tournament in Oklahoma. The first guy we asked, a plumber, told TLC: “Nah, I'm hooked up with Discovery Channel this year.” Then we tried a randomly toothed boat mechanic. “Sure,” he said. “Hope you don't mind a crew from *National Geographic* along.” The last guy—I think he was a professional drifter—spat out, “Sorry, I got a guy from *Time*.” We decided to wait for the musical.
6. **I didn't want to die covering it.** This eliminated buzkashi, which is exactly like polo except instead of a small wooden ball you use the bloody corpse of a recently beheaded calf. Fun at parties! It's the national sport of Afghanistan. Teams of men on horseback using ropes try to drag a calf carcass—into which sand has been pounded—back to the winning circle while hundreds of other horsemen try to keep him from doing it, often with whips, for days at a time. Magnificently dumb. But I just couldn't see my kids having to tell people, “Dad died in Kabul when three buzkashists mistook him for a headless goat.”
7. **I couldn't have already covered it.** For instance: lawn mower racing, which remains the only motor sport in the world where you can watch the pack go by, go get a bratwurst and a Pabst, and be back in time for the next pass. I liked it, though, if only for the names they give their rigs: “Sodzilla,” “The Lawn Ranger,” and “The Yankee

Clipper.” And I’d already investigated blimp racing, although there was only one blimp the sky at the time, and that was the one I was driving: the Goodyear Blimp. If you even want to do it, don’t. They redline at fifteen miles per hour and there is no bathroom. Which is why if you happened to be at the Indianapolis Colts–Baltimore Ravens exhibition game a few years back, I’d like to apologize. Those were not summer showers.

- 8. It had to at least resemble a sport.** This left out Extreme Ironing (which I did on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange anyway, just for the photo), the Air Guitar Championships, and Shotgun Golf, in which one advances a golf ball by means of a shotgun blast. That turned out to be entirely made up and passed off as real by the late Hunter S. Thompson. Hate to be a caddy for it.

Anyway, off we went. It would take us three and a half years, eight countries, and about 373 Red Roof Inns before our quest was complete. We found thirteen sports that we believe can outstupid anything a committee of Dennis Rodman, John Daly, and Courtney Love could come up with. The things I did, the interviews I conducted, and the sentences I found myself writing actually reduced my IQ. So much so that after I finally turned the manuscript in, all I could think to say was: “How ’bout them Cowboys!”

World Sauna Championships



OK, kids, today's activity is to go down to your local Pizza Hut, have them set the oven for 261 degrees, and insert your entire body into it. The tips of your ears start to ignite. The backs of your arms scream. Your throat feels like somebody stuck a tiki torch down it. Your lips are bitten by large, unseen raccoons. You vow to move to Alaska. And you haven't even hit thirty seconds.

Now do it for ten minutes or more and you have an idea of what it's like to compete in quite possibly the world's dumbest sport—the World Sauna Championships.

I know. I entered.

• • •

These are the 9th Annual World Sauna Championships in Heinola, Finland, a Heidi-esque little lake-riddled town 140 kilometers north of Helsinki. I've covered a lot of thrilling athletic endeavors, but never men sitting in small rooms and sweating. What other championships does the world have? Napping? Barcalounging? Standing in Front of the Fridge?

Announcer: And now Struhdler leans in for the leftover tuna—nope! No! He switches to the fudge!

As we drove up, my mind reeled at what kind of things competitors in the World Sauna Championships say to sportswriters afterward in the locker room. “I just got hot. What can I say?”

I went over the rules. Simple. Competing in “six-person heats”—said without irony—the field of eighty-four men (including me) and eighteen women battle to see whose skin can be the last. You may wear only bathing suits that go eight inches down the leg and absolutely nothing else. (Women can wear one-piece bathing suits.) You can wipe sweat from your face but not your body. You cannot cover your ears. You may not lean over too far. You get one warning, then you're out. Ambulances will be standing by. Good luck!

I wondered if sauna sitting has trash-talking like other sports. For instance, what if I can get into my heat on the first day with a lit Winston and a cup of coffee? Maybe look at the other five guys and go, “Hey, when are they gonna turn this bitch on?” Start knocking on the window and yelling, “Let’s get some heat in here! You want us to catch our deaths?” Maybe look at the crotch of the guy next to me and go, “That’s weird. I thought COLD causes shrinkage.” Or maybe wait outside the sauna while six *other* guys are about to go in and hand them a half-baked ziti. “Hey, would you mind taking this in there? I’ve got a potluck in, like twenty minutes.”

In her research, TLC discovered that there was an Australian gambling site that has set the odds. Three-time defending champ Timmo (the Great) Kaukonen is a 2.15-to-1 favorite. I was listed at 101-to-1.

As if.

First of all, nobody but a Finn has ever won the World Sauna Championships. In fact, nobody but a Finn has ever been in the six-man finals. There are 5.2 million Finns and 1 million saunas. Legend has it most Finns are *born* in saunas. To a Finn, a sauna is a holy place. Then again, so is Hell.

Secondly, I wouldn’t bet on me at 1,000,001 to one. At that point, I had saunaed five times in my life. I had about as much chance as a slice of Neopolitan ice cream. But the gambling site makes me realize how easy it would be for Timmo the Great to tank. All he’d have to do is bet on his chief rival (a young guy named Markku with a Charlie Chan fu), get down to the final two and then immediately bolt, so that Markku the Fu would win. He’d just have to make it look real. You’d hate to have the official go, “Uh, Timmo, do you mind waiting until we turn the sauna on first?”

By the time we arrived, Heinola was in full steam. This is a national event, televised regardless, and the bars were already bubbling with insanity. In one sidewalk bar about six guys were smashed already, with white-and-green painted faces and Viking horns, carried satchels full of reindeer powderhorn (*To help your horn stay stiff!* the sign on the pouch says. *Don’t leave your mouth too long.*) and had bows of birch tied to their belts. Finns take them into the sauna and slap themselves on the back to increase circulation.

“We cheer for Redneck and Ironback,” one face-painter named Samu yelled lustily. “Our guy will be champion!” Saunists have nicknames? Who knew? What would my sauna nickname be? Babyback?

Samu was amazingly plastered for 11 A.M. “You are going in?” he slobbered at me and I was flabbergasted. “Look, I am Finnish and even I won’t go in there!” Then he began hanging around me over TLC, asking her what she does. “I’m a teacher,” she said. He was right up in her face, just two inches from it, wilting her eyelashes with his Finlandia breath, and said, “I’m a drunk.”

Noooooooo.

At the registration table, they asked me to remove my shirt and then scrawl “82” on each of my biceps in Magic Marker, my competitor’s number. I found out I was in a heat with the Tiger Woods of saunists, three-time champ Timmo the Great, the favorite. And that’s when—on cue—his giant sauna-company-sponsored mobile home, complete with a sauna inside, pulled up. The man even *travels* in a sauna.

Honey, I'm going down to the 7-Eleven for some milk and a shvitz. You want anything?

Timmo the Great waded through some autograph seekers (no joke) and arrived at the registration table carrying a quart of water. His skin is a kind of permanent cherry, and shiny hard, like a newly painted model car. He has long blond hair (turns out it protects the ears) and he's stout, stocky, maybe slightly pudgy. He is thin-lipped (also a very good trait for a saunist—Angelina Jolie would be awful at this). Timmo's pulse gets up to 200 bpm when he competes and he actually *does* train aerobically for this, riding the bike a lot and running. Have absolutely no idea why. He is also very quiet. You don't want to be a person who needs a lot of movement. You have to be happy to be just sitting, especially while your very organs boil inside you.

In short, he's the world's most famous saunist. He probably has his own signature-mod back-birch-bow swatter.

With the help of an interpreter, I interviewed him.

Me: How much time have you been spending in the sauna lately?

Timmo the Great: Off and on, all day and night, about twenty sessions a day.

Me: Oh, my God! At what temperature?

Timmo the Great: Lately, it's been at about 140°C [or 284°F].

Me: Oh, good Christ! Do you drink a lot of water coming into the competition or what?

Timmo the Great: Oh, yes, about ten liters a day [2.6 gallons] the last three days. (He smiles at my reaction.) You, too, I'm sure, yes?

Me: Do you count beer?

Timmo the Great: No.

I was so screwed.

Because I was one of the first Americans to ever have entered the WSC, I did some very small interviews myself. There were all kinds of TV crews here—Ukraine, Germany, Sweden, and Russia. Various, I pretended that I thought the competitors were *running* the sauna, or that it was a hot-tub competition, or that I had been training for this by eating jalapeños. I had brought along my six-eight shock-white-haired basketball buddy from Wisconsin, Bruce “Thor” Pearson, who chimed in helpfully every now and then as though he was my publicist. “Rick does not have access to a sauna,” Thor confided to one reporter. “So he's just been doing really, really long stretches at room temperature.”

They nodded earnestly.

There were all kinds of odd entrants. A Japanese teen idol singer was there, name Kazumi Morohoshi, and he was followed everywhere by his manager, his agent, his coach, some fans, and a Japanese TV crew. His odds were a ridiculous 13-to-1. I would have bet my last saunamobile against him. He was skinny and pale and much too pretty to suffer like man Timmo.

The only other American entered was software designer Rick Ellis, formerly of the Soviet Union, who was so into this that he'd built his own sauna at his home in upstate New York.

even considered putting \$2,000 down on myself, but I couldn't figure out how." He said he been training at 110°C (230°F) and had made it sixteen minutes once. His wife looked at him ruefully and shook her head. He turned to her, exasperated, "What?"

Suddenly, it was time for the heats to begin, and over 500 sauna fans took their places in the open-air theater. On stage were two hexagonal glass-faced saunas and two giant viewing screens. The gladiators for the opening heat were trotted out, all soaking wet from the freezing pre-heat showers. Ominously, a little man opened the door to the sauna and the s... marched ruefully in, like drumsticks into a fryer. The fans chanted wildly. Sauna cheers? The mind reels:

We love Boris!

Here in the stands!

He'll never sweat!

He has no glands!

How bored must you be to watch people sweat? Actually, you'd be amazed at how fun it is to watch a grown man come apart like a \$9 Walgreens sweater. How often do you get to see a man go from normal to nuttier than Ross Perot in less than ten minutes? We watched a Bellarussian, for instance, dissolve for our amusement. He started out sane, just sitting there minding his own business. Every thirty seconds, a pitiless stream of water came out from a ceiling shower in the center of the sauna and splashed on the molten-hot rocks, creating 100-percent humidity in the room that would melt gold. About two minutes in, our man started rocking a little. At three his eyes started blinking oddly. At four he began twitching. At five his eyes got huge. At six he started swallowing each breath like a gulp of scorching soup. Then he started glancing wildly around the sauna, as if to say to the others, "Are you mad? Don't you see what's happening? They've locked us in a Crock-Pot!" He started madly wiping his eyes and mouth. He reached his hands out to his thighs to rub them, then realized he couldn't, then did so anyway, crazily, wildly, like he was covered in lice. The judge flagged him once, then twice, and yet he would not stop rubbing. Then suddenly he lurched for the door and he was out and sanity and cool air whooshed back into his brain and suddenly he was normal and smiling again.

Kind of like watching Tom Cruise be interviewed.

One guy got in, sat down, and immediately bolted before they closed the doors. He grabbed the handheld mike and yelled, "Somebody farted in there!" Turned out to be a German TV comic. Backstage, a Dutchman held two bags of ice to his ears, thinking it might help. It didn't. He lost. I heard one guy coming out tell another who was going in: "Every second after six minutes is sheer hell." One German said his temporary fillings were rattling in his mouth the whole time. Not the kind of thing our hero wanted to hear before his turn.

In each opening heat, only two of the six moved on, and our friend Rick Ellis from New York went 8:03 to advance. I was waiting to congratulate him when I noticed something awful. There were two big patches of skin missing on his upper lip, just under his nostrils.

"Dude, were you by any chance breathing through your nose in there?"

"Yeah, why?" he says.

“Your skin is all gone under your nose! It’s burnt off!”

He felt his upper lip in horror. He ran to the mirror. It was worse. The tops of his ears were split open and bubbling. Under his arms and on his back were bright purple patches. His forehead was painted bright red and blistering in front of his eyes. I took him to the back garden to try to cool him off, but nothing helped. He was sweating like Pam Anderson at a Bible study. “Man, I’m burning up. Even my tongue is burnt.” His wife begged him to quit, but he refused. Said he trained too hard. She shook her head.

“What?” he asked.

And that’s when they called my heat backstage.

Gulp.

On the way back there, I saw the great Finn saunist Leo Pusa, four-time champ, a stone-faced Greyhound bus of a man. I asked him for some quick words of wisdom before I went in. He told me some secret he used to win all those titles. “I sat longer than the others,” he said.

Let me write that down.

I vowed to do whatever Timmo the Great did. He took a drink. I took a drink. He stretched his neck. I stretched my neck. Three times, he took a freezing-cold shower backstage, so three times I took one, so that by the time I got introduced, I was shivering like a newly shaved Chihuahua. As they were reading us the rules, each competitor’s fans were waving the nation’s flag and chanting encouragement. Then I saw TLC in the crowd, mouthing, “Don’t do it!” She’d said it before I left, too. “You know you can’t win, so why not get out first? You’re going to lose anyway!” She was right, of course. I mean, why try to out-eat Kirstie Alley?

I drew seat No. 6 near the door. Timmo the Great was No. 2. We went in and it was so hot, instantly, shockingly, insanely hot, my brain just stopped working. It was like walking into a bonfire and pulling up a chair in the middle of it. It was like putting your face over the white coals of your barbecue and shutting the hood. It was so hot that if I owned this sauna and Hell, I’d live in Hell and rent this place out.

My strategy was to go in and keep time by the thirty-second water splashes, but that plan was scrapped approximately seven seconds in. It was just so goddamn hot I couldn’t think. Thinking literally hurt. I tried to stare at the rocks and not blink, because blinking hurt. I tried to take very few breaths, because breathing hurt. Leo Pusa had shown me how to sit, slightly hunched, with your hands under their opposite arms, each of them protecting the fragile skin at the small of your back. But I was cursing Leo Pusa because it didn’t help. Sitting hurt most of all.

My back seemed to have ignited. I was sure flames were coming out with each breath. I was convinced my ears were literally on fire, but if I moved even slightly, they would hurt more. I tried sitting up higher, but it was hotter the higher you went. I tried crouching down more, but then I was nearer the hideous, unforgiving rocks. It was so awful I could only wish Barry Bonds were in here. And then came the hideous, cruel, pitiless splashes of water lasting maybe three seconds each. I did not count them. I looked at nobody. I heard nobody. I saw nobody, just the red rocks, glowing, laughing, mocking. I would sooner have my kidneys removed at Jiffy Lube than this.

I decided to try to think of something to get my mind off the torturous pain, so I began to name every team in the National Football League. But my brain needed a CTRL-ALT-DEL. I counted the New York Jets. Twice. I was just about to bolt into the fresh air when—miraculously—the tall skinny guy next to me in seat No. 1 suddenly jumped up and ran out. Amazing! I wasn't last! I had no idea how much time had elapsed—four minutes? Six? I was thrilled he had left, because I'd been told that as someone leaves, you get a lovely blast of cool air that gives you a five-to-ten-second respite. I looked forward to it with every cell in my body, but it didn't happen. Nothing. The two guards let the man out very quickly and nothing good came of it. It was dispiriting. Like opening a big Christmas present and finding homework. I made a promise to myself: When I get to the point where I can no longer stand it, I'll count sixty more seconds and then go.

Four seconds later, I decided I could no longer stand it.

So I started counting ... One, two, three ... I was pretty sure I was leaving out the “one thousand” between each number. It was the longest minute of my life. Now that I think about it, I'm not even sure I made it a half minute because I can't remember if I saw a water splash. I would've had to have seen at least one, right? I'm telling you, in that kind of furnace, your mind just goes completely Paris Hilton. At the count of sixty, I came barreling out of the sauna too fast for the guards to let me out smoothly. I must wait for them! The bastards! May your daughter's wedding be in one of these things!

In watching other heats, I'd wondered why even the losers came out grinning and raising their hands in victory, but now I know. The cool air was so beautiful, so redeeming, so life-giving, that you couldn't help but smile a cantaloupe and pump your fist at just breathing it. You are out. You are taking in lovely, fresh, icy air. You could French-kiss Osama bin Laden.

I looked at the clock. Three minutes, ten seconds? 3:10? That was it?

“But you guys were in there a good six seconds before they started the clock,” my buddy Thor said.

Well, OK, then. When did the first guy bolt?

“2:40.”

Which meant I'd counted my sixty seconds in thirty. Which meant I would make a very billable lawyer.

I took a gloriously freezing shower and then watched the rest of the heat on the TV in the locker room. Timmo the Great and another blond Finn teammate of his (they wore a spa maker name across the cocks of their Speedos) moved on to the quarterfinals, in just over 7:30. Seven minutes and thirty seconds? It horrified me. I'm horrified for *them*. I still cannot comprehend the pain of another four minutes and twenty seconds. Backstage, Timmo was surprisingly pink. I went up to him, chummy, and slapped him on the back with congratulations. He turned on me like he'd like to knife me.

Note to self: Slapping backs a definite no-no among saunists.

The Japanese teen idol had withdrawn. He made it to the quarterfinals, but now his trainer wouldn't let him go on. “It is good to care about sauna,” the trainer scolded him, “but you

must also care about the fans. You must care about the face they love.” It was probably a good thing. The guy was so ravaged by prickly heat he looked like a Christmas candy cane.

Thor had come up with a great idea during intermission. He was going to cook lunch in the sauna. With two eggs in his hands, he entered, but the heat slapped him sideways and he lost track of what he was trying to do. He learned what I learned: ten seconds in that sauna and your IQ suddenly goes straight to NASCAR fan. He set one of the eggs on the bench and the other up on a shelf, but as he was doing that, he managed to sit on the first egg. It instantly began to fry. No, seriously, it *fried* like it was at Denny’s. But it was too hot for him to try to clean it up, so he bolted out. “Oh ... my ... God,” is all he would say.

Then there was the horrible tale of my friend Rick Ellis, the transplanted Russian from New York. He entered the quarterfinals with dozens of blisters on his body. We all told him he was crazy, but he had no trainer and his wife held no sway. He climbed into the dreaded hot box, while we watched, full of dread. As he was going in, he looked like some of the worst guys coming out. You could tell that, instantly, even he saw it was a mistake on the order of Three Mile Island.

“Man, I knew I was in trouble right away,” he later said. “Soon as I sat down, I knew I had no chance. But when I felt behind my back and felt this big half-dollar-sized blister, I said, ‘OK, that’s enough. I gotta get out.’”

He was the first out, at 4:15, and when we greeted him, I nearly ralphed. He was melting like the wicked witch. His forehead, his lips, and his ears were giant sacs of pus. His triceps was riddled with pebble-sized blisters, dozens of them. So much skin was hanging off him he looked like the world’s most successful gastric-bypass patient. His forehead was a science-fiction movie. His nose was cooked like a forgotten kielbasa. And this was just what we could see.

“I don’t know, man,” I said. “Maybe you should go to first aid.”

“Nah, I’m fine!” he insisted. “Although it does kinda hurt back here.” He lifted up his shirt and there it was: this horrible, huge, pus-filled sac—the size of a \$3 pancake—just hanging off his armpit. His wife gasped. TLC turned away in horror. Thor and I swallowed, fascinated. “Dude!” we both said.

When we dragged him to the first-aid EMT, the guy said, “You must go to the hospital. Within twenty-four hours, when these blisters break, you will lose lots of fluid. You will be highly susceptible to infection. We can’t do anything for you here. It is too serious.”

So TLC and I piled him into our rented Volvo and took him to the hospital, where, as we were leaving, his wife was shaking her head.

I got back to find I’d been inserted into something called the Wild Card Final, involving some qualifying-heat losers whose sufferings somehow amused the crowd enough to want encore. Wonderful. I vowed to go 3:11.

This time, somehow, it was even hotter, if that’s possible. The bench was a wok. The skin on my back felt like the first night of Florida vacation when you’ve burned the bejesus out of your back and sides. But this time—counting all the cars I’ve ever owned—I managed to push through to four minutes, the second to come out again. My time was four minutes exactly.

This time, the winner was a Bellarussian with about eight teeth total, who went just over six minutes. The guy who took second place, a milk-white Swedish guy I call Casper, was in the shower, looking defeated. "I knew I couldn't beat him," Casper said. "I think he was drunk. I'm not sure he knew what he was doing."

Good rule of thumb: never enter a sauna contest with someone who can't feel pain going in.

What's scarier than the men were the women. They were absolutely the meanest, toughest and least attractive women this side of Rikers Island. They were all huge chunks of petrified wood, straw-haired and brute-faced, who looked like they just ate a lunch of boiled children and testicles. They were even more stern in the sauna than the men, and every bit as good. The former champ—Natalya Trifanova, also a Bellarussian—once actually lasted longer in the women's final than Timmo the Great did in the men's, but Timmo insists he could've stayed longer if forced to. There was talk that soon the women and men will compete in one field—like the Boston Marathon—to see, for once and all, who suffers best.

"Women are more tolerant of suffering by nature," Natalya grunted. "Because of childbirth and things like this." She is just slightly less expressive than a gulag wall. I asked her if she has a boyfriend. "Yes, we train together." No smile. No nothing. This is not a girl you buy lingerie for. Or propose to. She just comes over to your house one day and barks, "Today, we marry," slams you with a shovel, and drags you down to city hall by your haircut.

Our favorite woman, though, was a Finn named Leila Kulin who looked like Brun Hilda's lesbian aunt. She had these two long ponytails down each side and a huge ruddy face that could stop a front-loading Caterpillar. She was about five-two, 220 pounds, and most of that was face and the rest sheer will. She sat with her back to the piping hot bench, that face staring straight ahead, and she *never* moved. She didn't tic, she didn't flinch, she didn't lean, she didn't shift, she didn't even twitch. Her blood type was asbestos. Mannequins move more than she did.

So, naturally, the women's final came down to Brun Hilda and the brickish Natalya, and that has got to be the greatest final of all time, either sex, in WSC history.

At seven minutes, Natalya was starting to crack, fidgeting this way and that, wiping her face, checking impatiently on her feet and looking at the ceiling. Plus, she was competing against Mount Sit-more, Leila the Stone, who still hadn't moved, not a millimeter. Nothing. She's not human. She was born without nerve endings. Or a hypothalamus. Against the granite opponent, Natalya looked like a squirrel trapped in a microwave. She was blinking three times a second. She was gulping air. She kept shifting her haunches this way and that, trying to find a comfortable spot, but of course, the joke was, there are none.

Her eyes were wide as hubcaps. She moved to rub her legs as though they were on fire and she had to put them out, but she knew she mustn't, so she stopped herself. Instead she rubbed her hands over them, over and over, an inch above them, as though rubbing *near* them would help. We were seeing a woman be electrocuted, battery by battery, right in front of our eyes. Finally she couldn't stand it and she snapped. She started rubbing her legs up and down, madly. The judge jumped up and showed a red card and motioned her out. Disqualified. But get this—she

wouldn't come out! The judge beckoned again. *Get out!* But she wouldn't!

She was a half-cooked rabbit trying to escape an oven. She tried to get up, but her legs were baked stiff. She was paralyzed! The crowd gasped. She motioned the officials to come get her, but they didn't! They seemed transfixed by the situation. Or perhaps the idea of walking into a burning building gave them pause. And what was the Stone doing while a woman goes stark raving bananas next to her? Nothing! The Stone was pitiless. The Stone didn't even look at poor Natalya.

You're dying? Never heard of you.

Natalya motioned the judges again, *Come get me!* At last, they went in—and you could see the heat hit them in the face like a Holyfield right—but they couldn't get her off the bench. It's as though she was glued! One try! Two tries! Nothing! She was going to die in there, in front of 500 people! Finally, they got a third man, and they were able to scrape her off the bench. They tried to get her into a wheelchair, but it was like trying to put an elm tree into a box, limbs were everywhere, and spasming. At last they folded her into it and raced her to the cold showers.

And now, finally, the Stone moved. And what moves! She leapt up off the bench in utter joy and barreled through the sauna door like Jesse James out of the Silver Dollar. She was bouncing up and down as they dragged off the poor quivering lump that used to be Natalya. Her winning time was 10:31, but you got the feeling she could've stayed in there another minute. She watched *Dr. Zhivago*. "I could've gone fifteen minutes at least," she said. I believe it.

Meanwhile, backstage, they were pouring icy water on Natalya from three different directions, trying to save her life. And standing there, quietly, in the fourth shower was the Great Timmo, who was going to compete in mere minutes in the men's final. He saw her and looked away, shook his blond head a little, took a cleansing breath, and tried to get the image out of his mind.

It couldn't be comforting. He was the next gladiator up after they'd wheeled the last one off in sixty-three pieces.

. . .

Just before the men's final, Rick Ellis returned from the hospital. He was a walking bandage. Gauze covered both ears, his entire forehead, his nose, every square inch of his back and sides, some of his chest, practically everything but his knuckles, which probably should have them. From the look on his wife's face, I knew what was coming next: They'll be turning his sauna into a shoe closet. "Guess I'm glad I didn't bet on me," he admitted.

Finally, the men's final arrived, and when the four pretenders bolted for their lives, it left the two favorites—Timmo the Great vs. Markku the Fu. They just sat and sweated and took furtive glances at each other, waiting to see if one of them would do the other the great favor of expiring so they could get the hell out. Ten minutes. Eleven. Twelve. It was a Hadrian standoff.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Markku the Fu stuck his hand out sharply for Timmo to shake it. Timmo looked at the hand for just a moment, as if to say, "What the hell?" It was a shocking moment. The man was congratulating his rival on winning when the event wasn't even over.

yet! It was like Kobe Bryant stepping up to take the game-winning three and LeBron James offering his hand in congratulations just before he shoots it.

Timmo looked at the hand and shook it, whereupon Markku the Fu jumped up and flew out of the door, followed like a noon shadow by Timmo the Great, champion again, in a winning time of 12:26. Sounds like a recipe, doesn't it?

1. Soak in cold water.
2. Broil at 261 degrees for 12 minutes, 26 seconds.
3. Serve.

The winner was humble. "I was guessing he was better than me today," the great man said afterward, just slightly redder than a freshly cooked Maine lobster. "So I was surprised he shook my hand and left. Nobody's ever done that before."

And what did Timmo the Great get for suffering longer than every other person? Sauna speakers.

Hey, congratulations on eating more hams than everybody else! Here's your free ham!

I worked my way over to him, shook his hand, and said with a grin: "Well done!"

He stared blankly at me.

Note to self: Saunists don't like puns.

Ferret Legging



Generally, these are the five places you should *never* put a live ferret:

1. your garbage disposal
2. the pope's hat
3. the Upper Larchmont Junior League Annual Fashion Luncheon
4. your spaghetti sauce
5. your pants

And yet, against all sanity, I ignored this advice. In fact, in pursuit of the very real sport of “ferret legging,” I allowed a woman to put not one, but two live ferrets down my pants.

While wearing no underwear.

Sober.

It's an experience I would ... well, let me just say that through therapy ... well, maybe I should just start at the beginning.

Ferrets (*goinica attachius*) are mostly tubular and often hairless and rather ugly, much like the lead singer for Midnight Oil. And those are their good qualities. They have teeth like a barracuda and jaws like wood clamps and the attitude of divorce attorneys, which means that if they chomp into you, there is a very good chance they are not going to let go until Arbor Day.

Ask Ben Stiller.

He was filming *Along Came Polly* with Jennifer Aniston, when a ferret he was holding (Aniston's character kept a ferret) chomped Stiller's chin and refused to release it. “I didn't do anything! I swear!” the poor man told reporters. “We were doing this final scene where I come running after Jennifer and I'm holding the ferret. He did this crazy turnaround thing

and he literally attached himself to my chin and then he didn't let go. I had to get a rabbi shot! I didn't provoke him at all. Their teeth are sharp, like razors. I mean, they're ratlike creatures. It was a horrible experience."

Incidents like this are what has earned ferrets the nicknames "piranhas with feet," "fur-coated evil," and "shark-of-the-land." They have a spine like a Roto-Rooter probe and more muscles in their jaws than a basement full of Dobermans. They have the same general DNA as Haitian loan sharks. They are not just vicious rats. They are vicious rats who know Rogo Clemens' pharmacist.

Actually, ferrets are not really rats—though the resemblance is uncanny. They're kin to the polecat. They live for meat. Meat is to a ferret what heels are to Carmen Electra. In fact, the foot-long ferret (not counting tail) is so fond of meat that it makes an excellent hunter. A ferret can get down and through any tunnel a rabbit makes and chase it out the other end where the hunter waits with hot lead. For a time in England, it became illegal to hunt with dogs, so hunters started using ferrets. Then it became illegal to hunt with ferrets, which, of course, didn't stop your average Nigel. The story goes that one day the game warden came walking up to a ferret-using hunter, who had nowhere to hide his ferret, so he dropped down his pants. Must've been a memorable conversation.

Nigel (sweating): Hiyo, Warden Charles.

Warden: Hiyo, Nigel. Good day for hunting.

Nigel (biting own lip hard): Bloody good.

Warden: Are you aware there are quite a lot of odd movements in your crotch region?

Nigel (holding back tears): No! Truly?

Warden: Truly.

Nigel (shaking visibly): Well, I have a confession to make.

Warden: Oh?

Nigel: (weeping) You stir something in me, Charles.

Anyway, it turned out a warm ferret is a better hunter than a cold ferret and the pants-dropping practice caught on. This started an argument in the tavern one night among the lads. Who among them could stand having their ferret down their pants the longest? This probably begot a bar bet, which started a sport, which, 200 years later, somehow, involved me.

The rules of ferret legging are simple yet cruel: No wearing underwear. No declawing or defanging the ferret. Pants must be wool and clamped at the ankle. Belt cinched tight at the waist. No feeding the ferret beforehand. No drugging the ferret. No drugging oneself. Knocking the ferret off a particular part of your person is allowed, but only from outside your pants. Of course, this is like saying, "Lifting the steamroller off your foot is allowed because there is almost no getting a ferret off a particular part of your person once it has its heart set on it. Some people use screwdrivers. I've heard of people doing it with scalding hot water. Also heard it doesn't work. The winner is determined in the same manner as an oyster-eating contest. The man who can keep them down the longest is the champion.

The all-time record for withstanding the pain of ferrets down the trousers is, believe it or not, five hours and twenty-six minutes by a furry little man in Yorkshire, England, named Reg Mellor. One time, *Outside* magazine asked Mellor if the ferrets ever bit his crank.

“Do they!” Mellor answered. “Why, I’ve had ’em hangin’ from me tool for hours an’ hours an’ hours! Two at a time—one on each side! I been swelled up big as that!” And he pointed to a large can of instant coffee.

Not a comforting passage for the greenhorn ferret legger to read.

Ferret legging has fallen in glory since its heyday in the ’70s. People decided it was cruel. Not to the ferrets, to the people. Great Britain banned it, which hurt a lot. Hell, you can’t even own a ferret as a *pet* in California or Hawaii. Far as we could tell, only two places in North America still participated in legging: Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Richmond, Virginia.

But Manitoba apparently took too much heat from animal rights activists (if they only knew) and axed it in favor of “ferret racing,” which involves ferrets running through a series of plastic pipes and tubes. Yuck. Now, if they released a rabbit two feet ahead of the ferret, perhaps coated in bacon grease, you’d have something.

That left Richmond, which was featuring ferret legging at its annual Richmond Highland Games & Celtic Festival, an event with the motto: “Music, Food and Large Men Throwing Stuff.” The ad promised that these large men would heave giant rocks and flip telephone poles end over end. Plus, they’d be wearing kilts while doing it. Are those good things to combine? Kilt-wearing men and knife-toothed ferrets? Isn’t that sort of like having R. Kelly at the Girl Scout Jamboree?

To get a little background on the coming event, TLC began e-mailing a woman from the Richmond Ferret Rescue League named Paige Collier, who informed her that I would “almost certainly” be fine, that yes, I would be putting them down my pants without underwear, but that everyone is only allowed to go three minutes and can quit anytime they want during those three.

That’s it? Three minutes? Five hours and twenty-three minutes shy of the world record? I was almost, dare I say, disappointed. Then Paige Collier wrote, “Would you like to see bios of the competing ferrets?”

This came as a shock to the both of us. Ferrets have bios? Who knew?

“Send the bios,” I said, since I make it a rule to know as much as possible about the thing I’m putting down my pants. They came. Each bio arrived with a photo and a paragraph or two on the celebrity ferret. Here is an actual ferret bio she sent:

Peppy ... was surrendered to the Richmond Ferret Rescue League approximately 6 months ago, and is about 2 years old. He is a white, crimson-eyed male, who runs faster in reverse than drive. He is suspected to be deaf, but this doesn’t slow him down. This is his first year participating in the ferret legging.

The mind nearly blows a gasket at all the questions this one single paragraph sends ricocheting around the noggin. For instance, what does that mean, “surrendered”? Was Peppy involved in some kind of police/ferret standoff? And why is Peppy only *suspected* to be deaf? Couldn’t you simply smash two cymbals next to his ears and see if Peppy jumps

Or is the fear of that reaction exactly why he's still only "suspected"? And, my God, if Pepp really is deaf, and he is *my* ferret, does that mean he can't hear me screaming? And why for the love of Christ does he go faster *backwards*? What kind of hideous hellbeast is this? Are those crimson eyes? Whose ferret was it, Charles Manson's?

There were more. *Mocha ...is one of our therapy ferrets.* What kind of therapy does Mocha practice? Aroma? *Paco ...is not particularly fond of other ferrets.* In other words, Paco has killed most of the other ferrets. *Tosh ... has an awesome personality.* Oh, yeah, he does this great James Leno impression and, like, he's always got gum.

There was also very helpful and detailed information about such possible dungaree divers as Karma, Marley, Zack, and Clyde. If I had to pick one of those four to have down my pants I suppose it would be Marley. Hopefully, he'd be higher than Snoop Dogg, find a small place to cuddle up near my ankle, and just veg. Thinking about it, I came up with a short list of ferrets I would definitely *not* want in my pants:

Fang

Adolf

Psycho

Lockjaw

Dahmer

Anyway, fast-forward to late October and me, at the end of a long ESPN road trip, pulling into the Richmond Highland Games & Celtic Festival to put a live animal down my pants in the pursuit of great journalism.

"Is that the deal Richard Gere was into?" my brother asked.

"No, no, different thing entirely," I said.

Then my son, Kel, weighed in.

"Ferret licking?"

"No, not ferret licking," I said. "Legging."

"Because I'd pay to see you do some ferret licking."

Smart aleck.

The festive color and pageantry of the Richmond Highland Games & Celtic Festival took place in a picturesque and charming ... parking lot. No lie. A giant dirt parking lot next to the Richmond Raceway Center. Inside was the answer to the question: Hey, whatever happened to all those geeks from high school drama club?

Turns out a highlands festival is kind of like a Renaissance fair, except way more plain. Everywhere you looked were tanless people dressed in Elizabethan costume, most of whom weren't in any shows. Bulbous men in kilts. One woman was in leggings, a kilt, and a Darth Vader helmet. One entire pink, fat family of four was dressed identically, down to the little pom-poms on their socks—red kilts, white shirts, boots, and tam-o'-shanters. People walked around all day just *dying* to say something in faux Shakespeare.

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