

The T-shirt Caper

By
Jay L. Carlton

It was the summer of '87, or was it '88? Whatever, it was a Tuesday night. That much I remember. Our team was playing our scheduled home games out of Sportsman's Inn, a very popular watering hole located in the saintly salubrious suburban area of Florissant Missouri, which occupies a large part of North St. Louis County. We were in the middle of another close race in the local 8-ball league barely holding down the number four spot in a 10-team division. It was forty-five minutes to post time. Johnny 'Big Ragu' Ragusa, 'Bulldog' Bill Arnold and yours truly were passing time waiting for other team members to make an appearance. Mayday Rick May, Big Mo, [from Missouri] Rocky Ortello, Daryl Miller, and Pat Neal would be arriving soon.

That isn't them coming through the back door carrying bats and gloves. Those tobacco-chewing beer-guzzling citizens are gentlemen in good standing of the last remaining Corkball League in North St. Louis County. Sportsman's Inn has had a Corkball cage out back for many years and four teams play nightly Monday through Thursday. Also there are several horseshoe pitches and a double large Bar-B-Q pit. Add the Darts and Shuffleboard along with the Pool Leagues, one could see how well rounded this sports bar truly is.

Check out the trio resting their buns beside the over-sized 4x8-pool table with the over-sized cue ball. That's us. As you can plainly see we are not really doing much of nothing, just having a drink and going over the visiting team's roster. Pay no attention to the shapely young dolls passing our table doing their best to distract our attention. Especially the one wearing white knee-high boots with 5-inch heels, velvet-blue hot-pants that looks like they were painted on, the mini tank top that can't help but to show off the 38-D's. I mean if there was ever an honest to goodness certified balloon smuggler needed for house attention she could apply for and get the position.

Her face was slightly thin reminding me that she could be a model. The earrings were golden in color that enhanced her light tan face. They matched the gold arm bracelet around her right bicep. Just the right amount of eye shadow showed off the prettiest drop-dead bright green eyes I have ever seen. Her long blonde hair swung from side to side when she walked keeping time and rhythm with her curvaceous swaying hips. Oh, those hips. On the left hip there was a small tattoo of a light gray bunny rabbit that hopped with each rise. But who's paying attention? Hardly noticeable. We had more important things to do. Riiiiight!

Now here's where the story really begins. See the three citizens entering the front door. They just got off work and decided to have a few laughs, a few ales and knock the stripes and solids about. They ordered a round of longnecks and that one in the black T-shirt asked Mike [the bartender] for a roll of quarters. He headed for the pool table.

After three or four games, we weren't really paying much attention to them, two of the party decided that all they wanted to do was enjoy their drinks and left their partner

alone at the pool table. It was obvious that after running off the balls that remained on the table from the last game this guy wasn't interested in just sitting at the bar and down beer with his compadres. That's when he decided to challenge anyone and everyone in the house to a game of '8' ball.

He waved to our table and asked if we were interested. We were busy and turned him down. His pals refused him again so he played alone. After awhile he got a little loud and began bragging about how he could beat all comers for five bucks per game. When he asked me the second time I said okay, but we pay off after each game. He agreed. The guy could brag and drink better than he could shoot.

I won the first game and he paid me a 5-spot. I won the second game and he again paid me a 5-dollar bill. I think he was getting close to the end. The tip-off came after I downed the '8' for the third game and he handed me four singles and four quarters. I think he borrowed the four singles.

He racked the balls for the fourth game; I broke and ran out. The boy looked a little dazed. I guess after losing four in a row he figured his hustling career was over and ESPN wasn't going to come calling.

Then he says, "I ain't got no more money!" I kinda figured that. Apparently his friends didn't either for neither of them came to his rescue. I told him not to worry about it that he could pay me the next time he came in.

Then he says, "How 'bout my shirt!"

I said, "What!"

He repeated "how 'bout my shirt. I'm outta money. I'll pay you my shirt!"

I looked at it. It was painfully obvious that the guy's wardrobe was seriously out of date. A trendsetter he wasn't. It was at least eight years old. He wanted to put up an 8-year-old heavy metal band T-shirt for payment. It came stock with a couple of holes, one rip under the armpit and a tear around the border on the right sleeve. Add to that the ring around the collar, it was a real prize to behold, if you were a burnout with only 50-percent capacity left. The band's insignia was on the front side along with catsup or some kind of food stains dried across the guitar strings. The dates of their last (or one of their last) world tours was listed on the back, all about faded out. That's how everyone in the house knew it should have been buried, burned or put out to pasture a long time ago. Soon it would have been faded so badly no one would have been able to recognize which band it was anyway.

After some quick deliberation I said, "Okay, I'll take it."

He said, "...huh!" Surprised that I would even consider such a proposal.

"I said I'll take it," I reiterated. His jaw dropped about 18 inches. In what seemed like a reluctant response, he slowly began to pull it over his head, then off his left arm and finally his right arm. He took his sweet time in removing the ragged faded apparel as he was in hopes that I would stop him and say forget it. But... I... didn't.

It was a slow burn. The Ragu said he thought he saw a tear well up in the guy's eye. The house gave its undivided attention to this T-shirt stripper. The girls whooped,

hollered and applauded as he began to remove the stained garment. They clapped with encouragement. "Take it off, take it all off," they yelled.

Finally he handed it over. It must have been his all-time favorite beat-up T-shirt and parting with it would be devastating indeed. But I figured he would get over it and anyway, I'd lay down good Yankee dollars that he had several more out of date fashion-statement T-shirts of the like lying around his closet floor or under the bed.

Giving it one final look, hesitantly, he handed it over. Gambling dept paid in full.

Remember the old adage:

That's how it goes,

First your money,

Then your clothes.

To add insult to an already bruise ego, the bartender, Mike Reynolds, threw the guy out.

Hey, bar policy. No shirt... no shoes... no service.

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