

Humor Winner

A Physical Education | BY KYLE J. SHELTON

As I hung there, my arms struggling to pull themselves up the chin-up bar, it started to dawn on me that my arms weren't going to do it.

The entire 8:00 am, freshman PES 100 class was staring at me, watching my spaghetti arms shaking, trying their hardest to pull up my chubby body.

In my head I was cursing my arms. "Screw you, arms," I told them. "What have I ever done to you? I don't ask much from you guys. Open a door here. Turn on a TV there. Simple stuff. Now when I need you to do one pull-up you wimp out on me. I'm not asking you to do eight pull-ups. Hell, I'm not even asking you to do two. One. One freakin' pull-up. But no. Well, the next time you both want suntan lotion when we go to the beach you can just forget it."

My P.E. coach, Coach Carson, stood watching me with his arms folded. He was a tiny imp of a man (sort of a cross between Frodo and Mickey Rooney) with no musculature to speak of and a smirky smile always plastered on his face. Supposedly he ran track in college. The sun reflected off his shaved head, and his thin mustache and dark eyebrows gave his facial expressions an exaggerated quality. He was thin and in relatively good shape, but the thing that gave him his presence was his voice. It was loud and commanding, and he used it to his full advantage.

"It's all right, Shelton. Just drop down."

I did as he said. All the muscle fibers in my arms couldn't lift up my own body. I decided it wasn't my arms' fault. I wasn't truly enormous back then but I was definitely chubby. Combine that with my arms' lack of any amount of strength and pull-ups were really just a horrible accident waiting to happen. I had images of my arms dislocating from my body, my torso and legs falling to the floor while my arms still gripped firmly to the bar.

Walking away from the bar I could see Hernandez smiling at

me and looking at his circle of friends. I didn't know Hernandez well, but what I did know about him I didn't like much.

This was my first semester of my freshman year of high school, and it was hard getting used to all the new faces I was being inundated with. At Chandler High there were close to 680 kids in my class alone, so almost every period was filled with new faces. Faces like Hernandez.

He looked like a member of a street-gang, but more of a Broadway musical street-gang member, not some tattooed thug. Despite his West Side Story look, Hernandez was tough enough that I felt his presence hovering over my psyche during every class period.

Somehow I managed to survive ridicule in all of my other classes, based mostly on the fact that all of my other classes never asked me to catch a football or do a pull-up. Once asked to do anything that required any hand-eye coordination or strength, my body would do its best impression of a spasmodic turtle: slow yet unpredictable.

Needless to say I hated P.E. My best friend at the time was in the class with me, so we used each other as moral support. His name was Atlas (why his parents hated him he never told me). His physique was as chubby as mine, but his coordination was slightly better, so he didn't get the prize for being the biggest spaz in the class. That prize was mine, and I defended my title well.

Every Tuesday and Thursday I would spend an hour and a half with this group of future inmates. We ran together. We played together. We snidely laughed at each other behind each others' backs. We were like a twisted, self-destructive family. But, like all families, we hated each others' guts.

With his background in track, Coach Carson enjoyed making his classes run mini-marathons, often in the frigid eight a.m. cold. He would tell us to start running around the track and not stop

KYLE J. SHELTON is a 2009 graduate from Arizona State University's Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law and an associate at Pite Duncan LLP in Phoenix. Kyle has tried to inject humor into all his writing over the years, which probably explains the "B-" he received in his first-year legal writing course.



Kyle J. Shelton

until he said so (or the sun became a supernova, whichever came first). The first mile would go by fast, but around mile two the class started looking like we were on a death march. Kids who had started out running like there was no tomorrow now looked like extras from the film *Dawn of the Dead*.

Atlas had been born with a lung condition that affected the amount of air he could take in, so sometime after the first mile his wheezing started to get strong.

"Kyle," he would cough out. "If something happens to me ... If I don't make it today ... if I don't make it around this track for the second mile, you gotta do something for me."

"Don't talk like that. You're gonna make it. Try to imagine going to Bio after this class. Imagine sitting in an air-conditioned room where all you have to do is sit back and daydream and stare at Amber Stewart's profile in a sweater. Imagine it and it will be so."

"I've seen too much in this place, man. Sometimes I wonder how I can ever go back ... go back to classes like Biology 101 and English like I ain't seen nothin'. Like none of this happened. P.E. changes you. Changes you in ways you didn't know a man could change. I hear kids in math class who are getting their P.E. credit through the marching band, talking like they know. Like they know what P.E. is. They don't know, man. They don't know nothin'."

Okay, so maybe what he really said was, "I don't know if I'm gonna make it today" and I responded, "C'mon, probably just a few more minutes more." Maybe he was too out of breath to

soliloquize on that track. Maybe it was a little less *Platoon* and a little more *The Wonder Years*. Either way, war or P.E. is hell.

In any event, after a nice "jog" to warm us up, Carson would generally have us engage in some sort of team sport. Football ... soccer ... basketball ... baseball ... pretty much anything that proved that my X-Y chromosomes were under suspicion was good enough for him. I enjoyed football mostly because it allowed me to just run around aimlessly, looking busy without having to actually try and throw or catch anything. My theory was that as long as I was running somewhere on the field the others would just assume I was doing something game-related.

This theory of mine might have explained why I never got picked when teams were divided up. Coach Carson, the fair and compassionate schmuck that he was, felt that team captains

Humor

should be the best athletes in the class, so as to create a competitive balance. Needless to say, the only way I would ever become a team captain would be if some freak accident killed everyone in class except the paraplegic kid and me.

When the team captains were decided (which were almost always Hernandez and a kid named Dalton) I would stand there waiting to be put out of my misery. 99.9% of the time the last two guys to be picked were Atlas and me. I'm fairly certain that if somehow an oak log had made its way out onto the field the log would have gotten picked before Atlas or me.

"Hmmm. This is really a tough one. I think ... I think I'm going to have to go with the log," Hernandez would say.

"The log? He's inanimate!" (Yes, the log's a "he." It was an all-male class). "He can't do anything but sit there!" I would scream.

"But he's got spunk. He has a 'I'm as bad as I want to be' vibe going on. And being in the middle of the field, the other team might trip over him. Can you promise the same results?"

One day, while standing
and defending my side of
the field, I started to let
myself daydream. As I
started to ponder mysteries
like why I had no facial
hair but my Aunt was like
Grizzly Adams, I suddenly
heard some commotion
from down the field.

He would have had a good argument, as I usually only tripped over one of my teammates or myself. It was probably a good thing a log never showed up. Still after all of that at least during football I could act busy. It was harder to fake usefulness in soccer. In soccer there was one constantly moving ball and it was expected of me to try to get near that ball and actually try to kick

it somewhere. The best soccer player on the team was a small, wiry little guy called "Mochila" (which is Spanish for "backpack." No one ever told me why they called him backpack, but I just assumed it was because he could probably fit inside one). Mochila would run around the field with a look of pure maniacal happiness plastered on his dwarf face the entire time. He knew he was built for this. Soccer was his calling, and here he was the star. During most games the team with Mochila just released him, sat, and watched him go, while the other team pretty much chased Mochila around the field.

I, like Mochila, knew my mission when it came to the game of soccer. My mission: pretend like you were running to Mochila but never catch up with him. If you ever started to get close to him (by some miracle beyond even Mother Teresa's understanding) it was best to fake a foot injury and start hobbling. This was my soccer master plan. There was no fail-safe strategy, no backup in case one day a head-to-head Mochila face-off became inevitable. This was my weakness, and I'm reasonably sure God knew this.

One day, while standing and defending my side of the field, I started to let myself daydream. Mochila didn't have the ball, so I was good for the time being. As I started to ponder mysteries like why I had no facial hair but my Aunt was like Grizzly Adams, I suddenly heard some commotion from down the field. I looked up and saw my nightmare. Mochila. Like a chinchilla-sized juggernaut, Mochila ran toward me. There was no avoiding him. This was it. Man against man. Kyle against Mochila. I tried to convince myself this wouldn't end in disaster. "Calm down," I told myself. "Let your game do all your talking for you." (What was I thinking? My game had a laryngectomy).

Then Mochila did the unexpected (even with his tiny size I think he might have been the devil). He kicked the ball at me. As the ball flung toward me I could hear my teammates scream my name, under the misguided idea that somehow yelling my name would make me concentrate. Instead it allowed me to hear my own name being screamed as a soccer ball slammed into the side of my head. I yelled "Agggggghh!" That may not be completely accurate. I might have yelled "Ahhhhhhgg!" I honestly don't remember. I do recall Atlas moving in slow motion yelling, "Nooo!" Later he told me I was the only one doing that. I also recall hearing laughter come from most of the class as Mochila retrieved the ball and started kicking it farther down the field.

Backpack didn't even give me a chance to challenge him. I like to think that he was threatened by my size and figured the only way to take me down was through assault. Either way that incident was still my crowning achievement in soccer. I had faced Mochila, and I was found wanting.

As the fall semester of my freshman year started winding down I couldn't wait for a two-week break from P.E. I knew Coach Carson and the rest of Hell's Angels would still be there next semester, but I figured there was a reasonable chance that over the two-week break I might break a leg or develop some sort of

spinal disease and be excused. A boy could dream.

The very last day of class of the fall semester I was ecstatic. We had spent most of the hour and a half running and playing a game of football in our high school stadium, and as the last 15 minutes of class came upon us Coach Carson called us over to the bleachers. We all sat down. He seemed as if he had something to say, and I figured it was going to be something like, "It's been a good semester, guys. Have a good break."

Boy, was I wrong.

"Guys, I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes about your grades for this semester. Many of you will be surprised. Many of you may be upset. But understand that your grades are a product of what you put into this class." So far things were going well.

Then they did a complete 180°. I wish I could tell you it didn't occur, but it did. I've tried to blur the memories of this speech by watching Dane Cook movies for three weeks straight, but even the pain of that didn't help.

"Let me tell you something about Shelton," Coach Carson barked to the class.

"I don't think he'll mind me saying this, but we all know he ain't really the athletic type."

No, really? Other high school kids in other states knew I wasn't the athletic type. Carson might as well have said the sky was blue. Yet despite its obviousness the comment still made me want to beat him to death with my left shoe.

"Honestly, out of all the games of football we've played in this class, I don't think Shelton touched that damn ball once," Carson yelled. (He was obviously forgetting that one time when Hernandez accidentally threw the ball too far left and it hit me in the nuts. Being the polite and respectful guy I am, though, I didn't correct him.)

"In fact the only time I see Shelton outside of this class, he always seems to be in the library playing chess or coming out of the men's room. Ain't that right, Shelton?"

"Ummm ... yes, sir ... I ... uh... like to play chess ... and I guess I have a weak bladder."

At this point I was *really* starting to wonder where he was going with this.

"Anyway, all I'm trying to say is that Shelton is not really athletic." (Okay, let's beat Shelton with a dead horse, I thought.) "Let's compare him to Joe Vidmar over here."

I started to look around the stadium for cameras. This was so over-the-top I started to wonder if I was on some hidden-camera show. This surely was a Television prank.

Carson continued.

"Vidmar is a natural athlete. He's strong, fast, and has great hand-eye coordination. In an athlete I couldn't ask for more. Yet as a student Vidmar is lacking. He doesn't always show up to class. When I tell the class to do something, he often takes his time starting. Maybe laughing and joking with Nate Jepsen over there, usually *about* Shelton. Vidmar just doesn't always listen. But look at Shelton. Take a good hard look ..."

I pleaded with him telepathically to not look at me but I think he was on a roll at this point. If destroying self-confidence was an art then this surely was his masterpiece.

"Shelton doesn't hesitate to do what I ask. If I tell Shelton to run a mile, Shelton runs a mile. If I tell him to get out on the field to get ready for a game of football, he doesn't turn to his friend and make a joke ... he gets his ass out there. Shelton always listens."

I started to look
around the stadium
for cameras. This
was so over-the-top I
started to wonder if I
was on some hidden-
camera show. This
surely was a
Television prank.

Coach Carson had made an eloquent and compelling point. Not only did I have the athletic prowess of an eight-year-old girl but I was also his bitch.

"The person with the highest grade in this class is Hernandez. Hernandez is the best *athlete* in the class."

Hernandez looked to his buddies and nodded his head, as if to say "Damn straight."

"The person with the second-highest-grade in this class is Shelton. Shelton is the best *student* in the class."

I looked at my one buddy and widened my eyes, as if to say, "Run. Run and keep running. It's too late for me now, I'm gone. But you have a future. You have hope. For god's sake, get the hell out of here while you've still got a chance!"

Coach Carson paused for a moment, looking out at the class, taking some time to measure his words carefully. The look in his eyes smacked of pride, as if he was imparting a great message

Humor

upon this class, a message that would serve them well for all their years.

"Shelton always tries. He doesn't have the ability, but he has the determination. This being the end of the first semester, all of your grades have already been decided. I tell you this little story for next semester. Next semester, if you want to raise your grade, you've got to get out there and show me you give a damn about this class. That's all. Class is over. Y'all can hit the showers."

For some odd reason hitting the showers was not something I was too keen on doing at that moment. Frankly, next semester didn't look too bright either. All I could think of was that Carson was through dealing with me. He had ordered a hit out on me through this speech. He could have done the honorable thing and just smacked me in the head with a brick after class. But no. He had decided that wasn't quick enough for me. Apparently my chess playing had pissed him off or something. Maybe he hated chess. Maybe he hated kids with weak kidneys. Maybe he hated kids with weak kidneys who played chess. Maybe chess had killed his father. I didn't know why he wanted me dead, but it was fairly evident he was good at getting it done. That speech was brilliant.

At his trial for my murder I could imagine him taking the stand. "Why would I kill Shelton? I liked the kid. In fact, I gave a big speech to my class right before winter break talking him up. Why would I do that if I hated him?" The jurors, all women in their forties who had long forgotten the horrors of high school P.E., would look at each other and nod in agreement. "What a sweet man," they would think to themselves. "Taking the time to make sure the class knew of Shelton's virtue."

If there's anything that'll get you killed in P.E. it's virtue. (Or, in some instances, staring at guys too long in the shower. Steven Goff learned that the hard way. I'm not a religious man, but, wherever you are, Steven ... peace, my friend. Peace.)

I walked back from the football field with Atlas. He looked ahead, his eyes glazed over in shock. For a while we didn't say anything. What was there to say? All I could think of talking about was getting into some sort of high school witness protection program. Maybe they could insert me into a high school in San Diego. Maybe make me like some kind of bad boy who had to be expelled from his old high school because he didn't play by the rules and made his own brand of justice. I could take up smoking, maybe get a tattoo, and start dating some hot Goth chick named "Darkness" who only liked to make droll ironic comments and screw my brains out. This was sounding a lot better than my current life.

Atlas interrupted my thoughts about what kind of Harley I would need in San Diego by coughing and saying, "Sooooo. That kind of sucked, didn't it?"

That was stating the case rather plainly, but at this point I figured arguing with my only friend in P.E. wouldn't be a smart move.

"Yeah. It really did." We continued walking. "So really, how bad do you think this will be?"

"I just want you to
know, whatever happens in
there, today or next
semester, I'll be there to fight
off the angry hordes with
you. We will not give in. We
will not give up."

Atlas paused, thinking for a moment. "I'd say it'd be pretty bad if not for the fact that you already have zero respect in this class. It's not like you really have anything to lose."

"I have my genitals."

"That's true. But c'mon, what were those really doing for you anyway?"

He made a valid point, but he was just trying to lighten the mood. As we approached the locker room door we both knew the end was coming. He looked me in the eyes.

"I just want you to know, whatever happens in there, today or next semester, I'll be there to fight off the angry hordes with you. If you are to die this day, Kyle Shelton, then you will not die alone. We will fight back the night, fight back the darkness that looms over us. We will not give in. We will not give up. We will fight with our last breath, and if that is not enough for the pagan gods to grant us mercy, then to hell with them and to hell with this world."

Okay, he never actually said that. In reality I think he said something along the lines of, "Well, here it goes," but really, how cool is "Well, here it goes"? I know, it's pretty lame. I thought it was lame at the time but I didn't say anything.

I walked up, tightened my genitals, grabbed the door handle and pulled it. As I walked in I could smell the sweat and the steam from the showers.

I saw Hernandez emerging from his shower, naked and glaring at me.

He didn't control me; I knew this in my heart.

None of these high school thugs did. They existed, like some generic cast of characters in the background of my life, solely as models of some kind of deformed masculinity.

As much as I hated them, despised their very being, I still measured myself against them.

Measured my physicality against theirs. Used them to test who I was.

As Hernandez walked past me, I looked down. I avoided his gaze.

Being a man is tougher than it looks. 