

CRUISING CAROLINA

Fock 2: Skott Land

I got to Skott's Kabin about midnight, quite tired, but not tired enough to decline his offer for a beer or two over some good old coaching talk.

Skott was a Florida native who had been coaching Cross Country and Track at University of Mobile for a few years when I met him. We were attending the same USATF Level II Coaches School at Brigham Young in beautiful Provo, Utah, in the summer of 1994. Neither of us knew anyone there, but we all coached the same sport, and as the first couple of days passed, everyone gradually became friends with everyone else. I mean, here we all were, thrown into seven days of total immersion in distance running: talking it, reading it, watching it, analyzing it, dissecting it; lectures, tests, projects, presentations, demonstrations, and discussions both formal and informal. It was terrific. We reveled in it.



And it was made even better by the ambiance of Provo. The tan, craggy mountains of the Wasatch Range towered over BYU's modern and spotlessly clean campus. An enormous Y at least 200 yards long, made of white cement, gleamed on the face of the ridge [Y for Young, as in Brigham, you know]. The sky was routinely azure – that inspiring shade of bottomless blue under which you can't help feeling good. The air was devoid of humidity or pollution. Even under 95° sunshine, our afternoon runs were surprisingly comfortable. They would have been downright pleasant but for the inevitable gasping and wheezing that was brought on by the thin mountain air (but even that was somehow enjoyable). Running along the river trail, or around the lake, or at the foot of the steep slopes, or around campus, or down into

Provo proper was a delight. Only a small push would have been enough to get me to rip up my return ticket and stay out there.

Even more delightful, though, were the people. It was liked being beamed onto the Planet of the Pleasant. *Everybody* on campus smiled and said "Hi!" with cheerful sincerity. Flocks of beautiful young Mormon coeds would saunter by, some even going out of their way, to greet us affably.

One morning, we found ourselves face-to-face with two typically clean-cut, smiling collegians bearing large, flat, open boxes. "Would you like a muffin?" they asked, and extended the boxes filled with dozens of freshly baked corn, blueberry, cranberry, and poppyseed muffins. "We made too many this morning," they explained, "would you like one?" They would have been heartbroken if we had refused. And the muffins were delicious!

My natural Bostonian cynicism was really taking a beating by the end of that week. I was starting to smile back at people instead of locking a sharp gaze at them and barking, "what are you fucking smiling at, you twit?!" My first impulse to Muffinman was to growl, "Why? What's wrong with them? Did you roll them on the ground or something???" or "You better not ask me for some goddamn donation now, Mormon!"

But there was no catch. No razor blade in the muffin. No rat's bane in the mix. Amiability simply abounded. Even the dog that we passed one night, tethered behind a fence that bore a "BEWARE OF DOG" sign, came bounding over, tail full of wag, to play with us.

Overall, the week was great, the food was plentiful and tasty – though the prohibition of caffeine on campus made for slow wake-ups for many of us – and the company was most enjoyable.

So, it was against this background that I met Skott. Aged 27, he was twelve years my junior, and just about as insidiously diabolical as I was when I bore the mantle of youth. He had an innocent demeanor, a disarmingly kind voice, and – most dangerous of all – a contagious thirst. It was this latter trait that served as the mortar of our friendship.

It was the midpoint of the Coaching School, Thursday night, and I was being the model student, on my way up to my room after evening sessions to work on my physiology exam, when Skott crossed my path. I suspected nothing. My guard was down. Skott casually mentioned that he and another of our group were thinking of taking a walk to the nearest watering hole for a beer.

Bing! The seed had been planted. His seemingly innocuous comment lit a softly glowing, golden neon sign in my head: **BEER**. That oh-so-familiar glow began to warm my overworked and fatigued brain cells. But my resolve remained steadfast.

I'd gladly meet up with them, I said, as soon as I finished my test. But Skott's devious incisiveness would not be so easily parried. He had his fish on the line, and he knew it. "Well," he said, with a hint of southern drawl, "this *is* Provo. For all we know, the bars might close at 10:00." It was 8:45.

Panic. The golden neon sign began flashing to blinding red, pulsing its urgent signal directly to the emergency section of my cerebral cortex. A paroxysm of adrenaline sent a tremor through my system. "Let me drop off my books," I heard myself utter through quickened breath, "and I'll meet you in the lobby in three minutes." A regular house of cards, that's me.

A. Beuford Gifford's Libation Emporium -- www.abgsbar.com -- (ABG's to the locals) turned out to be old, dirty, wooden, dark, and smoky. It was perfect: the Lewis' of Utah. I was thrilled to discover that pristine Provo had an underbelly after all. We had to walk two miles to get to it, but that was nothing to us if it meant gettin' beer. After total deprivation for *three whole days* (gasp!), the sweet nectar flowed straight into our souls. Tough to be a lush. ABG's turned out to be open until 1:00 (2:00 on weekends), so our panic had been unfounded. Still, better safe than sober.

Well, the good word traveled fast, and I think Skott had a lot to do with it. Our threesome swelled to seven the next night, with several others arriving independently. And on Saturday night – graduation night – more than thirty coaches and instructors packed ABG's to the bursting point. We swilled and talked track track track track until they booted us out at 2:00 or so.

Nicely lubed, our wee hours walks back to campus were not without incident. Skott terrorized a nearby pet store, convincing the scruffy black pups in the window display to "get the rabbit, get the rabbit" that was out of its cage. The poor little bunny was soon being dragged and tossed around by its ears while Skott cackled devilishly, and I watched in helpless horror. [Just for the record, Skott's version of this episode has been known to differ somewhat from mine.]

On the last day there, we borrowed a car and roadtripped up the Wasatch Range to visit famous Timpanogos Cave on Mt. Something-Or-Other. (Perhaps you've heard of it.) It was SOLD OUT! A sold out cave??? WTF???

So, undaunted, we hiked the "1.5-mile" trail up – and I do mean "up" – to Salt Flat Lake. It was more like three miles, but the climb was worth it. Sheer, whitish-gray cliffs at least seventy feet high surrounded the lake on three sides, and the modest waterfall that we sat atop on the open side afforded a sweeping panorama of the entire Wasatch Valley, at least forty miles of majestic mountains and gorgeous gorges. Very good for the soul. It had to be beneficial to an evil dude like Skott.

His name is really Scott, of course, and the transformation of the C to the K – apart from the fact that I just like K better, as you know – came from a very insignificant online conversation involving KOA's (Kampgrounds of America), in which we swapped C's and K's with reckless abandon, and he became, forever, Koach Skott.

The kabin was kwite kool, too. OK, kut it out!!!

The cabin was quite cool, too. From where Skott rendezvoused with me ("You might need a little help finding it," he said), the road almost immediately de-paved and disappeared into the deep country dark of Pigsah National Forest. There were no streetlights, and, at this hour, no house lights anywhere to be seen either – not that there would have been more than a very few at any hour. The hills rose and fell, and the road took one bend after another. Several minutes later, we forked onto a "wide path" and soon pulled up to Skott's abode.

Secluded, yet fully electrified and plumbified, it was Henry David Thoreau meets George Jetson: computer, microwave, and CD player, all within hewn log walls amidst thousands of acres of preserved forestland. The satellite TV took a little work, apparently, as Skott had to place the dish about twenty-five feet up on a tree trunk on the other side of the gully and pond, and facing back over the hillside that the cabin was perched on.

Skott was running a mail order rare-CD business over the Internet from there. It was so incongruous that electronics would be the sustenance of this domicile. It changed my view of all such

Internet enterprises that I have since seen. Whereas before I might have actually pictured a mixing studio, or a warehouse stacked with CD's, now I realize it could well just be a guy with a bathrobe and a bong, lounging in the living room with his laptop, digging *The Beverly Hillbillies* reruns.

Orders would come in, and Skott would pass them along to the appropriate supply house. They would, in turn, send the CD to Skott's cabin, where he would package it and address it. Then, he would make his almost-daily ride into downtown Brevard to the Post Office and mail them out.

I have no idea how anybody made any money in this exchange, unless Skott was charging his customers up the cornhole for their tunes. Skott had to include postage, the supply houses had to do so too. And we're talkin' about CD's from Europe in many cases.

This was an odd period of life for Skott, though. Like all true coaches, Skott's heart thrummed to the tempo of runners' workouts and races, and he had left his collegiate coaching job in Mobile because of a dearth of administrative support, because he loved his Slovakian wife Petra and knew needed a better place than the steamroom of southern Alabama to train for her national class races, and because he could make more money working at a minimum wage job than he ever could coaching at UM.

Coaches and teachers get paid such shit wages. It is totally out of whack. Going from the "top step" of the teacher's salary scale at a private high school, as I did, to pouring Bud drafts and making Kahlua Sombremos for the lower-middle class patrons of a small bar in a small city near Boston, SHOULD have involved a pay CUT. A big pay cut. But it didn't. The preparation, education, correction, evaluation and graduation of America's youth earned me less money than getting a bunch of blue-collar folks tipsy.

It made me angry to see Skott, one of the finest coaches I've known, not being able to use his gift. His credentials are outstanding, and his understanding of the training theory is profound, yet he was languishing at these unfulfilling tasks. He was like a ship's captain who had been reassigned to desk duty ashore, his feel and love of the sea being squandered. But, somehow, as we parted company in front of the Post Office in Brevard the next morning, I knew he would be back at the helm someday.

[Note: just over two years later, Coach Scott Simmons would lead the *unranked* Minot State (ND) Beavers to the school's first NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP in Cross Country, and be named NAIA Coach of the Year. There *is* justice, even if you have to go to North Dakota to find it.]

Returning to the Carolina roads, I suddenly felt hungry. I also needed beer and ice and foodstuffs for the trip to Sacramento. There was some southering to do yet -- you just don't get that far south without popping by to see how Bourbon Street's nightlife is doing -- but the Skott visit was the last of the specific items on the Things To Do list.

It was Monday, July 3rd. From here until Ed and Bryan's plane would touch down at Sacramento International Airport ELEVEN DAYS HENCE, life was unscheduled and the turn of the wheel was subject to whim and fancy instead of clock and calendar.

I need to say it again, because the idea kept rolling in my head as I drove down the road on the way out of Brevard: *life was unscheduled and the turn of the wheel was subject to whim and fancy instead of clock and calendar.*

If you have never experienced that sensation, it is HUGE. The freedom you feel is uncanny. Sure, this is the east coast, and that's on the west coast. So what? There is until Bastille Day to do it, one kickass chariot to carry the load, and the *entire* U.S.A. to explore in the meantime.

There was the ambiguous notion of New Orleans for Independence Day, but the route there still needed to be perused and paced. Brevard to NOLA would be about 600 miles or so. Nothing a 12-hour drive couldn't cover, and with no noteworthy scenery to stop and drool over, the half-day seemed reasonable indeed.

Atlanta lay prominently on the route, but that city had been done quite thoroughly in '96 and a couple times before. More on that later.

Right now, lunch was top priority, and there was a supermarket just ahead. Inside, I was served by an angel. A tall, slim, beautiful woman, probably about 22, with short cut dark blonde hair and captivating aqua eyes, wearing a name tag that read "Tara Dennis," served me up a pound of sliced turkey for \$3.99, and, even better, the largest, most piping hot and juiciest fried chicken breast in the display, for a mere \$1.59. Such a deal. I'm convinced she had been saving it just for me. She was so lovely. If you know her, tell her the tall guy in the hat says "Hi."

The fried breast of chicken would become a staple of Roadrage lunchtimes. A good-sized clucker boob is a fully satisfying meal. It's hot and sloppy, a perfect meal to make you pause in your driving to chow down. Your hands get all greasy and your face gets smeared. Crunchy crumbs fall all over. This is not a meal to eat while driving (though it's been done).

Most meals on the road are cold cut samiches or tuna samiches (low budget dining). These big juicy fried chicken breasts were my “splurge.” Outside the northeast, it seems that every supermarket deli would have a nice bin of fresh hot fried chicken pieces, and the price of a succulent breast was as low as \$1.09.

Many times I would stand outside the van, soaking up the sun in a hot parking lot, just voraciously wolfing down this chicken. Bird bones and crispy batter bits flew, while I made gluttonish grunts and moans and gasped for breath between mouthfuls.

Here in Brevard, I pulled into the neighboring gas station and ate while Blue Man drank. I was just about finished ravaging and slobbering over my hot hunk o’ chicken, and I looked up to see a horse staring at me. It was in a trailer, about eight feet away, with its head sticking out the side opening, and it was riveted on my eating display, probably mortified that my fellow humans would have said that I was “eating like a horse.”

And thanks to my local Rochester supermarket, Wegman’s (yes, we sometimes referred to it as Smegma’s), I didn’t have to buy soft drink for the whole month. Right before I left, as I was doing a little stocking up for the road, I turned into an aisle, and was faced with a display sign that I did not believe: “6-packs, Coca-Cola products, \$.88 each.” Yes! Eighty-eight cents a SIX-PACK. Christ, a can costs a dollar in some machines! So, I stocked up. A couple of cases of Coke Classic, a case or two of Sprite, and a few cases of Country Time Lemonade – 9 cases in all, 216 cans! I barely had room for them all in the van. What a deal.

Ahhh, my Scottish ancestors would be proud of my thrift. Hoot, mun!