

# A LOOZIANA LOSER

Fock 2: L, as in LSU, and Lotsa Libations

It started with the decision to visit Scott in Brevard NC on the trip's third day. From that spot on the map, New Orleans looked tantalizingly close, and I find it hard to ignore the call of Bourbon Street. Plus, I was looking for a Party City to spend July 4<sup>th</sup> in. The itinerary that I had written up beforehand was in the dumper right from the get-go. I knew I wanted to be in Utah within a week of leaving home, but how I got there was very flexible. The farmlands of the Midwest didn't appeal to me that much, and the swelter pot that I'd have to travel through by doing the Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona route would have made for sweaty and sleepless nights in the van. Besides, Texas is just plain huge, and not very interesting.

Well, I figured, first things first: go to New Orleans to celebrate Fourth of July, then figure it out the day after.

It's easy for a northerner to think of New Orleans as Louisiana, just as a southerner probably think of New York City as New York, or Boston as Massachusetts. In any of those cases, those cities are likely the only reason that those people go to those states. My dear friend Lea had that misunderstanding, but unfortunately broadcast it to a bar full of people. It was a few nights before the Super Bowl, and the New England Patriots were in New Orleans getting ready for their clash with the Packers. Channel 4's Bob Lobel was on the scene, doing the sports report from outside the Superdome. The station cut to him for a minute or so, then cut to video, then back, and so on. Lea was sitting at the bar watching the TV while I was tending to the dinner hour rush. The first time they showed Lobel with the words "Live From Louisiana" under him on the screen. When they returned to him, the screen read, "Live From New Orleans".

Well, this cracked Lea up, and she called my attention to it. Trouble was, the bar was noisy, so she had to speak pretty loudly. "Look at that! They just said he was in Louisiana, then they said he was in New Orleans!"

"Yeahhh...?" I replied, only halfway attentive, and not grasping her point.

"Well how can he do that?" she persisted.

"Do what?" By now I was almost at the other end of the bar.

"How can he be in both places at once?" she nearly shouted, "What, is he straddling the state line?"

I closed my eyes, and stifled a laugh. I could hear a couple of customers snickering. Trying to save her a little embarrassment, I leaned over to her on my way by to deliver the latest batch of professionally-blended cocktails, and said "Lea, New Orleans is a city in Louisiana." I guess I assumed she would do the old "Whoops! I'll be quiet now" thing, but not Lea.

"Ohhh," she said, laughing out loud at herself. And as I walked to the far end of the bar, I could hear her calling out behind me, "I thought New Orleans was a state! I was wondering how he could do that!" By then most of the bar was laughing too.

You had to love Lea. She was funny, sincere, honest, hard-working, beautiful, festive, intelligent (just not in geography), and loved mankind. She got married, though, so she probably changed. I lost touch with her, which saddens me, but I'm very glad I had the privilege of knowing her when I did.

Louisiana is The Pelican State. Yup, that's right: The Pelican State. Know what the state bird is? Oh ya. The pelican. Know what the State Meal is? Fried Pelican. NO, I just made that up.

You gotta see the flag. It's silly. First, it's hard as hell to draw, even with colored pencils or Flairs, let alone crayons. And, second, it's so cartoony. Pelicans just do not look like that. They're not cute, or white. They're gray and ugly. There is a certain pathetic nobility to them, I suppose, but they do not look like those things on the flag.



The State Seal is essentially the same image – a pelican feeding her young -- but it looks more dignified. I'll wager that Louisiana is the only place on earth whose flag depicts a female getting ready to puke up half-digested fish.

Like Alabama, Louisiana is pretty much middle ground, statistically. At 33<sup>rd</sup> in area, it's a bit bigger than Ohio or Tennessee, but smaller than Arkansas. Ranking 21<sup>st</sup> in population, it has more people than West Virginia and Arkansas combined, but less than half as many as Michigan.

The only other distinction it seems to have is that it is the only state that begins with the letter L.

Four states begin with I, eight begin with M, and eight begin with N. What's with the hoarding there? Why aren't there more L states? Well, maybe there's a reason for that.

L is a kind of blah letter, don't you think? And its connotations don't exactly add to its luster. L is the Loss in the W-L that pervades sports. L is the Loser symbol in sign language. It's such a basic shape, you would think that it would be somewhere sooner than 12th on the alphabet. Why did it take 12 tries to get to a simple right angle? Why did it take 9 tries to get to I: a straight line, the most basic of all shapes? Was the masted-and-looped configuration of B really the second shape that our ancestors thought of? Why was O even later than L?

You know, not one person has EVER told me that L is his or her favorite letter.

L ranks 11<sup>th</sup> in percent of use? 11<sup>th</sup>! That's nearly top 10. That's higher than M! It's built-in stat-padding, though, because L gets doubled a lot. For instance, when a normally calm, male, stringed-instrumentalist shouts a greeting at his lemon-flavored dessert, people say, "Did you hear that mellow cello fellow bellow 'hello, yellow Jello'?" Really, they say that. I hear it all the time.

I don't count llama in that group because that's a Spanish word, but the first name Llewellyn is ridiculous. Did some guy have stock in the letter L when he came up with that name? It's twice as bad as Lloyd. Couldn't he just be Loyd? What the hell is the second L for?

And what the hell is that L doing in "could"? Could. Would. Should. Kood. Wood. Shood. Good. Food. Oops. Foot. Boot. Would you put your wood foot in your good boot?

Yikes. I'll try again. What the hell is the L doing in "could"? More alphabetic freeloading. Take out the "u" and *could* is *cold*. Add an "-er" and *should* is *shoulder*. Both of them make the L do its job. Couldn't *coud* be sufficient?

*Calm, balm, palm, talk, walk, chalk, balk, Peter Falk.* Granted, we couldn't get by with *cam, bam, pam, wak, tak, chak, bak, Peter Fak*, but why was L selected to fill in and provide the subtle pronunciation change? Wouldn't H have been a better choice: *cahm, bahm, pahm*? Or an O: *tok, wok, chok, bok, Peter Fok*? Why L????

Does L have some clause in its contract that it has to be in some minimum amount of words, so they threw in a few moments of silence? I doubt it (why is that B in there??); after all, L is the eleventh most popular letter in the alphabet.

Maybe that's a fluffed-up stat though. L is doubled a lot. *Ball, call, fall, bull, pull, lullaby, lollipop, parallel*, and freaking *Hell*, just to name a few. That is just shameless stat-padding. Do all those doubles need to be that way? Would we stumble and choke on *bol, col, fol, bul, pul, lulaby, lolipop, paralel* or freaking *Hel*?

Plus, L must be sleeping with the adverb queen. Most adverbs end in "-ly." Sullenly. Three L's there, in only eight letters! Overkill. Ha! Two L's there, when one would suffice.

Then there is the carpenter's friend: *caulk*. It has always amused me to listen to women talk about what they need to get in order to fix that window or the leaky shower: *I need to get some caulk!* Of course, most women make a clumsy attempt at pronouncing it *callK*. We're not fooled, ladies.

And why does the alphabet have 26 letters anyway? I'm not the first to ask that question, I know. But, given that language is an evolving thing, when was this alphabet considered "complete"? When did they lock the doors and say, "We have quite enough letters now, thank you. All of you other shapes will just remain illegible scribbles and squiggles. Sorry. Now, go away."

Speaking of going away...

The capital of Louisiana is Baton Rouge, which is French for "Red Stick", about 90 miles northwest of Nawlins. Foreign language city names crack me up. Like "The Fertile Valleys" (Las Vegas), "The Monks" (Des Moines), "The High Ground" (Terre Haute), and especially "Mouse's Mouth" (Boca Raton). All those high brows in that well-off Florida city are living in Mouse's Mouth. Too funny.

Baton Rouge is also where you will find Louisiana State University, better known as LSU, which is the pulse of collegiate life in the state. The campus suits the climate well. Though the buildings are a tad on the bland side, the campus is aesthetically pleasing because of all the big, sprawling, thick-trunked trees that abound. Wider than they are tall, these octogenarian giants spread their cooling shadows across broad expanses of fine Louisiana dirt. Some had to be forty yards across! Fabulous trees!

Actually, it was at a coaching school at LSU where I first learned about negative ions, and their calming influence. These huge trees must have poured out a plethora of those marvelous negative ions. No wonder it was so good for the soul to just sit under one and zone out.

When classes were done for the day, many of my fellow coaches and I adjourned to the nearest bar. It was called Chimes, and it was immediately outside the campus gates. Chimes was an excellent bar: plenty of dark wood, good tunes, seventy different beer flavors to choose from, and drafts served in imperial pints (18.6 ounces) – Skott termed them Imperial Potables.

The place was reminiscent of one of my favorite places back home in Massachusetts: The Eagle Brook Saloon in Norfolk. They even had the same kind of Hall of Fame: any patron who drank forty different beers – no, not in the same night, dumbass – would get his or her name on an engraved plaque and posted on the wall. Hundreds of those names appeared on those sizable plaques. That kinda figures, though, doesn't it? You put a bar right next to a large college campus, challenge the clientele to achieve a beer total, and you are gonna get a response.

There were several names that appeared more than once on those hallowed walls. A few even enumerated their accomplishments: Glen #9 ... Glen #16 ... Glen #23 ... Glen #29 ... all the way up to Glen #35! That accounts for 1400 beers. Clearly, Glen is a man who understands commitment. My guess is that his legacy did not end at 35.

The final night of the week-long school involved a break-up party at a fairly local joint called Pastimes. A square, VFW feeling pervaded the place when we arrived. Three people sat sullenly at the bar, hunkered down for a dreary Monday night of Bud bottles. My first thought was, "we won't be staying here long."

We greeted the barkeep, an unremarkable middle-aged woman, and purchased a beer. Sam Adams was only \$2.00 a bottle. Hmm, I guess we could stay a bit longer, after all. Then we watched her response as 58 more of us gradually filed in. She did an admirable job, though she got a tad peeved when all those coasters started sailing through the air. But, since we were changing her take-home from a few bucks to more than \$300 for the night, she tolerated our mischief.

She was not the #1 Star of the evening, though. That honor went to Walt Wandell, a Pennsylvania high school coach, who bellied up to the bar around midnight and proclaimed, "Kamikazes for all my men!" Soon, there were 33 (\$100 worth) of those tasty vodka, triple sec, and lime juice concoctions served up randomly around the bar, available on a first-come, first-serve basis. We toasted our sport. Not everyone was into kamikazes, though, so I ended having a couple. OK, maybe a few.

I'm not sure how LSU did it, but they turned the campus around every night, so my inebriated stroll home from Chimes was never the same (usually not even close). Sometimes, my route would take me by the track, with the neighboring cage of school mascot Mike The Fifth, the very large, very live, Bengal tiger. Mike and I chatted pleasantly, exchanged recipes, and parted with the understanding that I would kick his sorry, striped ass if he ever had the temerity to leave his cage.

On the opposite side of the LSU campus, there is a memorial tower, cleverly named Memorial Tower. That is where I chose to leave my RAM-was-here mark. I hadn't hatched the RAMruns stickers idea yet, so it would have to be something else.

One night, again on my way home from Chimes, but by a far different route, I stopped to have a little lie-down on the big lawn and look up at the stars. Given the mid-summer humidity, I think I saw about eight of them. As I stirred to get back up, I noticed two abandoned and somewhat tattered softballs just a few feet from my head. It seemed as though they were toys sent from above to serve my whim.

Initially, I set out to toss them around a bit. The nearest thing to bonk them off of was the aforementioned Memorial Tower. Standing about 175 feet tall and about 15 feet wide, it was a target that required Accuracy. Unfortunately, I had left some things behind at the bar, and Accuracy was one of them. Sobriety, Coordination, Good Judgment, Lucid Speech, and Balance were some of the others.

So, on only my fourth toss, old Sarah Softball went sailing silently by my monolithic target. I waited to hear a "d'oh!" from a struck passer-by, but never did.

With only one left, I could not risk squandering my chance. The base of Memorial Tower is some sort of museum to some dead people with some distinction or another. Ornately trimmed, the entranceway had a fifteen-inch stone lip above it, with some fancy-schmancy yoo-ha carvings. Deep within the structural recess, the doorway was sheltered from wind and rain. It took me about seven tries, but I was finally able to gently hook-shot that softball onto the very back of that lip. I'll never know how long it will stay (though it was still there a year later when I was there for my final USATF school), but it will not be easy to bring down. I can't picture university maintenance personnel being ambitious enough to drag a tall ladder way out there to retrieve it. No one will ever know who put it there (until now). I should have written my name and address on it with instructions for returning it to me. I just hope it makes a few people do a double-take and wonder WTF it's doing there.



And the call of Remotest Seat hit me. LSU's venerable Tiger Stadium, a tall concrete testament to 1920's big-time football, stands nobly on the west side of campus. It is adjacent the outdoor track and the basketball arena. It looms over wide parking lots and the well-trafficked circuit road. On one late afternoon jog – in this case, it would be generous to use the word "run" – I found an open gate, and went in for a self-guided tour. The place, nicknamed Death Valley, is huge: 91,600 capacity. It would take some doing to Remote it right.

Thankfully, there are ramps instead of stairways, so I began my slog-jog upwards. Breathing heavily as I passed two maintenance men on their way down, I must have given the impression that I belonged there, because their initial [what-the-heck-is-this-guy-doing-in-here](#) look gave way to an [ahh-he-must-be-with-the-football-team-or-something](#) shrug, and they just let me



all over his bald head. It must be a wild spot to watch a game from, though, as long as you don't care much about seeing the players.

pass. After about the fifth level, I started walking. There was a long way to go.

Finally, I emerged near the bottom of the upper level. Two really little guys were throwing around a really little football waaaaaay down there. It was unlikely anybody would notice me way up here. It was less likely that they would care. It was even less likely that I would acknowledge their protests if they did. I walked to the last aisle, and trotted up the stands. It was freaking steep! Once I got to the top and turned around, my first instinct was to grab for something to hold onto. In the uppermost seats, you were practically hanging over the head of the fan in front of you. I could picture myself splashing beer