

# A LOOZIANA LOSER

## Fock 3: Hard Times in the Big Easy

Nothing, but nothing, though, matches the shock factor of one's initial foray onto Bourbon Street. In '92, our entire Olympic Trials entourage were all NOLA virgins. We all adopted Cajun-style nicknames for the trip, just to get that Nawlins feel. Being one of the elder statesmen of the group (you notice how old guys always use that phrase, just to make age seem freaking noble), I was Crawdaddy. Patrick, the self-confident, lady-charming miler, was Gator. Neal, the quiet, cerebral, distance runner, one generation removed from India, was Remi. Dugg, whose name I always refuse to spell correctly (for no particular reason that I can remember) was Bayou Billy, a folksy sounding name that suited his affable and maybe-a touch-naïve personality.

We also had the Kingfish, Mudcat, Professor Longhair, Bacchus, Swamp Fox, Gumbo, and Mint Julep, as our partners in crime. Did I say crime? I'm getting ahead of myself.

Our group checked out surrounding areas, like Tulane University and its nearby watering holes, The Audubon Tavern II (big and empty), and Ms. Mae's (dive). We dined – as opposed to just “eating” -- at Crescent City Brewhouse, where Stella served us huge portions of Red Stallion Ale in 32-ounce, mug-style, individual, 2-for-1 pitchers. Now, that's what I call dining! Somehow, I purloined one of the enormous mugs, hiding it in my clothing, even though I was wearing shorts and tank top. It was a neat trick. (And I still have it.)

We also spent an evening at Tipitina's, the famous nightclub, and danced and frolicked to the music of The Connells. Actress Kathleen Turner was there, diggin' the vibes too. A couple of us said Hi to her, and she was pretty friendly, sayin' Hi back. We suspected that she wanted to hang out with us, but needed to protect her image. Oh, well, her loss.

But all that was secondary. As soon as we got to The Big Easy, we wasted no time exploring the city's most famous street. It was mind-boggling. The freedom to booze at will was amazing to us Bostonians, who were accustomed to finishing or abandoning a drink before leaving an establishment. Carrying an open beer in public would get you drawn and quartered in Beantown.

In the prime hours of the Friday night madness, I even intercepted a young woman who was walking the other way, scooped her up onto my shoulder, and just carried her off down the street while her friends did nothing but laugh. Things like this were happening everywhere we looked. Drunks whooped and hollered and danced in the street.

Late on the following night, amid another bout of raucous revelry, I struck up a conversation with a NOLA policeman who was standing idly on a corner, keeping an eye on the goings-on.

“Pretty lively street,” I observed.

“That it is,” he agreed. He seemed affable enough.

“What does one have to do to get arrested on this street?” I asked him. He could tell it was not a wise-ass question, but rather the query of a bewildered out-of-towner.

His answer was simple: “Someone complains.”

I had no idea how prophetic that succinct reply would be.

Thursday of that week was my birthday: 6/26. Our afternoon and evening at the track meet was allegedly a quest to attain 100 of the plastic, souvenir beer cups. Picking them up off the ground was not allowed: we had to buy the beers and drink them. There were ten of us, and we had something like seven hours of hot and humid spectating to accomplish this, so it didn't seem like an outrageous goal. But, Remi wasn't a beer drinker, Mint Julep and Gumbo weren't focused, and Kingfish and Mudcat were both pretty wrung out from the previous night's vomiting, so their contribution was nil. The rest of us – Gator, Bayou Billy, Professor Longhair, Bacchus, Swamp Fox and I -- still made a good go of it, but we fell short. Just as well.

Anyhow, that was our springboard into another Bourbon Street night. As usual, our group splintered, with smaller factions fending for themselves, then rejoining and re-splitting here and there as

the night wore on. Many bars were sampled. I liked The Dungeon the best. Its posted hours were "Midnight till Whenever." Good music, great atmosphere.

Sometime well after midnight, I was walking along the sidewalk with Julep and Gumbo and a couple others, when we saw three policemen on the move. They were at a controlled run, and clearly had somebody targeted. I pointed it out to Julep, saying, "Look, they're gonna get somebody." My eyes raced ahead of them: "Oh shit, it's Dugg!"

Sure enough, a second later, the cops grabbed Dugg from behind and pretty much threw him on the ground. Dugg, of course, had no idea who it was who had assaulted him. As he was tackled, he kicked up reflexively and caught one of the cops on the side of the face. I must've broken into a run myself, because I found myself right beside them, telling Dugg not to resist, and assuring him that we would take care of things. Of course, I had no clue what we were supposed to be taking care of.

The cops cuffed Dugg and began to lead him away. To his credit, Patrick appeared from the safety of the crowd, said to the cops, "What are you taking him for? I'm the one who threw the beer," and gave himself up. They slammed cuffs on him too, much more forcefully than necessary, and hauled him away. It was a noble thing to do; it gave Dugg some company in his misery.

But, this whole thing would not do. Where were they being taken? What did we have to do to bail them out? I needed to know this stuff. It may have been wiser to leave those details up to the Professor or Bacchus, but I was the drunkest, and I was the Birthday Boy, so it fell on me. I tried calling after the cops with those questions, but they ignored me. So, like a dumbass, I followed them. The cops took them down one block, then a couple more blocks over.

After the second block, the trailing cop stopped and whirled on me, nightstick under my chin. "You take one more step, or say one more word, and you're going with them."

There was a short pause as I weighed my options. It was a no-brainer, which was good since I had no brain left by that time.

I gave a slight smile, nodded, turned and walked away. I'm pretty sure that even "OK" or "Yessir" would have counted as "one more word."

When I got back to Bourbon Street, my cronies were nowhere to be found. They had taken a cab back to the hotel. But I didn't know that. I went searching for them. Bars seemed like good places to search. And, wouldn't you know it, at Paddy O'Brien's, I bumped into some old familiars: Dan Foley and George Grant, two of the best runners that I ever had the frustration of coaching against. We struck up a lively conversation, bought a round or two, and resurrected my inner party. It was, after all, still my birthday celebration. Why should a little thing like my friends getting pinched derail that train? There would not be anything that I could do to help Patrick and Dugg until morning anyway. It would take a good while to book them, and we probably didn't have enough ready cash to bail them out, either. So I kept the good times rolling. I would have wanted them to do the same if the roles had been reversed.

It had to be about 5:00 when I got back to the hotel room. I eschewed the beds – people were on them anyway – slunk to the floor, on top of my sleeping bag, and tumbled into the thick sleep of the dead drunk.

Minutes later, or so it seemed, the phone was ringing. Wheels (Swamp Fox) answered it. I could hear the conversation, but lacked the will or strength to move. My head felt soooo bad. My stomach was no bargain either. I needed a good sleep-till-noon session, and it wasn't gonna happen.

Wheels gathered the necessary information over the phone from Patrick. He tried rousing me to contribute to the discussion, but I could barely grunt. When Wheels hung up the phone, I groaned, "Tell me..."

It was one of those good-news-bad-news things. Good news was that they had been taken to the police station that was just a few blocks from the hotel. The bad news was that bail was \$3200 -- \$500 for Patrick, and \$2700 for Dugg, because of the "assaulting an officer" charge that they tacked on. What a hosing. Mind you, at this point, we still had no idea what those two had actually done to get themselves arrested.

Wheels emphasized that there was some urgency in Patrick's voice, and that we needed to get them out as soon as we could. "Banks don't open till nine," I muttered, not lifting my mouth off the sleeping bag.

Wheels kept insisting that we needed to get a move on this thing, and I must have replied at least a dozen times, "Ya gotta give me a minute, Kev."

Finally, we headed out. The Hangover Demons were trying to drill through my skull from the inside. They were noisy and sloppy. It felt like a lobotomy without anesthetic. A bank was the first order of business. We needed to get cash advances on our credit cards. Fortuitously, I had recently received a brand new Visa Gold card with a \$2500 line of credit, and it was cherry. Wheels would have to get the other \$700.

We found out, to our extreme dismay, that downtown banks were not open on Saturday mornings, and that we had to get on the Interstate and trek out to a suburb called Elysian Fields to find our cash. It was not a short ride, and when we got there, the first bank turned us down, claiming they did not have enough cash to spare. WTF is up with that?

At the second bank, our Customer Service Representative was an obese black woman with waaaaay too much makeup. She looked like a clown. But she heard our needs and made out the proper forms. In the middle of doing so, she looked up and asked, "Is this bail money?" I was in no mood to explain, or to even speak. "What do you think?" I replied with a sneer.

We took the stack of hundreds and went directly to the police station. Wheels took over the transaction while I looked for a place to sit down. My brain was throbbing. There was a wooden bench across from the bail-paying window, so I went and sprawled out on it until the two criminals were released to us.

When Wheels and I arrived with the moolah, our two favorite felons had just been told to get in the showers, and were about to be issued their stylish orange jumpsuits and sent over to "The Yard". They were damn happy to get called back.

Then we got the story (or, at least, the story they were standing by). Two young women had been sitting on the curb, holding a map and looking vexed. Dugg and Patrick gallantly offered to be of assistance. In reply, one of the women belligerently said they needed no help, and cursed them out. Somewhat stunned, the two gentlemen moved on, but not before Dugg, irked by their tone and retort, took the last ounce or so of beer in his plastic cup, and splattered it on the pavement at their feet. Some unspecified comment accompanied the toss. At that point, apparently, the women leapt up, spied the policemen half a block away, ran to them, and bitched that she had been assaulted. She pointed at Dugg, and, without so much as a question, the police acted.

Someone complained. That, indeed, was all it took to get arrested.

When we all went to the meet later that day, we shared the story of the ordeal with the nice older couple, Sabby and Juliet, who had been sitting in the row in front of us all week. Sabby was a retired Schlitz deliveryman, and he found our love of the sauce entertaining. We liked them as well. As the tale was told, Sabby grew grim, and urged our lads to get a lawyer. He warned us of dire consequences if they faced NOLA's "justice system" without legal counsel. He even recommended someone to us.

The legendary Raleigh Ohlmeyer was contacted and hired. The process involved a Monday morning arraignment, which meant some travel rearranging, since Dugg had booked a Sunday night flight home.

The arraignment itself was very impressive. This is clearly a city that is accustomed to crime. The accused were channeled through the system with staggering efficiency. *Name, crime, whaddyasay, go in there and set a goddamn date. Next.*

They must have shoveled thirty cases past the judge in the first hour, but the courtroom was still full, and more orange-clads were arriving all the time. Judges must really dread Mondays in New Orleans.

The plan for our defendants was simple: plead guilty, pay your fine, get outa town and get on with life. However, because of his inadvertent kick, Dugg was not allowed to plead Guilty. What's up with that?? Since when can you not plead Guilty? You're not allowed to say "Yes, I did that," even when you didn't? That's ludicrous. It reeks of ludicrousity.

At any rate, Guilt and Innocence were irrelevant concepts on this morning; today was all about slotting trial dates, putting most of these accused assholes back out on the streets, and flushing out Central Lock-Up for the next batch.

Our boys had their turn, with Raleigh leading the way, and they were funneled out into the next room to set a date. I met them in there. The room was jammed with all the other evil-doers who had also gotten a quick peek at the judge. Most of them looked like they had seen him many times before, like, maybe every Monday. There were some nasty-ass perpetrators in this crowd.

This room was also the place where I could reclaim the bail money. The lads showed up, so the authorities had to give the money back. After a good while, some lady took my info and wandered off. I just stood there at the crowded counter, among the desperadoes, waiting. Finally, she came back, carrying a thick envelope.

To my surprise and chagrin, she opened the envelope right up, pulled out a familiar-looking stack of crisp C-notes, and said, much too loudly for my taste, "OK, that's three-thousand-two-hundred dollars." Out of my peripheral vision, I could see a few heads turn. Then she began to count it out: "100, 200, 300, 400, 500..." Another head seemed to turn our way with each bill she laid down. "...1100, 1200, 1300, 1400, 1500..." My stack had become the focal point of the room. Several of the conversations had stopped. I could almost hear drooling. And scheming. "...2800, 2900, 3000, 3100, and 3200. There you go, sir. Three-thousand-two-hundred dollars. Sign here, please."

I could imagine what a piñata feels like just before the fiesta starts, knowing that everyone wants to bash you to get at the goodies. I signed the paper, jammed the envelope of cash into my shorts, gave Dugg and Patrick a "We're leaving NOW" look, and skedaddled.

In the end, their records were cleared. The twat who accused them actually had the temerity to show up at the trial. From over 100 miles away! What a bitch! Get a life, woman. Get a job at the DMV or something.

So, as a result of that episode, I have always approached Bourbon Street with a trace of apprehension. It's certainly not out of "respect for the law." It's more out of fear of morons. If nobody complains about me, I'm all set. And I have to remember not to kick the cops.

That doesn't hold me back much, but it's prudent to progress at a level that is one notch below Anything Goes.

Decorum dictates that I leave out a lot of juicy details of this 2000 Independence Eve. They're fuzzy anyway, which might be just as well. But I will tell ya that there was this tall, lean, blond woman in tight, shiny, silver pants and a tiny, matching, string bikini top, with a silver cowboy hat to crown it all. She and I were dancing on the box in the middle of a large nightclub sometime well after midnight. I had my black cowboy hat on, and I forget where my shirt ran off to. Somebody else had claimed it as a souvenir earlier, I think.

Well, one thing led to another, and I came back to Blue Man just before 7:00 a.m. North Rampart Street was empty – all the cars were gone, and the parking meters were hooded to keep the street clear for the July 4<sup>th</sup> parade route. I began to applaud my good fortune at parking elsewhere, since I surely would have been towed away.

I flopped into Blue Man's belly for some a.m. shuteye, and, despite the heat and thick air, I was happy-snoozing in mere seconds. But not for long.

I was awakened less than a half-hour later by a loud knocking on my front passenger window. "Shit," I moaned to myself, "gotta be cops telling me to move." So I snuck a look through the curtain, and saw, instead of a policeman, some scrawny, black, 22-year-old ghetto scumbag. "Screw him," I muttered, "he just wants my money, and he ain't getting any" and I lay back down. He knocked again a few seconds later, but I tried to ignore him.

I thought he had gone away, then I heard a voice calling in through my open screen window: "Hey, Cal! Open up, Cal, it's me!"

Cal?? Who the fuck is Cal??? Go away, you rat bastard. My head hurts.

In 20/20 hindsight, I probably should have said that out loud, or at least made some noise, because about ten seconds later, my half-dozing mind was blasted into alertness by the smashing of my front window.

I was up in a split second, enraged and roaring obscenities, throwing back the front curtains. The ghetto fucker was stunned. I'll bet anything he shit his pants. His arm was inside and reaching for the passenger door handle. My grab at it missed, and he sprinted off.

Burning with adrenal rage, I leapt out of the van to give chase. Part of my mind was boldly saying, "You're a runner, go GET him!!" But the rest of my mind quickly evaluated the situation, and came up with the following rationalizations:

- he had a good head start
- he was more, um, "genetically predisposed to sprinting" than I was (am)
- I was barefoot, and standing in broken glass
- I was in my underwear
- my head hurt very much
- and, most importantly, leaving the van unattended would leave it and all its contents wide open to theft

So, as he turned a corner out of sight into the safety of his ghetto, I bellowed something brave like, "You better run!" and began to address this unwelcome dose of Reality.

As I started to clean up the glass, my initial thoughts were that it was no big deal: insurance would cover the cost, and some glass company would just fix the window today, maybe even drive out here to do it.

Then the reality hit me: it's the Fourth of July. Ain't nobody workin' at no glass companies today. And a call to GEICO, my insurance company informed me that I have a \$250 deductible on glass, so the \$135 window would get no help there.

Fuck.

It didn't take much to figure out where to go next: there was a police station on the next block. I went in and told the two desk ornaments what had happened. They offered me the Yellow Pages. Big help, thanks. I got a couple of phone numbers for glass companies and such, then I asked if I could use their phone. "There's a pay phone outside," was the no-eye-contact response. Again, much obliged, ossifers.

The first few calls got nothing but answering machines. No surprise, really. But finally, I got a human. Some unfortunate soul was womanning the 1-800 switchboard at Triumph Glass, a national chain of glass installation shops, and told me the best she could do was to have the window delivered to the NOLA location by 10 a.m. the next day. With a sigh, I agreed. But as she began to gather my pertinent info, my sluggish mental wheels finally started to turn and I perceived some flaws in this plan.

I was chained (figuratively speaking) to the van. With no window, I could not lock Blue Man up, and hence could not wander away from it. Likewise, I couldn't even run the AC, since it would all just pour out the glassless space, so "chilling out" in the van all day was a no-go also. New Orleans is not a place you go to sit and park anyway, especially in 98° heat and 88% humidity, so even if I had found a place to hang, it would have been too damn aggravating to be there.

Hence, I turned my mind to westering, and did a quick calculation. Interrupting the Triumph woman in mid-question, I asked, "Do you have a shop in Little Rock, Arkansas?" Somewhat taken aback, she replied, "yes, why?" So I told her to truck that there window to Little Rock, and I would meet it there. That way, I figured, if I couldn't go anywhere urban, I could spend the day by taking a leisurely ride on the Natchez Trace Parkway, a most relish-worthy road indeed!

With windows wide open, and tunes rockin', I steered my wounded and violated steed northward, actually even northeast for a while. I was still fuming deep inside, but I've gotten pretty good at accepting a setback and immediately focusing on how to best move on from it. There was nothing I could do about my lost plan for Independence Day in the Big Easy, but the rest of the day was still something I could salvage.

So, the thought of including Natchez Trace in RR2K after all, was decent consolation for the inconvenience and aggravation of the smashed window. Blue Man had been traumatized, and I could think of no better way to soothe him than to let him relax on the NTP.

As I reached the Mississippi border, I ran into a great bunch of guys: eight black guys ranging from their late-20's to their late-30's, and their motorcycles. That may sound daunting, but it was obvious

from the first second that these were fun guys. First of all, their bikes were absolutely *beautiful* – I mean real showroom quality bikes. They had the full fenders in various glossy colors and trim with gleaming chrome, and some had elaborate but classy paintings on the tanks. These were not tough-guy, blow-your-ears-out Harley hogs; these were very expensive, high quality, touring motorcycles.

And when I pulled into the Info Center at the border, these guys were standing and sitting all over the “Welcome to Louisiana” sign that was facing the other way, and were mugging it up for the camera with big foolish grade-school grins. I arrived just in time, because as I leaned out the window and gave them a silly grin of my own, they recruited me to take their photo so all eight of them could be in it.

They were all from Chicago, and were taking the ride back after a weekend on Bourbon Street. Their assessment of the street was typical: rolled eyes, big smile, and “who-oo-oooo”. I took a few pics of them on the sign and then on their bikes. One of them had a license plate “MR RAMM”, so we hit it off great. He even let me get on his sweet bike and pose with them. Too bad I can’t show you the photo, but you know the deal by now. Those guys put me in a much, much better frame of mind.