

MARK E. JOHNSON'S

**PRETTY
GOODDEST
BLOG HITS,
VOL. 1**

Concerning CROSSFIT, BIGFOOT, THE TOUGH MUDDER,
'POSSUMS, UNEMPLOYMENT, THE FIERY GIZZARD TRAIL,
DICK PROENNEKE, and other unrelated topics.

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By Mark E. Johnson, clearly

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to my book! I am tickled pink that you downloaded it. Seriously, I am the color of a piglet at this very moment due entirely to the fact that you are reading these words.

Let's get some stuff out of the way right off the bat. First of all, this book won't teach you how to do much of anything.

It won't promise you a life of riches and luxury.

It won't provide you with a blueprint for launching a podcast, writing a bestselling book, or accessing your inner self, which frankly, sounds kind of gross.

You won't learn how to "Make \$1,512 a Week from Home Without Getting Out of Bed" nor will you discover "6 Easy Steps for Developing Rock Hard Abs in 22 Seconds."

This book exists for one reason: to make you smile and maybe even laugh. That's it.

If it accomplishes this, I hope you'll share it with your friends and across your social media platforms. (By doing this,

I'm hoping that I will then Make \$1,512 a Week from Home Without Getting Out of Bed.)

So, this book is a collection the most widely read blog posts I wrote between 2011 and 2018. In some cases, you'll read something that is clearly out of date, but just play along.

Although my main objective is to entertain, you may actually slip up and learn a little something. For example, there are fascinating, little known facts about 'possums (yes, you read that correctly), important insider information about Crossfit and the Tough Mudder obstacle race (I was terrible at both), and even a few tidbits regarding Bigfoot because I am known, among two or three people, to be an expert in this field.

You'll hear about the amazing Alaskan bushman, Dick Proenneke, who could build a transistor radio out of a pinecone. You'll also be privy to convincing arguments against exercise and employed, both of which come in handy for a lazy human like myself. I'm sure you don't fall into this category, but just in case...

But consider all this valuable information to be gravy — otherwise I might actually have to do research, provide sources, and all that junk.

I began writing a blog about six years ago, back around the time when the word “blog” was invented. I wasn't sure what it meant then and I still don't know. I guess it has something to do with a “log” as in “Captain's Log.” Where the “b” comes from is anyone's guess. I could flip over to Google and find out, but this would require too much effort.

(OK, I couldn't stand it, so I looked. It's a short version of “web log.” You probably already knew that. Now I feel dumb.)

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So why did I start writing a blog? (Now the word “blog” sounds weird to me because I said it so many times.) Purely out of rebellion. For more years than I care to admit, I have made a living writing what other people want me to. This often involved agricultural stories covering topics like fertilizers, fungicides, seed varieties, crop yields, and other exciting things. I was often so “pumped” and “jacked up” after writing one of these stories that I would lay awake in bed, tossing and turning, before finally drifting off to sleep after six, maybe seven seconds.

It was terrible.

One day, someone suggested that I write a blog.

“A what?” I responded, looking like an idiot.

“A blog, you idiot!” they replied. “You just write about whatever you want!”

I was confused by their words.

“How much does it pay?” I asked.

“Nothing, you idiot!” the person replied with more exclamation points. “You just write about whatever you want!”

Then it all made sense. Even though no real money would exchange hands, I could write about whatever stupid topic I pleased at any given moment. Maybe someone would read it, maybe they wouldn’t.

But it would be fun.

That was the extent of my strategy when I launched my blog page, A Write Smart. At some point along the way, a few sick individuals began reading it and actually shared it with their sick friends. Before long, an astounding number of people, maybe 22 or 23, were gobbling up everything I put out.

It was amazing!

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This brings us to where we are today. A Write Smart has been read by people all over the world, perhaps even more than one person in almost every country. It's practically a household word.

For that very reason, I've decided to change the name.

Coming soon, A Write Smart will become Doofus Dad, written from the perspective of a bumbling, beleaguered, slightly inept father of two teenagers and one fifth-grader, and husband to a much more competent person than himself.

If you knew me, you'd understand that this makes a LOT more sense than anything with the word "smart" in the title.

My first book, "Doofus Dad Does Everest Base Camp" will be released in Fall 2018. (Spoiler alert: I survived.) More Doofus Dad books will soon follow, provided I still feel like it.

In the meantime, I hope you will enjoy these, my Pretty Goodest Blog Hits, Vol. 1. And if they do make you smile — even a little — please consider sharing them with your own sick friends.

Mark E. Johnson
Kingston Springs, Tennessee
August 5, 2018

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1

THE TOP 12 REASONS WHY THIS 47-YEAR-OLD HATES CROSSFIT

Originally published August 27, 2013.

Note: This blog has been read at least a quarter of a million times, and I'm pretty sure my mom hasn't had the time to log onto my website that often, so I suppose those numbers are real. It's OK to read it even if you know or care nothing about Crossfit.

AFTER NEARLY THREE YEARS IN, I have a love/hate relationship with Crossfit.

It's mostly hate.

The majority of my 47 years were blissfully Crossfit-free, and I lived out my days happy and without of the dread associated with upcoming workouts and the soreness common with past workouts. It was all good. (Except for the whole fat, weak, undisciplined, out-of-shape, crappy-quality-of-life part.)

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And then, my do-gooder wife shamed me into trying Crossfit because she wanted to “lose weight” and “look and feel better.” Kicking and screaming, I went, lost 50 pounds and had to listen to an incessant stream of I-told-you-sos. She’s now one of those annoying people who gushes on and on about how much she loves Crossfit and couldn’t live without it.

I’m not one of those people. What I love about Crossfit can be summed up quickly: I love it the second the WOD (workout of the day) is over. Everything up ’till then sucks.

With all that said, here’s the top 12 reasons in no particular order why this 47-year-old absolutely *hates* Crossfit.

12. THE TRAINERS TICK ME OFF.

I’ve had several of them and they’re all the same. First of all, they’re all built like Greek gods and goddesses; B) they always act like they “care” about me and are all concerned with my welfare, though I suspect it’s all an elaborate put-on, like the moon walk; Thirdly) they never seem to buy any of my perfectly good excu... reasons why I can’t do something or complete a WOD. The fact that I could be my current trainer’s dad hasn’t earned me one modicum of respect or sympathy. What’s *with* these people?

11. THE POSTING OF THE WOD.

Every morning, my trainer posts the WOD on Facebook, and for some stupid reason, I read it. This is at around 6:30 a.m. I work out at 5:30 p.m. Using my fingers to do the math, that gives me 11 hours to dread the WOD. I can do it driving, while playing Candy Crush on my phone, working, sitting on the pot, giving a work presentation, just anywhere. I’ve become quite proficient at dreading the WOD and trying to figure out ways not to go to

the box (what we call a Crossfit gym).

10. MY CONSCIENCE.

There are WODs where I really, truly believe that if I try to do one more pull-up, my arms will actually fall off. Or that my bleached skeleton will be discovered under the bridge at the 400-meter mark because I decided the run back to the box was too much trouble and it was easier and more comfortable to go ahead and die there. It would be quite simple to just cheat and not complete all my reps or rounds, but for some reason, I rarely do. Don't get me wrong — I might accidentally cheat a rep or two here or there — but I seem incapable of really letting myself off the hook. It may be that I'm afraid the Crossfit gods will catch me, send me to Hell, and program an eternity of "hero" WODs.

9. YOUNG PEOPLE.

OK, I know that many people will say that at 47, I'm still a young man. But those people are, like, 92. My box is full of people who are *actually* young — 20s and early 30s and such. I marvel at them. I was watching one young guy, Phil, doing burpees the other day with the strength of an Olympian and the finesse of a dancer. He was doing 10 or 20 at a time without slowing, bouncing off the floor and into the air with an arrogant defiance of gravity.

By comparison, I'm like a six-foot-five-inch sack of dog food repeatedly crashing to the ground and struggling to re-animate itself back into an awkward standing position. Young people suck. I hate them.

8. THRUSTERS.

Who the hell came up with this exercise, anyway?? Hitler? I can totally see Nazis using this movement as a torture device.

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“Show me your pay-pahs and then give me 15 unbroken thrust-ahs!!!”

Thrusters involve doing a front squat — often with heavy weight — and then elevating into a push press at the completion of the squat. Rinse and repeat. Frankly, it’s rude and uncalled for. Aren’t we already in here working our butts off when we could be home on the couch like normal people? Must you squash our very spirit, too?? If the punishment for a felony was five years of 135-pound thrusters, I guarantee you, prisons would be unnecessary. There would be no crime.

7. THE MUSIC.

So, we’ve established that there are young people in the box, right? Much to my displeasure, it seems that young people don’t want to work out to James Taylor, The Beatles, or ELO. Quite the contrary. Hip hop music seems to be the sonic driver of fitness these days, and it’s actually educational. Yesterday, I learned some new words while doing hand-release pushups. Unfortunately, I can’t use these words unless I’m attending, perhaps, a drive-by shooting or a drunken frat party. (They might be a little harsh for the frat party, now that I think about it.)

6. “ROUNDS-FOR-TIME” WODS.

As much as I try to convince myself that I don’t have much of an ego, I have to admit that I really do hate always being last. RFT WODs, if you don’t know, are a collection of movements and reps that are repeated over a set number of rounds, usually five, until completed. All participants start at the same time and finish, well, whenever they finish. By contrast, AMRAPs — as many rounds as possible — are completed within a specified

time range, usually 15 or 20 minutes. Everybody starts AND finishes at the same time, recording their total rounds at the end on the whiteboard.

I love AMRAPs. I love them because I'm not left there trying to complete my workout in desperation while others have long since finished, stretched out, showered, dressed, gone home, gotten married, had kids, grown old, and died.

5. PARTNER-CARRIES.

It is what it sounds like. As part of the WOD, you have to literally carry your partner some specified distance — perhaps 200 meters. I've done this once. My partner was my trainer, Nick, who is 28 years old, 240 pounds, and built like Tarzan. I'm 235 pounds, NOT 28, and NOT built like Tarzan.

We had to do a bunch of other crap before carrying each other 200 meters apiece, as if that wasn't insanity enough. I'm not sure which was worse — being the carry-er or the carry-ee. Slung over Nick's back like a bag of garden mulch, his shoulder jammed into my already-upset stomach, I was being rattled to pieces, upside down, out of breath, trying desperately to hang on and not puke all over me and him both. At one pitiful point, Nick scooped me up in his arms like a gasping, gangling, bald-headed, white-bearded, Benjamin Button baby and ran down the busy street, cars passing with aghast faces peering out in shock and people deciding whether or not to call 911. It was one of my crowning moments, let me assure you.

4. THE SMELLS OF THE RUN.

Most Crossfit boxes are in retail strip malls or in industrial areas. This makes running very interesting. My favorite parts are the smells I encounter along the way. On a 400-meter run, those

of us at Crossfit Barefoot run a gauntlet of fragrances that waft from a Chinese restaurant, a Pep Boys auto shop, an exhaust-laden street, a pee-smelling highway overpass, and numerous dumpsters, cigarette depositories, and trashcans.

I feel like Katniss in “The Hunger Games,” dashing to reach her bow in the cornucopia and not get slaughtered in the process, except my opponents are disgusting odors.

Combined, these odors usually win.

3. HANDSTAND PUSHUPS.

When executing a handstand pushup, you stand on your hands with your feet overhead resting against the wall. Then, you lower your head to the mat and back up again, like a pushup. That is, if you can do them.

You first must be able to “get on the wall.” This is my problem — getting on the wall. Call me an elitist, but I prefer to walk on my feet. I’ve been doing it all my life and I’m good at it. I’m not a gymnast and one look at me will confirm this to everyone except, perhaps, Stevie Wonder.

Me trying to get on the wall resembles a gawky 4th-grade girl attempting cartwheels in a city park, the difference being that gawky 4th-grade girls can actually DO cartwheels. I have yet to complete a single handstand pushup, but I’ve certainly mastered the art of the failed attempt. Nailed it!

2. ENCOURAGEMENT.

This, I know, sounds non-intuitive, but I really hate receiving encouragement. You see, when I’m the one *offering* the encouragement, it’s usually because I’m impressed with the person and their performance.

“Hey, way to go, Alex! Great job!” or “Good work, Andrea!”

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You're killing it!"

But when others encourage *me*, I suspect it's because they are sad for me or they are truly afraid that I might die and they want me to go out on a positive note.

"Good job, Mark! We'll be sure to send your belongings home to your family members! Great work!"

Encouragement sucks.

1. POSITIVE CHANGE.

OK, I said these weren't in order, but I actually saved this one for last because it's the worst. I'm here to tell you, if you're considering taking up Crossfit, for God's sake, DON'T! It's an insidious trap, because much to your eternal horror, positive changes will enter your life despite all your best efforts. You'll lose weight, get stronger, start looking like Tarzan (guys), and literally *feel* better, which is super annoying.

If you're like many people — my wife, for example — you'll even enjoy the process itself and cherish the camaraderie and new friendships. And what will this mean?? Yep. You guessed it. You'll have to keep doing it. More trainers, posted WODs, guilty consciences, disgusting young people, thrusters, hip hop, rounds-for-time, humiliating partner-carries, odor runs, thinly-veiled encouragement, and positive change. It's a vicious circle. Run! Run while you still can!

Oh, and your do-gooder wife will keep telling you she *told* you so.

(I hate Crossfit...)

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2018 UPDATE

I WROTE THIS POST FIVE YEARS AGO. In the year following its publication, our family moved to a rural community and we were forced to give up our Crossfit memberships. There just wasn't a box close enough to make it work and not be forced to turn our children out into the forest to fend for themselves.

In the meantime, this post somehow went viral. I mean, worldwide viral. I began receiving messages and comments every day from all corners of the globe, usually from people my age and older.

"You have inspired me," they would write with Russian accents. "I was going to give it up, but I read your blog and have decided to keep on going. Sure, I live in Siberia and have to leave at 2 am every morning, drive my snowmobile for three hours through sub-arctic temperatures, catch a bush plane, fly another two hours, and then join two Eskimos and a penguin in an ice cave for our daily WOD and then do the same thing in reverse, but that's OK. It's worth it."

Or they would say, "Just read your post and it's awesome! I was starting to get a little down and was going to quit for a variety of reasons — mainly because I was born with just a head and nothing else, so doing Crossfit is a challenge — but you've inspired me to keep going no matter what happens! Doing pullups with my ears is kind of tough and I'm typing this message with my tongue, but those are good life lesson, right? Keep on keeping on!"

Stuff like that.

So until now, I haven't been able to bring myself to admit

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that I'm a big, fat, Crossfit quitter, essentially dashing the hopes and dreams of an entire fitness demographic. So to make up for that, I decided to start a Mt. Everest trekking company and write some silly books.

I still have a warm place in my heart for Crossfit. Holly and I were devoted participants for the better part of five years and the experience was life changing.

2

CRITTER CHRONICLES: THE 'POSSUM

Originally published November 11, 2016

Note: This was the first of a series called "Critter Chronicles," an entirely scientific (not) collection of essays about wildlife.

A HH, THE LOWLY 'POSSUM. This animal is feared, hunted, eaten, shunned, and run over, all with equal enthusiasm. It receives respect from neither humans nor even its woodland neighbors. In fact, the 'possum is so thoroughly marginalized that its name isn't even spelled out or spoken all the way and starts with an apostrophe.

As I'm sure you know, it's technically "opossum." (I'd give

you the Latin name but I don't really feel like it and it doesn't matter anyway.) You have to wonder why they went to all the trouble of putting an "o" in there at all. Whereas most respectable wildlife was named many centuries ago by Greek scientists, 'possums got their monikers from Jamestown colonists only about 400 years ago based on a Virginia Algonquian Indian word which, translated literally means "that weird catlike thing that keeps getting into our garbage cans."

Though technically wildlife, 'possums haven't really achieved "watchable" status. When most people think of wildlife, they think of majestic animals like deer or eagles, or shy, humorous creatures like raccoons or foxes. You know, creatures that we're excited to see and snap pictures of. 'Possums, however fall into a different category.

Weird and gross.

Nobody really enjoys encountering a 'possum in nature. They are unsettling — beady black eyes on a white face with a pink nose and a long naked tail — and they skulk around like teenagers who just got busted with their dad's porno magazines, back hunched and grimacing.

'Possums are marsupials (they store their newborn babies inside a pouch) which in the case of kangaroos, is endearing because there's only one in there, he's really cute, and he hangs out with Winnie the Pooh. But when you get five or six pink, hairless, infant 'possums squirming around together in what amounts to an interior fanny pack, it become a horror movie.

Here in Middle Tennessee, 'possums have a rich history of either being hunted and eaten with a side of sweet potatoes or flattened by vehicles, the latter of which leaves them both dead

and inedible. Their poor safety record may be attributed to the fact that reckless, oft-drunken or stoned ‘possums are known to play two challenge games: “Who Can Cross This Road Before That Big Thing Gets Here?” and the oldie-but-goodie simply titled “‘Possum,” in which the participant freezes and plops over when confronted by any loud, bright, or otherwise startling stimulus.¹

Here at Critter Chronicles, this fact led us (me, sitting alone in my office) to question the *real* motives behind the ‘possum vs. vehicle phenomenon. Is this just a matter of bad luck for the ‘possum or perhaps ... murder?

Think about it. ‘Possums are no larger than a big cat and easy to push around. Could it be that one or more of its woodland neighbors has an evil agenda and that ‘possums are routinely baited across busy roads or even physically shoved?

Sure, there are documented instances of teenaged ‘possums punching each other in the shoulder and whispering, “Watch this!” before waddling into oncoming traffic. On the Fujita Animal Intelligence Scale, ‘possums are, after all, pretty dumb.

But there could be other factors at play.

For example, in popular language, deer have cornered the market for animals that are rendered useless when encountering vehicle headlights.

“He froze like a deer in the headlights.”

But this designation should’ve gone to the ‘possum, truth be told. Agreed, deer are often transfixed by bright lights, but it doesn’t usually last that long and the animals don’t fall over onto

¹ It’s a cruel twist of fate that the two games were inexplicably paired at

their sides.²

Could it be that white-tailed deer are actually shoving ‘possums to their deaths to retain their high status in the popular American vernacular?

Probably not, but it’s an interesting idea anyway.

More likely is the fact that in ‘possums, you have a perfect storm of negative characteristics as they relate to Tennessee’s roadways: dumb, slow, creepy-looking, apparently prefer human thoroughfares to their own perfectly safe ones, and collapse in a furry heap at the sight and sound of a vehicle when they are, in fact, directly in front of it.

Lest you think I’m unfairly picking on ‘possums, let’s look at some of the positive attributes of this poor fellow.

Hang on. Let me think about that for a minute...

OK, after an exhaustive, two-minute research session on Wikipedia, I found this: ‘Possums are largely immune to the venom of pit vipers like rattlesnakes and copperheads.

That’s a start, I guess. I’ll give them props for that. However, the National Opossum Society (I’m not kidding) says the ‘possum is one of the most short-lived mammals for its size because practically everything else eats, murders, or runs over it immediately.

But not snakes. Good job with the snakes, ‘possum!

In other good news, ‘possums are generally omnivorous, meaning they’ll consume most anything. This is smart. You don’t want to be picky about food if you’re probably not going to be around very long anyway. A ‘possum is essentially living its life

² The Tennessee Fainting Goat should take the top award for this trait, but they are unfortunately stuck in the “livestock” category.

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on death row and every day, is eating what is more than likely its last meal.

“Just give me whatever you’ve got and as much of it as possible,” is what the ‘possum is telling us.

Actually, that sounds more like my 17-year-old son.

You get the point.

To sum up, the ‘possum

- Has an extra O in its name,
- Is weird-looking,
- Plays chicken with cars and loses 100% of the time,
- Can defeat a snake, which is its one bragging point, and
- Eats like a teenaged boy.

And there we have...the lowly ‘possum.

3

MY TOP 9 IRONCLAD TIPS FOR TOUGH MUDDER VIRGINS

Originally published June 25, 2014

I BECAME AWARE OF THE TOUGH MUDDER a few years ago after discovering Crossfit and completing a couple of Warrior Dashes.

In case you've never heard of the Tough Mudder, it's a 10- to 12-mile mud and obstacle run, infamous for being one of the most difficult of all the wildly popular mud runs out there these days. (Feel free to debate this distinction in the comments section.) For a couple of years, it became a goal that I liked to verbalize to friends with a Barney Fife sniff — “Yeah, I’m thinkin’

about doing the Tough Mudder.” It made for good conversation. But secretly, I never thought I would have the nerve to do.

It probably won't ever come to Middle Tennessee anyway, I reasoned, so I'll never be faced with the decision to do it.

Then came an announcement last winter. It was coming to Middle Tennessee.

Gulp.

OK, maybe if I act like I didn't notice the announcement, I can get away with it.

Double-gulp. A friend of my wife's, Paul, a guy in his mid-50s who hadn't worked out in several years, challenged me to help him form a team because he “wanted to do something stupid.”

Crap. Now I was trapped. Since I was the “Big Crossfitter,” I couldn't talk my way out of it. With no other recourse, I made my first critical error: I agreed. We formed a team, “The Incompitent Basterds.” (We named it this in hopes that nobody would look at us and think that we were competent or that we could even spell.)

It was a team of four — myself, Paul, and two ladies with whom he works, Heather and Rebekah. A month before the June 7 event, though, the founding Basterd tweaked his hip while running. He was out. Three days before the event, Heather became a foster mother of a newborn. She was out.

And then, there were two.

On the big day, the last surviving Incompitent Basterds showed up with Paul as a spectator, along with my wife, Holly, who is in far better shape than me but was terrified of the high obstacles and much like any sane person, had no interest in voluntarily subjecting herself to electrocution.

More on this later.

The atmosphere at the event site in Spring Hill, Tennessee, was circus-like. There was a lot of nervous energy and laughter as participants used black Sharpees to write bib numbers on each other's arms and foreheads. After a couple hours of mental preparation, people-watching, and anxious trips to the Porta-Johns, Rebekah and I joined about 300 other Mudders in the starting chute. For an eternity, we were whipped into a bouncing frenzy by the motivational dude on the microphone before they finally released us and we ran onto the trail with shouts of unbridled and apprehensive energy.

Four hours or so later, and with a noticeable absence of unbridled energy, we finished. Based on that experience, here are my Top 9 Ironclad Tips for Tough Mudder Virgins in no particular order (except for No. 1) along with one bonus.

9. THE MUD — OVER-PREPARE FOR IT.

Yeah, I know that I should've suspected there would be mud. It's not called the Tough Dirter or the Tough Grasser, after all. But, y'all don't understand. Mud was a problem before we ever stepped out of our Nissan minivan. The "parking lot" was a hillside pasture that had been rained upon for a couple of days straight, and with the vocal encouragement of an overzealous flagman, I essentially "drifted" the van into its designated spot like a scene from "The Fast and the Furious." (I don't think they used minivans, though.)

The "Mudder Village" was how I imagined the last day of Woodstock, minus Jimmie Hendrix, nasty blankets, and topless hippies. Just walking to the starting chute constituted an obstacle, and I was a mess before I even took a step onto the

course. As of the writing of this particular paragraph, it is five days and five showers after the event, and I'm still digging eraser-sized dirt-clods out of various orifices of my body. Suggestions? Drive a 4-wheel-drive vehicle if possible, bring multiple trash bags to dump your disgusting garments in, and several old towels to sit on in your car, which will later require detailing and delousing. Better yet, arrange to have a lake nearby that you can jump in.

8. RUNNING? FU-GIT ABOUT IT.

At first, running was good. Running was fine. Like I said, we'd all been cooped up so long, running actually felt awesome. The Mudders in my wave all started out running with a nice, jaunty pace and lots of conversation, joking, and laughing. That lasted for about a mile and a half, maybe. Then began a four-hour ordeal of running, walking, and leap-frogging our fellow competitors. (Not *actually* leap-frogging them, because that would've been silly, right?) It was after the "Mud Mile" obstacle (more on this in a minute) when running *really* became fun, and I don't mean "fun." I had enough soil between my socks and the soles of my feet to support a vegetable garden my granny would be proud of. It felt like I was running barefoot on a gravel road. By the last two miles, the runners had dwindled down to a couple of overzealous marathoners and a lady being chased by a bee. The takeaway? Don't worry about having to run 11 miles. You won't.

7. THE FUNKY MONKEY — YOU NEED TO TRAIN FOR THIS ONE.

This obstacle is like the monkey bars at the playground when we were kids. Y'know, back when the objective was to get

OUT of the house rather than to morph into Gollum in a darkened basement with an Xbox controller in your clammy, translucent, webbed hand. So, although the last time this 48-year-old was on monkey bars was probably during the Carter administration, I walked up to the Funky Monkey with a distinct air of confidence, even though failure would result in plummeting into muddy water below.

I derived even more confidence from the fact that I was wearing extremely cool, molded rubber, Batman-like Tough Mudder gloves that would make gripping a breeze and made me feel badass.

After traversing the first two or three bars — which are slanted up for about 10 feet and then slant down another 10 feet — I realized I was in trouble and was not, in fact, badass or even kind-of-not-good-ass. It felt nothing like when I was 7 and weighed 65 pounds. I knew I was doomed when my hands started slipping inside my Batman gloves. The Funky Monkey dropped me like a banana peel and I ended up doing a half-gainer into the brown water. Takeaway? Train your shoulders and grip strength. Acquire some upper body strength, of which I apparently had none.

6. ENJOY THE COMPANY OF SUPERHEROES — YOU'LL FEEL LIKE ONE, TOO.

Speaking of the Funky Monkey, I watched in amazement as an incredibly ripped, short black guy wearing nothing but Superman boxer briefs grabbed the sides of the monkey bars — not the horizontal pieces you're supposed to use — and shimmied his way across the thing in about 10 seconds. He dropped onto the platform on the other side with a wide grin

arched across his face as we all cheered in astonishment. Later in the race, I saw this guy leap over a wall without touching it at all. It made me wonder what it must feel like to enjoy such superior health and strength, and how joyful such a person must be during an event like this. It was cool.

5. THE ARCTIC ENEMA — PREPARE TO EXIT THE RIDE IMMEDIATELY. This is essentially a big dumpster, about six feet deep and 20 feet long, filled with ice water. Your task is to jump in one end, swim under a barrier in the middle, and exit the other end. So, imagine jumping into and swimming through a muddy-water Slushy full of those little ice cubes from Sonic that you love to chew on. I've never removed myself from a pool that fast. Maybe a rabid crocodile would've motivated me to move faster, but I doubt it.

4. CHOOSE YOUR TEAMMATE WISELY — THEY MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE.

I just got lucky. Rebekah, whom I had met only once before the race, turned out to personify the true spirit of the Tough Mudder. You may think that distinction should go to any one of the hundreds of shirtless, ripped, tatted-up Bros who made child's play of the obstacles with one hand while simultaneously doing shots of 100-proof testosterone with the other, but that would be too easy. Rebekah, an attorney, is a mid-30s-ish long-distance runner, soft spoken and slim as a twig. She had never done anything remotely resembling the Tough Mudder, but saw an opportunity to push herself into uncharted territory. Mile after mile, Rebekah conquered one fear after another by scaling high walls, slogging through unimaginable mud, struggling through the partner wheelbarrow carry, and scampering up

sheer half-pipes, always with an attitude of, “I’m ready. Let’s go.” By the end of the thing, we were both bruised, battered, and spitting gobs of mud, but Rebekah persisted without pause. This is the kind of teammate you want, period, the end.

3. YOU CAN DO IT — THE FORCE WILL BE WITH YOU.

Speaking of attitude, let me return to the testosterone-swigging Bros. I bet you expect me to say that they were a bunch of meat-headed, arrogant, douche-bags, right? Wrong. I’ve never seen a greater demonstration of unsolicited help and encouragement in my life outside of a national disaster or emergency of some kind, and most of it was delivered by the Bros. At each obstacle, these guys were assisting people over without the slightest regard to their own progress through the course.

At one obstacle in particular, the “Balls to the Wall,” several hundred Mudders were backed up while only four at a time scaled a very imposing 15-foot-high wall using a thick rope. As we waited nearly 45 minutes for our turn, we witnessed several overweight and very frightened competitors start up the wall with Bros giving them the initial boost. There were several feet that they had to conquer with their own body strength, and a few seemed ready to give up and return to the starting position, but as I watched, this amazing crowd of people literally WILLED the terrified Mudder up the wall.

All of us screamed “You can do it!” and “Get up that effin’ wall!” over and over as the person inched their way up. When they reached the top, the crowd erupted in wild cheers, with many of us in tears as the competitor thrust a triumphant fist into the air. It was one of the most incredible things I’ve ever

seen, and made the hardships of the 10.6 miles irrelevant.

2. THE MUD MILE — EMBRACE IT.

Let's talk about mud some more. At about the four-mile mark, Rebekah and I rounded a corner in the trail and came face-to-face with what I was convinced was some type of living hell on Earth: The Mud Mile.

Stretched out before us was a series of eight or 10 mounds like you would see in a motocross course, except these were composed of shiny, gloppy mud rather than nice dry soil. In between each set of mounds was a six-foot-wide and three-foot-deep trench full of mud, sludge, water, snot, shit, and I'm sure, other unmentionables.

Remember when Andy Dufresne had to crawl through that stinking sewer pipe to escape Shawshank Prison, vomiting all the way? OK, this wasn't really anywhere near as bad as that, but it was really nasty.

Hundreds of people were slipping and sliding in and out of the pools, pulling themselves out of the muck like putrid zombies, and the 85-degree air was thick with that sickening sound of viscous material being repeatedly displaced along with a chorus of human voices exclaiming in disgust as horseflies buzzed overhead. One of those Medieval artists who illustrated horrifying scenes of Purgatory would've started painting this, only to abort the project for fear of coming off too graphic.

All in all, it was one of my favorite obstacles.

Oh, and did I mention that the trail took us through the Mud Mile TWICE?!

1. ELECTROSHOCK THERAPY — USE THE CAREFUL APPROACH.

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So you've made it 10.599999 of the 10.6 miles. You stopped running miles ago. Now, you look like a member of a throng of The Walking Dead. You've been beaten all to hell and every fiber of your body is cramping all at once, including your teeth. You've got ONLY ONE obstacle left and you can see the finish line at the other side, replete with smiling volunteers handing out the much-sought-after orange Tough Mudder headbands and even MORE-sought-after cups of cold beers. Just a few more steps! Piece of cake, right?

Wrong.

The infamous "Electroshock Therapy" is a wooden structure, about 20 feet wide and around 50 feet long within which are dangling hundreds of innocuous looking white wires. All you have to do is run through it. Problem is, many of these wires are crackling with 10,000 volts of electricity — you don't know which — and the ground, of course, is thick mud. I chose, unwisely it turns out, to take the direct, bull-in-the-China-shop approach and run through as if scampering from the car to the house in a downpour.

I didn't run far.

ZAP! I was down. Some rude, giant man slugged me in the back, it felt like. Up, run, ZAP! Down again. *Holy hell, get me out of here.* Up, run, ZAAAPPP!! I awoke — that's right, *awoke* — at the end of the obstacle with my open mouth, right eye, and right ear submerged in the muck. I remember none of the last four steps. Perhaps that's for the best.

BONUS: DON'T EXPECT ANY HUGS AT THE END.

The volunteer placed the headband on my sunburned head while actually laughing at me to my face. I stared at the person

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without comprehension, stumbled over to the beer table, grabbed one, upended it, and unceremoniously spewed muddy brew all over the ground in an attempt to rid my mouth of Tennessee soil. At this point, any semblance of pride was long gone. I rudely snatched half a banana from the hand of another horrified volunteer and shoved it into my mouth with a guttural noise.

Behind me, Rebekah was just making her way out of the Electroshock. She spent five minutes eeking her way between the devil strands, somehow making herself approximately two inches-thick, and completed a human version of the old board game, "Operation." We posed for the obligatory horror photos, exchanged fist-bumps, said our muddy goodbyes, and slogged our ways to our vehicles on powerless legs. Later, as I stood under the shower for about 40 minutes, the significance of the whole thing began to sink in.

I trained. I participated. I survived.

I'm one Tough Mudder.

4

TO MY FELLOW BIGFOOTERS: DON'T STOP BELIEVING!

Originally published November 29, 2012

OK, I'M GONNA COME RIGHT OUT WITH IT.

I believe in Bigfoot. Sasquatch. Yeti.

There you go. I said it. Hello, my name is Mark, and I believe in Bigfoot. (*All together: Hello, Mark!*)

From the infamous evening back in 1972 when my ill-advised parents took my 6-year-old self, along with my brother and sister, to see "The Legend of Boggy Creek," I've been fascinated by all things Bigfoot. (For the record, I wanted to see "Fantasia," but was outvoted in the back seat of the station

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wagon on the way to the theater. For weeks after, I wouldn't enter a dark room without someone else turning on the light first. Thanks for that, Mom and Dad.)

I've got my own proof, mind you. I'm pretty dang sure that me and my buddy, Randy Pennington, spotted a grainy, slightly out-of-focus Bigfoot up in the woods above our farmhouse one time when I was 12. We sprinted the 9 miles all the way back to the house, screaming bloody murder!

Okay, it was more like maybe a quarter mile, but we ran the whole way and we were really upset.

I was so into Bigfoot as a teenager, I wrote my senior term paper on him. (Or her, if you believe the Gimlin/Patterson footage.) I got an A minus. In my defense, I think the minus was because I was typing on that coated, erasable typing paper and the word "beast" got smeared on Page 3. It looked like "beach."

Anyway, I can argue for hours in support of the Bigfoot theory, but you can find other, more credible sources for that.

Oh, I admit that I'm one of those people who likes to believe in things. Like Neil Diamond, I'm a believer. For you to affect my disbelief in something, you must prove it to be false, though I don't require that the same thing be proven true if I think it's cool enough. Sue me, but I think the world is a lot more interesting and fun when populated by things that defy explanation. Yes, there are very intelligent PhDs out there who assure us that the Big Three — Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, and UFOs — couldn't possibly exist, and they lay out academic, scientific, and other-ific arguments to support their theories, but I'm unmoved by this.

(Now, lean forward, because I'm going to whisper

something in my conspiratorial voice.)

Maybe — just maybe — we don't actually know everything. Maybe mankind isn't quite as brilliant as it thinks it is.

Yes, I know that's crazy-talk, but I'm feeling frisky tonight.

But there's one thing I do know. There is an enormous contingent of Internet users whose apparent purpose in life is to follow Bigfoot Facebook pages and make negative comments. Ridiculing online Bigfoot believers is practically a cottage industry, I've learned. And I'm talking about some serious ridiculing. Virulent, personal attacks and hateful obscenities.

Just because someone believes in Bigfoot!

But it's not only that. Hatefulness will rear its ugly head on the Internet anytime a person makes a statement of belief in anything. Optimism is not to be tolerated in today's world. Allow commenting on a blog page, and let the negativity begin. In my opinion, the single biggest downside of Internet interaction is the total absence of accountability. Protected by a nondescript username and untold distance, these jerks will happily spout things they would never have the guts to say in person. The lack of basic human civility and manners is shocking.

For these reasons alone, I think Bigfoot believers should be held in high esteem. We bring positive energy to a negative world, says I. We are Renaissance men and women who shamelessly wear shirts that proclaim, "Gone squatchin'," "Bigfoot saw me but nobody believes him," and "Sasquatch stole my underwear." We wept at the end of "Harry and the Hendersons."

And what's wrong with this?? The worst-case scenario is no conclusive evidence is ever found, and we die slightly

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disappointed but happy with our Bigfoot T-shirts on. No harm done. The best-case is that we are all vindicated, and scientific proof is revealed that there really is an 8-foot-tall hairy guy minding his own secretive business back in the woods behind that old Phillips 66 gas station.

And when that happens, I won't even say "I told you so."

2018 UPDATE

IN THE SPRING OF 2018, while hiking back from Everest Base Camp in Nepal, I'm pretty sure I discovered either the Yeti's lair or the Grinch's house. It looked like a big wooden door set into a huge rock structure on a mountainside. There was even a dark, human-shaped figure standing at one side of it.

Really! I kid you not!

You can read about this and see the photo I made by purchasing my book, "Doofus Dad Does Everest Base Camp."

(I'm not going to give *everything* away, you know!)

5

I WANNA BE DICK PROENNEKE WHEN I GROW UP

Originally published January 7, 2013

“A LONE IN THE WILDERNESS,” the documentary about Alaskan naturalist Richard “Dick” Proenneke (pronounced *prin-uh-key*) is one of the most remarkable films ever made, in my estimation.

Yes, I know that’s an ambitious statement, but I stand by it. I can’t think of another movie or TV production that can exhilarate me, fascinate me, and make me feel like a sorry sack of poo all at the same time.

Have you seen this documentary? PBS often plays it during their fund-raising drives. I first saw it about six years ago.

Let me back up and give you a little context. When he retired at age 51 in 1968, Proenneke was a WWII vet, an expert outdoorsman, and a sought-after diesel mechanic in the more tamed areas of Alaska. That year, he decided to put his skills to the test by moving to a remote area of the state called Twin Lakes, building himself a log cabin, a living alone for a solid 12 months. Among his many talents, Proenneke was also a skilled photographer, and he recorded many of his activities that year using a film camera mounted on a tripod. These films, along with his extensive and eloquent journal writings, would later become the aforementioned documentary.

The movie is hypnotic. Most of the film has that soft, over-saturated, slightly sped up Super-8 look. It was shot without sound, but sound affects were very skillfully added, so much so that I believe they're real when I know they're not. One of Proenneke's friends narrates it in the first-person. Again, I know it's not Proenneke's voice, but I believe it is anyway.

But the thing that has me glued to my seat every time I watch "Alone in the Wilderness" is the absurd, over-the-top competence of the man. He decides to build himself a cabin in the wilderness and, by golly, that's what he does.

But he does this not with a pickup truck full of power tools from The Home Depot. He uses *hand tools*, many of which he fashions himself. He's limited only by his imagination. The door hinges, furniture, chimney and fireplace, moss roof, bowls, spoons, pots and pans... All of this, he makes himself!

I'm not talking about the completely off-kilter, ugly, unusable, out-of-balance, leaking, ineffective, kind of thing that I would make. (And that just describes the store-bought curtain

rod I tried to hang this weekend.) I'm talking about a cabin that Honest Abe himself would've admired. I'm talking about wooden spoons that look like they just came out of an Ikea bag.

Proenneke never even appears the least bit winded in the film. As we watch, he notches out 12' spruce logs and rolls them perfectly into place before squatting on a high slope to pick a bucket full of wild blueberries for his buttermilk pancakes. There's no sweat pouring down his face. No wild cursing and throwing the hatchet into the weeds as he realizes he cut a log too short. No kneeling on bruised knees among an explosion of parts and pieces of some pressboard piece of junk from Target as he stares desperately at tiny, unintelligible English instructions written by some Korean guy sleeping peacefully on the other side of the planet. No further cursing when he gets to the end of the entertainment center only to realize he mounted the door upside down and now that little magnet thing won't connect with the other magnet thing to make the door close.

As opposed to the author of this blog, Proenneke did none of that. What he did was to simply live out the fantasy of every modern man who wishes he could be *That Guy*, the one who could live off the land and build things without messing them up.

More rare than his physical skills were his emotionally ones, because his solitary year turned into 30. He lived alone, happily by all accounts, for three decades. Due to health problems, he left his by-then-famous cabin at age 81 — having lived all those years with only occasional visits from close friends — and moved to California until his death a few years later. Humans are, as we all know, social creatures, and most of us require the company of others. Proenneke, though, was perfectly content

with the company of nature, his journals, and himself.

The question is, did he miss out on life? Did he die a lesser man because he didn't choose to have electricity, indoor plumbing, an Xbox 360, or an iPhone 8 Plus? Did he miss out because his trash wasn't picked up every Thursday at his curb, or because he couldn't run around the corner and grab a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos at Kroger?

I don't think so. I think he lived his time on this Earth entirely on his own terms and in respect of Mother Nature and in fear of Almighty God. And while the lack of human companionship would be unthinkable to most of us, I don't think he missed it at all.

And when I get to Heaven someday, I intend to sit down with Dick Proenekke on the front step of that cabin and have a good, long talk about it.

6

THE FIERY GIZZARD TRAIL: CERTA MORS

Originally published November 17, 2017

SOME OF YOU KNOW THIS, some of you don't, most of you probably don't care, but last year, my do-gooder wife and I launched a company — Hobnail Trekking Co. — that arranges treks to (but not up) Mount Everest in Nepal. We did this partly because we're slightly crazy and partly because doing the trek has been on our bucket list for years. In March 2018, Holly and I will fly around the world and check out Big E with our own eyes.

So we're now in the midst of training and part of this involves hiking with our trek group members, several of whom live right here in Middle Tennessee. Last weekend, upon the

suggestions of trek member Luis, we brazenly decided to tackle the Fiery Gizzard Trail, known as one of the Top 25 hikes in the nation. The full trail is around 12.5 miles long and is rated “strenuous,” which in Latin, means “certa mors,” which then translated back into English, means “certain death.” Not knowing this, I just assumed it actually meant “strenuous,” which is kind of a nebulous word and not to be taken too seriously.

As the Owner of an International Trekking Company, I approached this trek with all the optimism and preparation of a total nincompoop. I had good boots, a good Camelbak pack, and a good peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I was also hiking with my company’s trek leader, Dawa, an Everest Region Sherpa and veteran of hundreds of long-distance Nepali hikes at altitude. So hiking with Dawa is like calling an Uber and Richard Petty shows up as your driver.

Regardless, the fact that this trail is called “The Fiery Gizzard³” rather than something like “Friendly Fluffy Bunny Path” should have raised a red flag.

Upon the recommendation of the one member of the group who had done the hike and shall remain nameless (Luis), we arrived at the trail head at around 10 am, giving us some five hours to knock this thing out before darkness fell. Again, lots of blind optimism.

While waiting for the fifth member of the troop to arrive, the rest of us made a short jaunt to an overlook to view amazing Foster Falls far below in a deep gorge. It was beautiful and we all

³ I’m not even sure what a “gizzard” is, but it sounds uncomfortable even when it’s not “fiery.”

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said the appropriate words. Then Luis, who is 16 years younger than me and has the physique of a pro soccer player, said "C'mon, guys!" and began scampering down a set of stairs that descended into the gorge. These were the kind of stairs that should have a sign at the top saying, "Keep in mind, if you walk down these stairs, you've got to walk back up them." The angle of descent was roughly that of a sheer cliff face. Yet down we went, flush with verve. We took the requisite photos in front of the falls and then headed back up the staircase. Upon finally reaching the top, I was alarmed to find my legs were rubbery and my heart was pounding in my ears.

And we had not even *started* the hike.

"Ahh, that was a good warmup!" shouted Luis. "Now we're ready!"

"Gaaakkrwwb," I replied.

THE LAST MEMBER OF THE PARTY ARRIVED and we took off. The first hour was heavenly. We cruised along a smooth, fairly level trail that meandered through a dense hardwood forest, sometimes skirting cliffs that offered amazing views for miles. After a while, we decided to break for lunch. An older, bearded man and his wife walked up and struck up a conversation. He was a local who hiked the trail regularly and had even conquered the Appalachian Trail in its entirety twice. After appraising us for a few minutes, he asked how far we were going today.

"The whole way, all 12 miles!" I replied.

He smirked and said, "Hmm. Good luck."

At this, I should have suggested that we turn back

immediately, but as the Owner of an International Trekking Company, I was nonplussed. (I know now that I should've been extremely plussed.)

We continued and the trail began to get interesting. More inclines and descents, crossing downed trees and footbridges, and splashing through shallow streams.

At about two hours in, we approached a steep gorge and far below, we could make out a rushing stream. To my horror, I noticed the white tree blazes marking the trail actual led straight *down into the gorge*, instead of finding a suitable path around like any sensible trail would do.

Without hesitation, Luis started down. The footing had become an ankle-snapping mixture of roots and wobbly boulders, and each step had to be considered carefully. We finally made it to the bottom, crossed a footbridge, and were faced with the incline on the other side. A combination of stone and wooden steps led up an impossibly steep hillside, making the first staircase the led to Foster Falls seem silly in comparison. Far at the top, I could just make out tiny ant people moving around.

Up I went, heart pounding, sweat pouring. Gasping for breath, I could feel myself turning green with nausea and my legs weighed 400 pounds each. On and on. Each torturous step seemed to be its own workout that lasted hours. I turned to look back.

I had climbed approximately 15 feet.

At this point, a small child from another group smiled at me and literally ran up the entire incline, giggling. I tried to trip her as she ran past, but my reflexes were far too slow.

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I'll spare you the details, but suffice it to say, I finally made it up. I glanced over at Dawa and he just grinned at me, barely breathing and sweating not a drop.

"Why aren't you sweating?" I demanded.

"Because Sherpas keep it simple," said Dawa. "We don't need to sweat."

After uttering some choice curses at my Nepali friend, we pressed on into the ever-lengthening shadows. The inclines and descents became more frequent, the ground rockier. My feet and toes were starting to complain and I was beginning to stumble more often. I had left my FitBit at home (of course), so I asked team member Shari how far we'd gone, assuming we were approaching the end.

She looked at her watch and then back at me with big, sad eyes.

"Four miles."

It was a funny joke and I laughed wholeheartedly. But then I noticed she was staring at me. "I'm serious, dude," she said. "Four miles."

The background fell away from me like when Chief Brody is on the beach in "Jaws" and sees the little boy being gobbled up in the surf.

"F-four miles??" I stammered.

IT WAS AROUND THEN THAT BEGAN ONE OF THE LONGEST, most difficult 8.5 miles of my life. The five of us realized that we weren't even halfway through, there was NO WAY we were walking out in the daylight, but we were too invested to turn around.

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At least once in every hiker's life, they experience that moment when they ask this question: "Why am I not at home on the couch, feet up, cat in my lap, bowl of Orville Redenbacher beside me, watching "Stranger Things" while simultaneously playing Candy Crush on my phone?" I know it's weird, but it's always that *exact* same question. And the answer is always, "Because I started this stupid Mt. Everest trekking company and now I've got to act like I'm some kind of amazing, super-experienced hiker so people will trust me and, oh by the way, I've got to get in freaking shape because in four months I'm hiking for two weeks at 14,000-plus feet and I'd prefer not die because that would be embarrassing and probably bad for business."

So like all hikers, I had that moment, too.

Two hours later, the mood had changed. Now, the raucous laughs and inappropriate joke-telling, backslapping, doling out of "flat tires," and braggadocios tall tales had been replaced by bitter cursing, sobbing, moaning, praying, or just tearful stony silence. (This was me. Everybody else was having a great time.) From time to time, someone would ask Dawa how this trail compared to the one we would travel to Everest Base Camp.

"This is worse," he would say. "We have a Nepalese word for this kind of trail that roughly translated in English means 'certain death.'"

DARKNESS FELL. WE FOLLOWED LUIS across one boulder field after another by way of headlamps and tiny flashlights. Every so often, I would suggest that we sit down just to give the rest of the group a much-needed breather and for me to consider

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vomiting my guts out.

We sat quietly in the primeval forest. A giant swath of stars twinkled down through treetops as the stream gurgled beside us in the blackness. A hoot-owl hooted in the distance.

It sucked.

OK, I'll cut to the chase. The fact that I'm writing this post is a dead giveaway that we survived and eventually made it to the parking lot. We piled into a vehicle we had hired to carry us back to our cars at the other end. The driver, a nice and sympathetic man named Troy, told about recent deaths on the trail and about how the area park ranger might "read us the riot act" when we got to our cars for being out there after dark. All that said, I'd never been so happy to be crammed into a mid-size SUV, knees under my chin, in my life. Upon return to the original trailhead, we jumped into our vehicles and peeled out of there before the grumpy park ranger could catch us.

The Fiery Gizzard was indeed fiery, but certain mors was avoided. The Hobnail Trekking Crew made it from one end to the other, scorched slightly, but otherwise undamaged.

Next up? The Friendly Fluffy Bunny Path...

7

BURPEES OR BACK SURGERY: YOU DECIDE

Originally published February 15, 2014

MY BACK HURTS.

As I write this, I'm shifting around in my office chair to find a comfortable position, because couple of hours ago, I completed a Crossfit WOD (workout of the day) that involved a bunch of deadlifts. It's funny that when I type the word "deadlift," my computer tries to change it to "deadliest." (Go ahead and try it. See?) It's funny because for a person with chronic back problems like me, the mere concept of a deadlift does seem pretty deadly, so my computer is spot on.

Let me insert a quick disclaimer before I proceed any further. I'm a blessed man. I mean, really, really blessed. I've got

an awesome wife, three incredible (and slightly crazy-making) kids, and a very cool life. There are a blue-million people out there who are facing much more formidable challenges than me, so believe me when I say, I'm really not complaining. And I blame my back pain on basketball, not deadlifts. I'll get to that in a minute.

But after some consideration, I've decided that the world's population can be neatly divided into two kinds of folks: Good-Back People (GBPs) and Bad-Back People (BBPs).

GBPs think they have their own problems, but they're wrong. They don't have any problems. They just don't know it.

BBPs spend a large portion of their lives shuffling in and out of chiropractic offices, laying prostrate on floors, strapping heated, electrified bands around their waists, and fantasizing about being GBPs.

We covet our neighbor's backs and we make no bones about it. A BBP with a cool mill in the bank, a hot spouse, and freshly showered, well-adjusted kids would chuck it all for a lower torso that would allow them to simply tie their shoes without grinding their teeth in agony.

BBPs are easy to spot in public because we rarely stand still. We are often found lifting one leg up like a stork or thrusting out our hips in a kind of self-chiropractic adjustment or twisting our upper body back and forth like Chubby Checker, who must've had an absolute nightmare of a back.

If you notice someone suddenly jerk as if they've been shot or stabbed or have stepped into an invisible pothole, you can bet they are a BBP. This is because back pain can be ninja-like. You're going along, enjoying your day, exhibiting proper

posture, not trying to lift a VW or hoist an anvil or install a child seat in a 1990 Honda hatchback or anything crazy like that, and then — BAM! — the ninja springs out of the darkness, knees you in the lower back like a thug hired by Tonya Harding, and disappears into the mist. In an instant, a grown man becomes a 39-weeks-pregnant woman with one hand on her lower back and the other groping for the nearest stable object.

IT'S NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO ADEQUATELY describe back pain to a GBP, but here's a good analogy: Imagine you're the Tin Man, and you're still in your rusted state, the way Dorothy and Scarecrow found you in the Evil Woods or Forest of Doom or wherever it was. Remember that terrible creaky sound he made and how Dorothy oiled his joints until he could move around? This is how my back feels (and actually sounds) practically every morning, except there's no Dorothy and no oil can. There's also no Scarecrow, thank God, because that would scare the hell out of me first thing in the morning, but I digress.

Because of our Tin Man-like mobility, BBPs often have irrational fears. For example, we sometimes believe that we may actually break in two. As crazy as it sounds, we truly believe that if we learn forward a little too far, we'll just snap right off at the waist.

BBP-husbands have fears that thugs will approach us in an alley as we leave the show (like in "Ghost"), insult our wives, and force us to make a choice between a) defending our bride while screaming, "Ouch, ouch, back, back, back!" with one hand clutching our L-5, or b) ignoring the slur and losing our Man Card for all eternity.

IT WAS THE IMPENDING LOSS of my Man Card that ultimately spurred me to try Crossfit in 2010. Some eight years before, I had undergone lower back surgery after two decades of chronic pain. (I can trace my problems to an injury that occurred while dunking a basketball when I was 21.) In the years following the surgery, I had essentially decided that my athletic days were gone forever, and given the slightest provocation, my lower back might literally disengage from the rest of my body and plop to the floor, leaving me with an unsightly gap between my upper and lower, er, hemispheres.

When my do-gooder wife started Crossfitting at a local box, I thought she was suffering from temporary insanity. And when she first described a burpee to me, and then suggested that I TRY one, I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she had increased my life insurance earlier that day as part of some diabolical plot. The idea of purposely casting myself to the floor and up again repeatedly was so absurd, I could scarcely formulate a response. I believe “Aa-aackk...” is what I came up with.

Through various forms of coercion (I believe the withholding of marital favors was involved at one point), I finally consented to try Crossfit. Three years later, I’ve learned some interesting factoids, like:

- My back is stronger than I gave it credit for,
- Sitting or standing still for long periods of time is actually a lot worse for my back than strenuous exercise,
- I can do burpees, but they’re much worse than I

expected,

- The Mona Lisa doesn't have eyebrows or eyelashes, and
- I dislike GBP Crossfitters even more than regular GBPs.

I want you to focus on the first two factoids. When a person suffers from back pain, the natural inclination is NOT to go to a gym and start banging giant tires with sledge hammers like Thor trying to fix a flat. Rather, it is to hobble to the nearest sofa, lie motionless, and let people bring you refreshments. I'll admit this can be fun — I watched the entire "Band of Brothers" mini-series the week after my back surgery — but it's never really going to help strengthen a bad back, which is the only true antidote for back pain.

But there again, I digress, because I'm not a doctor nor am I sponsored by Crossfit or any other fitness program. I can't make recommendations for what you should do with your own sorry excuse for a muscular/skeletal system, only tell you what I'm doing with mine. Amazingly, I can deadlift almost 300 pounds with this old Tin Man frame, and while that's not much compared to many, it's an incomprehensible miracle for me. But more important is the fact that I can still offer my "Daddy Express" piggy-back rides up the stairs to my 6-year-old at bedtime.

The take-away from all this? If you gotta dunk, make it a doughnut.

8

THE TOP 10 REASONS WHY I MIGHT NOT WORK OUT TODAY

Originally published November 18, 2016

PEOPLE HAVE ALL KINDS OF EXCUSES for not working out. I mean, there are thousands of them, take your pick. They are usually weak, transparent, laughable, and just plain ol' lame.

I, however, have valid reasons, not excuses, for maybe not working out today. These are sound, understandable, solid, sensible, and after reading them, I'm sure you would come to the same conclusion if you were me: It's probably best to just skip today's workout and start fresh tomorrow.

So in no particular order except, of course, for No. 1, here they are.

10. MY TUMMY HURTS.

It doesn't hurt like *really* bad — I can still eat and watch TV and everything — but if I concentrate really hard, I can feel something going on in there, some type of disturbance. I may be coming down with something.

9. I ALREADY TOOK A SHOWER THIS MORNING.

Before you scoff at this one, hear me out! A shower has a certain intrinsic value attached to it. It's a big deal, a major commitment. You've got to go through the whole freaking laundry basket to find clean underwear, devote a certain amount of time for the water to warm up, the shower process itself which can be complicated, and then the post-shower routine — drying off, applying deodorant, and worst of all, fixing your hair. (I don't actually have hair, so this one is OK for me.) I'm not just going to flippantly agree to set myself up for TWO showers in ONE day only because I "need to get in shape," and I'm "getting fat!" That's crazy.

8. I ATE TOO MUCH BREAKFAST AND LUNCH.

A top physical specimen like myself must be finely tuned and prepared, nutritionally speaking, for a workout. Just enough lean protein, healthy carbs, and pre-workout supplementation. Without that, you may as well hold off until tomorrow, because nothing good is going to happen. Sure, you could argue that because I had a bad breakfast and lunch, I should go work it off, but this is dangerous thinking. I could get heartburn! Heartburn, do you hear!

7. MY WORKOUT CLOTHES ARE DIRTY.

Like, I'm going to have to dig them out of the bottom of the

hamper, dirty. Like, they full-on stink. It doesn't matter that before I even finish the bear crawls in my warm-up routine, my freshly laundered workout clothes would be just as bad. That's not the point! You can't walk into the gym or box in already-stinky attire, and everyone knows it.

6. I'M EXPECTING A CALL.

As a self-employed writer, you must be available to take business calls 24-7. If there is even a slight possibility that someone may be calling to offer me work between 5:30 and 6:30 this evening, I should be stationed by my phone. Never mind that nobody has called me for work in, like, eight years, that's beside the point. I gotta be ready! Ain't no grass growing under THESE feet, buddy!

5. MY 9-YEAR-OLD HAD A BAD DAY AT SCHOOL.

We're getting into child psychology here, and I'm not fooling around with that. There was a major incident in third grade today. Folks, he got called down for talking to his buddy during math and the teacher made him MOVE HIS CLIP DOWN from "Good Job" to "Room for Improvement." I think it's probably best that I hang out with him this afternoon rather than only thinking of myself and going to workout. Plus, this WOD has burpees and thrusters. (I looked at the schedule online.)

4. DONALD TRUMP WON THE ELECTION.

Yeah, yeah, I know it's been more than a week and I should have "sucked it up" by now, but it's tough, y'know? I still need a safe place where I can be alone with my feelings, grieve properly, and maybe watch that new Bourne movie on Netflix. And to show solidarity with everyone else who isn't working out because of Donald Trump, I've clipped a pen to my shirt. (I

couldn't find a safety pin, so this Sharpee will have to do. Sure, it's technically a marker and not a pen, but just work with me here.)

3. MY TRUCK BURNS TOO MUCH GAS.

This is no laughing matter, I tell you. It's a big truck! Ford F150, 5.8-liter engine, and everything! I can't just go driving all over creation for every little thing like that. People, *every single time* I drive approximately 48 miles (three times a week) to go play laser tag with my other loser buddies, I'm thinking, "Man! This truck is really burning some gas! I'd better cut back on some of my frivolous activities, like driving to go work out!"

2. GLOBAL WARMING.

Since I brought up the subject of burning too much gas, I thought I'd just carry it through. Not only is driving to the box contributing to the hole in the ozone layer, melting icebergs, and Leo DiCaprio's apparent angst, but what about *after* I get there? The human-produced heat and carbon gases escaping that enclosure on a daily basis are surely not good for the health of our ecosystem, least of all me! Though it's an incredible self-sacrifice, I will probably choose to forgo today's workout in defense of our own beleaguered Planet Earth. You're welcome, Human Race!

And the No. 1 Reason I May Not Work Out Today...

1. SOMEONE ON FACEBOOK CHANGED MY MIND.

I was TOTALLY planning on going to work out, but then I made the mistake of scrolling through my Facebook feed and caught sight of a post ridiculing the high-intensity, short-duration exercise model.

I replied with my own very snarky comment, complete with

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the classic “LOL, what an idiot!” ending, but the guy outsmarted me and came back with something even better:

“Get your facts straight, you moron! Ever read a book?”

There it was. He totally flamed me. And for the first time in the entire Recorded History of the Internet, somebody changed someone else’s mind on Facebook. Dejected, I thought, “OK, maybe I’ll skip today’s workout even though I really *wanted* to do five sets of burpees and thrusters.”

Dang Facebook...

9

THE TOP 9 BEST THINGS ABOUT BEING GAINFULLY UNEMPLOYED

Originally published November 5, 2016

BACK IN AUGUST (2016), I LEFT my full-time communications job for greener pastures. At the time, I wasn't certain what those greener pastures might look like, only that they would be greener, whether by a better annual salary, a more fulfilling job, or literally access to a pasture that has been properly fertilized and irrigated, and therefore greener. (Don't scoff at this. Browner pastures are no fun at all — ask any cow.)

It was the first time in some 13 years that I was not “gainfully employed” by some company or organization. As you might imagine, this took some getting used to, but I easily fell

back into my longtime role as a “freelancer,” which is Latin for “doesn’t make money.”

Working from home is different, I admit. It’s not the same as climbing into a nice pair of khakis, driving into an office five days a week, reporting to a supervisor, receiving money on a consistent schedule, and so on. Sure, there are predictable stresses that come along with not having a steady job — annoying things like food, housing, and college tuitions — but since this isn’t a serious blog, I will carefully ignore those.

Now more than two months later, I consider myself a veteran unemployed person. I’ve “settled in,” as people like to say, so much that I’ve compiled my Top 9 Best Things About Being Gainfully Unemployed. I won’t organize them into any particular order (except for No. 1) because that would be too much like work. And what does “gainfully unemployed” even mean? Simple. These are the advantages or desirable things I’m *gaining* by my unemployment.

9. LIVING IN COMFORTABLE CLOTHES.

Let me start by dispelling the tired old cliché of the freelancer always working in his or her pajamas. Come on, people! This is an absurd falsehood.

Sometimes I wear sweat pants.

Honestly, since August 18, I have been dressed in something OTHER than some combination of gym shorts, t-shirts, pajama pants, and sweats TWICE, not including church. Once was for a job interview (I didn’t really want it anyway) and once for a wedding, which was lovely and I only had to wear the tie for less than an hour.

You’ve read about those people who dress themselves in

formal attire every day to work in their home office, right?

Yeah, I'm not one of those people.

However, much like a real office, I do require a dress code. It looks something like this:

- If it requires a belt, it's too dressy.
- If the shirt has buttons and doesn't depict Mickey Mouse, the logo of your child's school, or some image related to Harry Potter, it's too dressy.
- Any shoes other than slippers? Take 'em off — too dressy.

Sorry. Rules are rules.

8. WATCHING SUPERHERO, KICKASS HERO, AND WAR MOVIES.

Any employed married man knows that superhero, kickass hero⁴, and war movies may only be legally viewed on days when he's home sick or when the wife is away at a conference. But when you're unemployed, it's open season because, um, who's going to stop you? I watched "Taken 1, 2, and 3" all in one sitting — absolutely guilt-free. I now understand who the "Avengers" are, all except for the guy with the bow and arrows. (I'm still not sure if the "X-Men," "Fantastic Four," and "Avengers" are somehow related, though.) Fortunately, I stumbled across "Deadpool" before naively allowing my 9-year-old to view it and therefore becoming warped for life.

⁴ Author's Note: "Kickass hero," my own term, refers to guys like Liam Neeson or Matt Damon who dispatch approximately 86 head-shaven Eastern European bad guys during the movie and by the end of it, are only slightly winded, possibly with one arm in a sling.

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To retain the delicate balance of the cosmos, my wife watches “90-Day Fiancé” and “The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills” while I’m not around. (Correction: It’s “The Real Housewives of Orange County.” Holly wanted to make sure her smutty, guilty-pleasures show was listed accurately.)

7. SPYING ON WILDLIFE WHEN THEY MISTAKENLY THINK I’M AT WORK.

I’ve always suspected that indigenous wildlife behaves very differently on weekdays when they know all the humans are away at work, and now I know I was right.

For example, we all learn in elementary school that “nocturnal” refers to animals that are active at night. But now I know that it really refers to animals that are active at night and between the hours of 8 a.m. and 5:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, except for state and federal holidays. This includes all the deer, possums, raccoons, and owls in my heavily wooded neighborhood.

I always thought that they were either sleeping during the day or at least deep in the woods somewhere. Wrong. They behave much like the toys in the Toy Story movies, springing to life when people aren’t looking.

Making the assumption I’m still driving off to work at 7 am and not spying on them out of my bedroom window, the wildlife often gather behind our house at random times during the day to smoke clumsily rolled cigarettes and determine who’s going to eat my landscaping via a spirited game of Rock, Paper,

Scissors.⁵ During accepted wildlife hours, they go back to grazing peacefully or flinging themselves in front of our vehicles.

6. SCHEDULING REPAIRMEN WHENEVER I WANT.

All the cable guys, pest control technicians, and HVAC repairmen are frustrated now that I'm home all the time because it's ruining their deal, which is trying to make the human race crazy by making us book a "3-hour block of time" during a weekday to show up at our house, and then arriving an hour later. This is their goal because they are all sadistic madmen and women (any present company excepted), but they didn't count on me working from home. If I need something these days, I simply call the help desk and say, "Sure, sometime between 7:30 a.m. and 11 p.m. next Thursday will work just fine, because I'm here all day, plus one hour." They hate that.

5. NO STAFF MEETINGS.

I honestly believe that staff meetings are simply a way for a supervisor to justify his or her status as a boss. I know this because I've been a boss and have succumbed to this urge.

"At the appointed time, we must all sit around the same table with matching chairs, sip coffee, and look at each other. This will take roughly one hour. When we are finished, we will have successfully removed one hour from an otherwise productive day and possibly have scheduled another such meeting for next week. But just to make sure, we will send around a calendar invitation to confirm that next meeting so that you can use another 3-5 minutes responding to that email and opening your cloud-based Google calendar to make sure it

⁵ Bigfoot was there one time, too, but suddenly became very grainy and out of focus when I tried to film him with my phone.

automatically saved itself there, which cancels out the ‘automatic’ part of the whole process. Good meeting, everyone. Dismissed.”

4. BECOMING A SKILLED GOURMET CHEF.

Becoming unemployed meant that I would immediately become employed as chef for my family. Now, I wasn’t too shabby in the kitchen to begin with, truth be told (don’t try to verify that statement), but suddenly having my afternoons free has expanded my horizons as a culinary genius in ways I couldn’t have anticipated.

No dish is off limits, no cookbook is safe.

I’m deftly handling complicated things like “sautéing,” “simmering,” “browning,” and “heating up in the microwave.” Word is spreading internationally among all the best gourmet restaurants: Johnson is available! The calls to hire me as Head Chef are pouring in. Strangely though, these are all restaurants that only serve “white pasta” (fettuccini Alfredo using spaghetti noodles); crockpot chili with Rotelle; fat, overdone hamburgers and shriveled hotdogs; and scrumptious tacos made from a “kit” — but only on Tuesdays.

Several different kinds of cereal are also on the menu for the children, particularly the teenagers, who would rather “just have cereal tonight.”

3. STAYING UP LATE.

I used to do this when I was Gainfully Employed, too, but there was a difference; I felt bad about it. Now, not so much. Or at all.

When the rest of the family is crawling into bed, I’m just getting started. I can safely retrieve the Bad For You Snacks I

Don't Want to Share from their various hiding places, kick up my feet, and settle into a good History Channel documentary or jump into "Jaws," "The Shawshank Redemption," or one of the Jason Bourne movies two-thirds of the way through, which is fine because I've seen them all 32 times. If I feel really productive, I'll actually take the time to switch the TV over to Netflix and binge-watch "The Office" until, say, 12:34 a.m.

This is roughly the point at which I suddenly realize what an idiot I am for insisting on staying up late and begin the never-ending process of turning off lights throughout the house, putting away the leftovers that have been sitting out on the kitchen counter for six hours and will probably give us all ptomaine poisoning tomorrow, and making sure neither of the cats is trapped in a closet.

And then, I do the same thing the next day because I can.

2. NO PROBLEMS WITH SUNDAY NIGHTS.

My wife calls it the "Sunday Night Freak-Out." It's the inevitable anxiety that begins to creep in sometime Sunday afternoon and builds to a crescendo by bedtime, ruining all the fun stuff you're trying to do by continually tapping on your subconscious shoulder. "Hey. Hey. Hey. You've got work tomorrow. Your two-day reprieve is almost over and you're not ready. You didn't do that thing you said you were going to do over the weekend to prepare. Hey. Hey. Hey."

Don't get me wrong. For the most part, I've had jobs that I really enjoyed and worked with people who became my friends. But none of that matters, and you know it. The Sunday Night Freak-Out always overshadows all of the positive feelings about work somehow, even when work is perfectly fine.

But now? Not a problem. I greet Sunday evenings with the good nature of encountering an old friend on the street, offering a warm hug and a pat on the back. The Freak-Out simply cowers before me and squeaks away, impotent against my superhuman powers of unemployment.

And now, I present the No. 1 Best Thing About Being Gainfully Unemployed...

1. ENJOYING AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE.

(Caution: Slightly Serious Stuff ahead.) For many people I know, the word “change” elicits fear and loathing. For them, to live a comfortable life is to have the same job, live in the same house, and socialize with the same people day in and day out, and I understand that; with familiarity comes security. It’s just not the way I’m wired, I guess, because I’ve been relishing in the concept that I don’t know what’s going to happen next. I’m a writer, which means I may be learning about or working in ANY given topic or industry tomorrow.

Uncertainty brings with it a world of possibilities! Holly and I are already planning a trek to Mt. Everest Base Camp in 2018⁶, an adventure that would’ve never come about without my decision to become gainfully unemployed. I may launch a home-based communications company or I may choose to accept another J-O-B from someone else or I may simply remain Head Chef and Chauffeur for Casa Johnson.

That white pasta ain’t gonna make itself, you know.

I’m sure this makes some of you squirm with anxiety (not the least of whom, my wife), but that’s OK. After all, if we were

⁶ Read about it in my book, “Doofus Dad Does Everest Base Camp.”

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all doing this, the world would be thrown into anarchy. Imagine all the un-validated supervisors seated at empty conference tables, playing on their iPhones alone for an hour before slinking back to their offices, dejected. The Bunn Coffee Maker and Culligan Water factories would either shut down or be forced to retool their assembly lines to produce sweat pants, creating a boon in the cotton industry. Traffic in and out of major metropolitan areas during rush hours would grind to a virtual free-flowing, uncongested, luxurious, no-brake-needing, 70-MPH Autobahn.

It's a lot to think about, and I'll get right on that ... immediatly after this next episode of "The Office."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WRITING IN ONE FORM OR ANOTHER has been a part of Mark Johnson's life since, well, ever. Although the phrase "he makes a living at it" has been a bit of a stretch at times, Mark has occasionally exchanged his written words for currency, sometimes over impressive stretches. These collections of words have included hundreds, no, *millions* of songs, magazine stories, and of course, blog posts. Mark has also worked as an editor and communications director — typical boring stuff that you don't care about.

He has written two books — the one you just read (it's *kind of* a book) and his memoir, "Doofus Dad Does Everest Base Camp," released in fall 2018.

Mark lives in Kingston Springs, Tennessee, with his wife, Holly, and their offspring, Sam, Ava, and Pete.

To read more of his work, visit www.doofusdad.com.