

The Final Word:
Hip, hip, hooray for the return of the Hula-Hoop
By Craig Wilson, USA Today 06/24/2008

Walking the dog the other night, I came upon two little girls who were playing on the sidewalk in front of their house. Both were holding Hula-Hoops. I decided to play dumb.

“What are those?” I asked.

“Hula-Hoops!” they replied in unison, looking at me as if I were not only dumb but worse. Old and out of it.

I may be dumb, and I may be old, but I’m not out of it. Those girls didn’t know who they were talking to. A man on the cutting edge of the Hula-Hoop craze, thank you very much. A trendsetter, if you will.

The toy, which took America by storm, turns 50 this summer. That would make me 8 when I first got my hands on one. I loved it more than I loved my bike, and I loved my bike more than I probably should have.

But my bike was old hat by the time the Hula-Hoop came along. The Hula-Hoop was sleek and round and well, sexy, not that I knew what sexy was, but I kind of knew something was going on.

My Hula-Hoop was phosphorescent green. It might have glowed in the dark. I’m not sure. It doesn’t matter.

Why I loved my Hula-Hoop so much had to do with the fact that I was good at keeping it spinning. It came naturally to me. I had Hula-Hoop hips.

I was a farm kid trapped in upstate New York, but obviously I possessed talents I never knew I had – talents that could take me to Las Vegas. Maybe Honolulu even. The sky was the limit. People would walk all the way across the street just to watch me perform. I was that good.

Why I didn’t run off and join the circus I don’t know. Maybe I didn’t know that you *could* run off and join the circus.

While I gyrated like Elvis, the hoop shimmied up and down my elementary-school body. Once I spun myself into such a frenzy, the hoop rose up to my shoulders and flew over my head. I raced after it and stood until it lowered itself and returned to my shoulders and back down to my waist. The crowd went wild. Well, Patty Miller went wild. She was my crowd back then.

I admit to being a bit smug when others would move their hips once or twice, and the hoop would immediately fall to their ankles. They would try again and again, but they obviously didn't have the Hula-Hoop gene. Bad hips.

I was a magical summer that summer of 1958. But like all good things, it came to an end, and not the way you might think.

I was an 8-year-old who weighed about 8 pounds. And after three months of hula hooping, I weighed even less.

I still remember the day Dad took my Hula-Hoop away. He said he was doing it for my own good, as fathers like to say at times like that, whether it is for your own good or not.

But I had lost enough weight that my parents were concerned I was going to disappear, just vaporize right before their eyes. There's skinny, and then there's gone.

Which makes me think I might just go out and buy a 50th anniversary edition Hula-Hoop. For my own good, as they say.

The Final Word; For this dog, three left turns make it all right.
By Craig Wilson, USA Today 11/18/2008

Since the world seems to be falling apart around us, perhaps now is a good time to take a walk. Get away from it all.

As we walkers know, there's no better way to spend an hour or two. A good walk cleans out the cobwebs, doesn't pollute and can be full of surprises. You never know what's around the next corner. It's also cheap entertainment. Yet another perk during these credit-crunch times.

There's a bit of a problem in our house, however, I live with a reluctant walker.

Our dog, Maggie, has her talents – she can stand on her hind legs for hours, especially if treats are on the kitchen counter – but walking on all fours for an hour is another story. She's a slug.

At every street corner, she turns left, as if to say, "Let's turn here, Buddy, go to the next corner, turn left again, and we'll be home before we know it!" Wheaten terriers have minds of their own.

I then pull her along to the next corner, where she repeats the trick. After a few blocks, she finally admits defeat and prances on as if she's a normal dog taking a walk. Not that she doesn't enjoy the final left turn most.

We did our usual routine of attempted left turns last weekend on one of those glorious autumn days in Washington, D. C., that demand you go for a walk. The sun was bright, the air was crisp, and there was still enough color left to put on a good show. Maggie and I walked for almost two hours.

Up the hill, into the woods, past Bill and Hillary's place (they are *never* home), then back into the woods; homeward bound.

She would never admit it, but even Maggie loves this particular walk. I can tell by the way she races off in front of me, then races back to make sure I'm still there. She also loves to smell everything along the way. And I mean everything.

I'm not sure if Geoff Nicholson has a dog, but he walks, which elevates him in my eyes, even without a dog. He has written a book about his adventures on foot: *The Lost Art of Walking: The History, Science, Philosophy and Literature of Pedestrianism* (Riverhead Books, \$24.95).

Nicholson shares the joys of stepping out, even in Los Angeles, where he now lives. I have walked in Los Angeles and didn't find it particularly joyful, but, hey, it works for him.

His daily strolls around the car-cluttered metropolis have not only let him get to know the city and its people better, but they also helped him fight depression, which any walker will understand perfectly.

Yes, you get to know your dog on a walk. But you also get to know yourself. Even better.

The Final Word: Mothers go with flow of raising sons.
By Craig Wilson, USA Today 05/06/2008

With Sunday being Mother's Day, I find my thoughts, not surprisingly, turning to toilet seats. The ups and downs of toilet seats, to be exact. Every mother's lament. Especially mothers of boys.

I asked my friend, Mary, if she had any thoughts on the subject, and she quickly agreed the problem has a certain universality. But having grown up in a house full of brothers, she suspects that her mother only wants to forget the years when the family bathroom was a battleground.

Sharon O'Connell, the only female in her house, wasn't so quick to dismiss the discussion. She had more than a few things to say about said seat situation from a mother's point of view, and she wasn't taking this sitting down.

Author of *House of Testosterone: One Mom's Survival in a Household of Males*, she is surrounded not only by three sons and a husband, but a male dog to boot.

"The battle of the toilet seat is something I, and most women, gave up on a long time ago," she says. "We have to pick our battles in a household of men, and that's a losing one".

It's a can't-win situation, O'Connell says.

"The thing is, in a household of young boys, they don't even bother to put the seat up to begin with, which means the mom doesn't fall in the toilet in the middle of the night, but then there is the downside".

I grew up with one brother and one dad, leaving my mom the only gal in the house. Mom's rule was seat up, seat down, move on.

My cousin, Martha, also has two sons and a husband, leaving *her* the only gal in the house. They have it backward. Her boys are good at putting the seat down, she says, but the problem is they don't always put the seat up when they need to.

Contrary to popular opinion, I think we men can be trained. We can stand corrected, so to speak. And maybe it's not all our fault. Maybe mothers should take some responsibility here.

We had visitors recently – female visitors – who all weekend long put the toilet seat down and left it there, much to my chagrin. And Maggie's.

Maggie is our dog, and while very much the lady, she still enjoys a sip from the toilet every now and then. This can be done, however, only if the seat is up. Hence the problem.

Maybe a mother could put the seat *up* every now and then? Fair is fair. But let's not argue. It's Mother's Day.

All this talk got me wondering whether mothers of boys really do have it harder than mothers of girls?

The toilet seat issue aside, I think not. O'Connell doesn't think so either. She says it's easier to raise boys.

"Particularly when girls reach those middle school years," she says.

A midnight fall into the toilet is small potatoes compared with monitoring a daughter who changes her name to Monique and starts trolling for "friends" on Facebook.

So, all you mothers of sons out there, relax. It's your day. Have a seat. Happy Mother's Day.

Izzo is Hoarse, of Course, of Course
By Mitch Albom
April 3, 2009

Good Morning.

I am Tom Izzo's v...*eeeeek!*

A-hem.

I am Tom Izzo's voice. Yes, I squeak. I warble. I sound like a man constantly gargling. Now and then, I have been known to disappear altoget...

...

A-hem.

I am Tom Izzo's voice. I have been with him since birth. No, I was not always the shaky, scratchy, Godfather-sounding scream you have come to know.

Once I was sweet and vibrant. When Tom was growing up in Iron Mountain, in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, I used to holler joyfully with other kids. I used to call for the ball. Like this:

"Hey, gimmie the b...*eeeeek!*"

A-hem.

In college, at Northern Michigan, when Tom was rooming with Steve Mariucci, the future NFL coach, I used to squawk all night. I'd talk about basketball. I'd talk about girls.

And in the morning, I'd bounce right back. A good strong voice. I coulda been somebody. A singer, maybe? Opera? Like this:

O sole mio...eeeeek!

A-hem.

And then Tom started coaching.

And I was doomed.

If only Jud had stuck around...

A coach does nothing more frequently than yell. He yells in practice, he yells during games, he yells on the bus. If I had a nickel for every time I had to go: "Hey! Hey! Hey! HEEYYYYY!"

I mean really.

It doesn't help that Tom is so...passionate. From the time he was an assistant under Jud Heathcote, he was hollering. "Go here! Stand there! Set this pick!" And the phone? As a recruiter, he was on the phone forever. It's a good thing that I was a strong tenor. That way, by the last call of the night, I only sounded like a tired Al Pacino. Otherwise, I would have been Barry White.

And once Tom got the head coach's whistle at Michigan State, well forget it. We talked so much that day, I sounded like:

"Guess wha--! I g—the j--!"

"Huh?" people said.

From then on, honestly, there hasn't been one day I've sounded good. I snap, I crackle, I pop. I screech. I get all phlegmish. Not Flemish. That's another language.

And when it gets really bad?

I become The Hoarse Whisperer.

So many games, so many Final Fours

This, over the years, has come after double-overtime games, tournament victories or yelling at Zach Randolph. By the end of all that, I sound like a guy ordering a mafia hit.

Don't blame me. Did you ever try screaming over a marching band? Did you ever try convincing a referee he was blind? I mean, you can't chirp like a bird in this job.

When players forget their assignments, when they don't get back on defense, when they take a knucklehead shot, it makes me so ROARING MAD I WANNA S---

I wanna sc...*screeeeek!*...

A-hem.

And the bigger the stage, it seems, the more the yelling. And Michigan State has been to five Final Fours under Tom. Five. That's a lot of strain on the nodules. No wonder I sound like I'm talking under water.

So I thought I'd clear that up this morning, since you'll be hearing plenty of me in the next 36 hours. I may sound gruff, throaty or as squeaky as an eighth-grader.

But I just wanted to add that while I, Tom's voice, may be worn, spent, creaky and exhausted, remember: a voice follows a heart. And my guy has a big heart. You don't get this raspy by not caring. You don't get this raw by not putting everything you have on that floor, every night. And I...

I'm getting choked up here.

A-hem.

Anyone got a lozenge?