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"HOW MANY FIELD GOALS IN A TOUCHDOWN?" AND OTHER THINGS I DON'T UNDERSTAND

Donna Arganbright

One of the greatest blessings in my life is that I look like an idiot. I don't know what it is—maybe it's my round face, my hyper-feminine style, or the high voice I affect, but it must be convincing. Since I discovered the fact that I look dumb, it has become a source of many emotional ups and downs in my life, specifically when it comes to my interactions with men.

Men, on average, seem to agree that I am an idiot. They love explaining to me all the basic aspects of life they have decided I don't understand. No matter how I try to prove my competence through top grades, near-perfect standardized test scores, and leadership positions wherever I can find them, I am still typecast as an idiot. Take, for instance, the first swing dance I attended in college. A guy from my Writing 101 class a year ago asked me if I wanted to dance, and, of course, I responded with the obligatory, "I'd love to!"

"So," he said, pulling me out onto the dance floor, "do you know how to swing dance?"

I thought back on my many years of dance classes I'd taken since I was eight and the four years I taught swing and two-step at a summer camp. "I'm okay!" I said.

"Do you know the basic step?" he asked, grabbing my hands and yanking them in and out, while stepping in a circle to what was almost the beat of the music.

Maybe I should have been a little clearer. "Actually, I've been dancing for a while now!" I said with a smile, trying to inject all the laughter and kindness possible into my voice so as not to offend.

"Oh, well do you know this one?" he said, and yanked up my arm, spinning me the wrong way. As I learned over the course of the dance, he didn't know any other moves. Still, it may have been more fun if he hadn't tried to make conversation. "So what's your major?" he asked.

"English, with a concentration in creative writing and English teaching," I said. I tried to get us back on the beat but to no avail.

"Creative writing? Well, have you heard of the writing fiction work-

shops they have here?" he asked.

"Yep, workshops are pretty much the main requirement for my degree. I took Intro to Fiction my first semester," I replied.

"Well," he said, "I'm an accounting major but I'm a great writer too, so I took a fiction workshop for fun. But the lady teaching it was the worst. Lydia Baker or something, did you have her?"

"No—" I was going to continue, but he cut me off there.

"Well, she was the worst. She wouldn't stop judging my story!" he said.

"I mean, she's there to critique everyone's stories. That's her job," I said.

"She said I was sexist because I called a woman in my story a bitch, in the story! She was being a real bitch about it."

I'll spare you the long and arduous three minute conversation we had, where I tried to politely tell him that women don't enjoy being called bitches, and he in turn explained to me that he, as a master of creative writing (who has already finished a novel but will NOT let anyone read it), is right, and that women should be depicted in fiction as in real life. Where they are bitches.

The explanations were relentless, and no amount of reason would quell them. It was for this reason I decided to use the phenomenon to my advantage. It was the summer after my freshman year of college I realized that I could wield this small power.

I was attending the first annual employee kickball game and potluck for the Wake Cup Coffeehouse and Restaurant, where I worked as a barista since my fourteenth birthday exactly (I would have started sooner if it weren't for those pesky child labor laws). There were copious amounts of food and friends, or maybe food and workplace-variety acquaintances. It was a great day. I ate four varieties of mac and cheese, grilled corn, and fried chicken. I chatted with the coworkers I knew best about that one time Emma forgot to take the spoon out of the blender, and where Krissy the Crackhead, the dishwasher who had been fired for stealing our tips for months, ended up (she works for a maid service now and finally got clean, ironically). Eventually, Shayla the pastry chef declared to the party at large, "I wore my damn running shoes, are we gonna play kickball or not?"

And so, the bases were laid out and teams were chosen. I made no effort to hide my distaste for athletics, bemoaning the fact I was required to participate in this heinous activity. How dare they ask me to exercise?

I lined up anyway. Front staff versus kitchen staff, it was decided. Shayla would be captain of the kitchen team, and Shaun, the front manager, was captain of mine.

Shaun is a delightful person, one of my favorite people to work with. He was the one to interview me all those years ago, and I was (understandably, I think) terrified by this large tattooed man with a big black beard and a rough voice. His first question, I remember, was which Harry Potter character I identified with, and the interview was punctuated with at least three absolutely awful dad jokes (what's the difference between a well-dressed man on a bicycle and a poorly dressed man on a tricycle? Attire).

Since then, Shaun and I have gotten to know each other pretty well. I babysit his kids when I'm home for the summer, and I don't fall for his trick of pointing at the floor and saying "Babaga horse?" (you lose if you look at the ground, somehow). That's why it was so surprising that he thought I didn't know how to play kickball.

"Ugh, I don't exercise, how do you even kick a ball?" I asked, mimicking flailing my left foot wildly out to the side.

"Oh, it's really not that hard!" Shaun responded in complete seriousness. "What I do is I usually get a running start at it, from back behind the plate, see?" He backed up until he was about three feet behind home plate. "Then I take about three or four steps forward, like running at it, then you wanna kick with your dominant foot. And you're going to want to use this part," he said, pointing out the top of his foot, "not the toe."

I stood there in shock. This man, who had known me for three years, had heard about all my academic accomplishments, saw how quickly I learned to make gourmet coffee, believed wholeheartedly that I didn't know how to kick a ball. I wondered exactly how far I could take it. How dumb, exactly, did he think I was?

"So then," I asked, furrowing my brow and pouting my lip, "what do I do after I kick the ball?"

"What you wanna do is run to that base there, and the goal is to run around all the bases," he said with sincere helpfulness.

"But that's so easy!" I responded. "You just kick the ball and run around all the bases! Why are there so many people in the field? Are they there to cheer you on while you run?"

"No, not exactly." The poor man still hadn't caught on. "The people out there have to catch the ball. If they catch the ball you're out."

"So if they catch the ball they get a point?" I asked.

“No, you can’t score on defense. You score by running around all the bases.”

“Oh, this is easy! I just kick the ball on the ground! That way they can’t catch it and I can run around all the bases!” I put on my most triumphant face. I knew what was coming next, and I was already formulating my next response.

“Ah, but they can pick the ball up off the ground, and then if they throw it at you and it hits you you’re out.”

“WHAT?” I shouted. “They’re going to THROW THE BALL at me?” I was holding up the game now; the outfield was already set up and waiting for me to kick. Half of the audience I had gathered was looking on in confusion, wondering how I’d managed to live eighteen years without learning how kickball works. The other half was struggling not to laugh.

“Donna, it’s really not a hard ball. It doesn’t hurt, I promise,” Shaun said. “Besides, if you run fast enough it won’t hit you, and that’s the goal.”

“Oh. Okay,” I said, letting my voice quiver just a little and trying my best to look terrified. I stepped up to the plate and finally let Shayla pitch.

To this day, Shaun still thinks he taught me how to play kickball, and I haven’t had the heart to tell him that it’s something every first grader knows. But on that day, I learned a very important lesson. I can prove my intelligence time and time again, and it won’t matter. That competition I had engaged myself in, struggling to convince everyone I meet that I am smart and capable, was never going to happen. At the same time, I learned that I had been given a valuable tool. Maybe this idiot aesthetic was a blessing rather than a curse. The competition was different. Instead of asking, “How can I convince people I’m not an idiot?” I wanted to know how much of an idiot I can convince people that I am. While telling a man repeatedly that you understand simple concepts rarely works, messing with them until they figure it out for themselves results in embarrassment and a realization that I am more than they assumed.

My favorite thing to Not Understand is sports. I really hate sports. I never bought into the idea of watching other people play a game. Playing and competing is the fun part. Therefore, I have turned every game I attend into my own personal sport. I race against the clock, trying to see how ridiculous I can get before whichever man is explaining catches on to the fact that they’re being messed with. I have Not Understood baseball, soccer, ping pong, hockey, and tennis, but by far the greatest sport to Not Understand is football; I have it down to an art.

Having been cheer captain for two years in high school, I have come to intricately understand the rules of football. When I cheered, I had to make sure I was cheering for defense or offense at the right time, and know when to call, “FIRST,” and, “TEN LET’S GO (clap clap).” I had to know how to accurately predict when time-outs would be called and how long they would last in order to prep my team with which cheer and stunt we’d do. I also had to know which cheers would pump up the crowd depending on where the team sat on the scoreboard. In the years since I finished cheering, I have put these same skills to use in other ways. Understanding a sport is very important to Not Understanding.

Each time I attend a game, I figure out who in the group is going to explain it to me. Ideally, I like to choose single guys. The more desperate the better. They tend to enjoy spending time with a pretty girl hanging on to every word they say. However, attraction really isn’t necessary.

For the first Griz game of the year, I attended with an entirely new group of friends. Of the group, two were men, my new friends Peter and Charlie. Both had yet to explain a sport to me.

I made sure to set it up just right. Throughout the pre-game festivities of group pictures and underage drinking, I made sure to pepper into conversation, “Ugh I just hate going to these, I don’t understand what’s going on, you know?” Charlie generously offered to explain, and the game was set.

Once we arrived, it took no more than a, “Wait, what just happened?” after the first loud cheer for Charlie to launch into a lengthy explanation of the concept of “downs” and that we are now back at the first one with ten yards to go. At first, I stick with basic questions that Peter or Charlie would answer.

“What does a fumble mean?”

“Why did they stop playing and why are they just standing in circles?”

“How many points in a touchdown?”

They got used to answering my questions—I got more ridiculous.

“When are they gonna use the tall pointy basket?”

“So, how many field goals until they get a touchdown?”

“If he’s the running back, why is he running forward?”

At one point, Charlie, his girlfriend Grace, Peter, and another man (whose name I never learned, but he was standing near us and thought he would be able to explain better) were all trying to explain the function of a quarterback.

Peter was the first to catch on. He continued answering all my questions but kept up the joke, returning my ridiculous questions with equally ridiculous answers. I learned that a dispute over a call made by the referee is always settled by a fight to the death with broadswords between one member of each team.

Charlie didn't figure out what was happening for another quarter. It probably didn't help that he and Grace were both incredibly intoxicated at the time. It was all fun and games, asking silly questions and getting serious answers, until Grace jumped in.

Standing next to Charlie, she heard all my confusion and decided to jump in with some explanations of her own. This sucked all the fun out of my game right away. Her motivation felt completely different. In general, men want to prove how much more they know about the subject than I do. They are looking for my validation, the shower of compliments on their intelligence for understanding all these complex rules. They want to demonstrate their superiority, and it shows. When Grace explained football, she was trying to make sure I was having fun. She never thought of me as dumb, just lacking information that she has. Her comments were geared towards really helping me understand, not demonstrating her knowledge. She didn't want to impress me or feel superior to me, she wanted to share the joy she gets from the sport with me, and that made her explanations better. I didn't get the long, blustering, technicality-heavy sentences I was used to. Instead, she used words as simple as the ones I was using: "That big guy" instead of quarterback; "The pointy things over there," not goalposts.

Apparently, my idiot vibes were enough to convince even one of the smartest women I've met that I don't understand very simple concepts. I'm not sure how I feel about that. Still, I will continue to Not Understand, just maybe not around other intelligent women.