

## Humor Me

By Ronald P. Culberson

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### **“Nicknames: It is Better to Receive than to Give”**

I always wanted a nickname.

Nicknames seem intimate – not in a sexual way like “Sugar” or “Pookins” but in a familiar way like “Dude” or “Buddy.” It implies friendship and a quick shortcut to personality traits like “Smiley” and “Dopey” or physical qualities like “Shorty” and “Lard Butt.” Indeed, a nickname bypasses the formality of “Robert” or “James” and allows us to connect with one another on more “Comfy” terms.

As a child, I remember telling “Sis” that I needed to find a nickname for myself. In her older and wiser way, she explained that I couldn’t assign a nickname to myself but rather a nickname must be assigned *to* me. While it made sense, I wasn’t thrilled with the prospect of waiting until someone *else* came up with a good handle for me. I was “Lucky” that I didn’t have to wait too long.

At the time, I was playing little league baseball which, by the way, had great potential for a nickname. There were Lefty’s, Catfish’s and Goose’s in baseball. Unfortunately, my baseball skills weren’t worthy of a nickname like that. Instead, I was the kid the coach put in when we were 30 runs ahead – an experience that only happens in baseball when the other team doesn’t show up. To make matters worse, my coach drank a mysterious liquid from a recycled Malox bottle during the games and by the fifth inning, he was slurring his words and not capable of much more than to sit and sweat.

During one game, he promised to put me in. He’d say, “Weasssssel, thon’t worry, I’m gonna puth you in next inning. Blurrrp.”

The next inning came and went and again he’d say, “Weasssssel! Geth your gluf on, you’re goin in.”

Unfortunately, I never went in. And what could have destroyed a normal kid was a monumental victory for me. I now had a nickname. I was...Weasel.

The next week, I bought a jersey with big iron-on letters across the shoulder that read, “WEASEL.” I proudly wore it into my sister’s room.

“Check it out,” I said.

My sister never laughed so hard. She kept saying, “Weasel? Weasel? *Where* did you get *that* name?”

I was crushed. But deep down, I knew she was right. A nickname from a drunken coach was not a real nickname because it wasn’t given to me by anyone who cared. It was just a Jack Daniels induced slip of the tongue.

Eventually I got rid of the shirt after watching too many of my friends mouth the word “Weasel” and turn their head as if they didn’t understand.

Years later, during my last summer of college, I worked as a “Roads Scholar.” In other words, I was a college student who spread tar, shoveled asphalt, and drove a steam roller for meager hourly wages. I had never done this before so I was quite the “Novice” and what was simple to the more experienced crew was a challenge for me. One morning when I accidentally slammed my steam roller into a truck, I was not surprised when my crew boss called me “Dipstick” (and a few other nicknames that sound very “familiar” but are not repeatable).

A few days later, while I was shoveling gravel with my shirt off, my boss looked at my lean, rock-solid, 130-pound physique and said, “You are the skinniest Dipstick I’ve ever seen.”

And from that point on, I was known on the roads of Western Virginia as “Skinny Dip.” In fact, most of the crew didn’t even know my real name. To them, I WAS Skinny Dip.

After working hard that summer and earning the respect of my boss and a bunch of life-long manual laborers, I left the job in August to go back to being a “Wahoo” at the University of Virginia. As the whistle sounded on my last day, every crew member came up to me, shook my hand and said, “It was an honor working with you Skinny Dip.”

I look back with fond memories on a summer spent on the road with good hard-working men. I might have thought I deserved a better nickname, like “Stud” or even “Weasel,” but it meant much more to be given an undeserved nickname like Skinny Dip.

I just don’t put it on my jerseys.

Until next time, just humor me.

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