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For Good or Ill, Spitting Happens

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CLEMSON, S.C.—The defending champ, Bill Barrioz, stepped up to the long roll of canvas that had been unfurled by the judges, his lumberjack boots stopping at the strip of duct tape that served as a foul line.

A wad of Red Man Select bulged in his left cheek, flooding his mouth with a sweet burst of motor-oil-colored juice. The rules were simple: no solids, just spit. Whatever splattered on down that white cotton sheet would have to be at least the size of a dime to qualify for the tape measure.

The crowd at last weekend's 19th annual Spittoon, a celebration of long-distance tobacco spitting here in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, was packed in close, a bit closer, indeed, than prudence might dictate. Everyone wanted a glimpse of the 42-year-old woodsman—the Great Expectorator, the Sultan of Sputum—who has won this event so many times that the Redneck Performing Arts Assn. has begun to doubt the fairness of letting him compete.

Barrioz pursed his lips and pressed two fingers against them, holding his pucker narrow and tight. Then he lifted his chin, inhaled through his nose and: *Pfthwoooosh!*

Time was when spitting rated as a fairly mundane staple of the American male's repertoire, an oral punctuation mark that bespoke dusty ranches and smoky saloons. Twentieth century city life changed much of that, relegating the spittoon to the ash heap of history (except, perhaps, on the floor of the U.S. Senate, where a pair of brass ones still stand sentry). Today the habit is so obviously ill-mannered and unsanitary that we no longer require "No Spitting" signs to remind us that, in public, it is best to keep one's secretions to oneself.

Yet, to paraphrase a popular expression, spit happens—perhaps not as copiously as it once did, but enough still to underscore its ambivalent place in our culture. Although the Spittoon crowd may have chug-a-lugged a few too many beers to care, saliva runs through the worlds of law, medicine, religion, sports and art, a veritable Renaissance serum, bewildering in its capacity to heal and contaminate, arouse and repulse, elevate regular guys into heroes and reduce heroes into scum.

It is a fixture of adolescent gross-out rites: Beavis & Butthead drop saliva bombs from the school roof in their CD-ROM game *Virtual Stupidity*. But it is also bound up in romantic notions of virility: “Teach me how to . . . spit like a man,” Rose asks Jack on the deck of the Titanic. It is forever being disparaged: “Ain’t worth spit.” “A bucket of warm spit.” “Spittin’ in the wind.” But it remains the glue of everyday life: good for licking a stamp or testing an iron or matting down an unruly eyebrow.

Spit lubricates. It soothes. It defogs. And when it comes from your mother, notes *Couplehood* author Paul Reiser, it “cleans like nobody’s business . . . a baby’s face, a countertop, a Buick.” Without it, our mugs would become hideous portals of disease; spit helps neutralize the roughly 300 to 400 forms of bacteria swimming around in the human mouth.

We all produce it (about a liter a day) and exchange it (kissing: swapping spit), but we also reserve the right to set the terms of transmission. When misdirected—say, Roberto Alomar spitting in the face of an umpire or an HIV-positive prisoner spewing at his guards—it becomes as hostile or frightful as any substance around.

Even at Spittoonoo, a reckless spray is bad form: “Viscosity,” cautions contestant Dan Ashe, a 28-year-old fishery biologist. “You don’t want the crowd to turn against you.”

America’s love-hate affair with saliva plays out most visibly on the baseball diamond, where spitting is as much a part of the national pastime as the seventh-inning stretch. At times it appears almost subconscious, rhythmic, a symbolic marking of turf. “In our sport, there’s no dialogue, so body language becomes everything,” says Rex “Wonder Dog” Hudler, the Angels broadcaster and a renowned hawkler during his 21 seasons in uniform. “Spitting says, ‘Pffwoofth, let’s go, I’m ready for battle.’ ”

Sitting in the dugout, the message often degenerated into something less noble. “The thing then was to spit on a guy’s white shoelaces, and there I’d be, getting drilled from all sides,” Hudler says. “Tobacco, gum, seeds, candy bars. Dude, it’s a nasty place.” Still, spitting was not without its sentimental flourishes. While laboring in the minors, Hudler kept a drawing of Pete Rose on his apartment wall, for inspiration. “After a good game—and a few pops—we’d come home and spit on the picture,” he recalls. “It was like, ‘Pete, we played the game tonight. We went after it.’ It was a thing of respect.”

To the folks of Clemson, a college town of 13,000 in northwestern South Carolina, Spittoonoo stands for something else altogether. First held in 1981, it was conceived as a counterpoint to Spoleto, the Italianate arts festival hosted every summer by the sophisticates in Charleston. Rednecks have performing arts too, figured the Spittoonoo founding fathers; theirs are just a little messier.

“It’s yin and yang—sweet and sour—that makes the world go round,” says Larry Atkinson, the 375-pound Spittoonoo president, a former barroom bouncer who works at the local nuclear plant. “Spittoonoo’s all about drinking another beer when you’re not

really thirsty, or eating another barbecue sandwich when you're not really hungry—just because it's good. Life's too short to sell yourself out cheap.”

Like a Jordan or a Gretzky, only one Spittoono regular has proved himself capable of winning at will, a hydrokinetic master with five championships under his belt. Bill Barrioz even keeps a little brass spittoon in his pickup truck, secured to the dash by Velcro.

“My father keeps saying, ‘Doggone, I sent you to college and the only thing you're known for is spitting tobacco!’ ” says Barrioz, a volunteer firefighter. “My wife says she doesn't mind, though, because it makes me less attractive to other women.”

As Barrioz tells it, he began chewing tobacco as a youngster after a Boy Scout leader sang its thirst-quenching praises during a hike. Later, as a forestry student at Clemson University, Barrioz got his first taste of competitive spitting, discovering that some basic rules of physics were all he required. “If you shape your mouth just right,” Barrioz explains, “your tongue acts like the plunger in a syringe—the faster and stronger you can compress that liquid, the further it'll go. I use the basic two-finger method, which adds a little more pressure to your lips before they give way. I figured it out one time in the shower.”

His Spittoono personal best: 21 feet, 11 inches, just shy of an NBA three-pointer.

“That sumbitch can slang one,” said Brad Thomas, a grudging admirer.

While a contest like Spittoono may be a relatively modern conceit, the allure of saliva extends across the ages. In the ancient world, spit was seen as a mystical salve, powerful and sacred. As readers of the Bible know, Jesus restored sight to the blind by wetting their eyes with his saliva.

Etiquette manuals of the Middle Ages suggest that spitting was considered perfectly normal and necessary; sucking it back in was the unhealthy act. In 1530, the Dutch scholar and theologian Erasmus added a common-sense update: “Turn away when spitting, lest your saliva fall on someone.”

It was not until the Enlightenment that the whole practice—even to speak of it—began to grow distasteful. Norbert Elias, author of *The Civilizing Process*, attributes this shift to the rise of European nations and the centralization of power, which imposed new forms of social pressure on the masses. The taboo was entirely in our heads—that is, it was based on changing notions of shame and respect, not fear of a bacterial grenade.

As soon as it was linked to the spread of tuberculosis, sputum went from the merely gross to the potentially lethal. Anti-spitting campaigns swept the U.S., and by the early 1900s, almost every large city had passed a law against expectorating on the sidewalk.

Spitting never quite reclaimed its place in public. "Most of us, in fact, never even think of spitting: It is a marvelous instance of socially induced inhibition . . .," writes folkways scholar Margaret Visser. No-spitting laws now seem quaintly anachronistic; California repealed its law in 1984 at the behest of then-Assembly Speaker Willie Brown (a former shoeshine boy who survived the greater peril of having to fish his tips out of a spittoon in a white man's barbershop in East Texas).

With the advent of AIDS, though, spit is again at the legal vanguard. Police are especially alarmed by the prospect of being infected by an uncooperative suspect. Despite no evidence that the virus is transmitted under such conditions, an HIV-positive Ohio man who spit in the face of an officer was convicted recently of assault with a deadly weapon, his saliva.

"You can make yourself ill just thinking of something like that," says Diana Bridgeman, the office manager for Redding, Calif.-based Eagle Gear, a maker of safety equipment. Her solution: SpitNet, a disposable biohazard hood that fits snugly over the heads of belligerent arrestees.

Spit, however, can sometimes have a silver lining. In St. Petersburg, Fla., last year, Sgt. Michael Puetz was shadowing a particularly elusive rape suspect, trolling for evidence that might link him to the crime. His quarry, a parolee named Charles Peterson, suddenly stopped his motorcycle at a red light and spit. Puetz ran over with a paper towel and mopped up the phlegm, which contained enough DNA to land Peterson back behind bars.

Then there's the case of Ernest "Bud" Thompson, a Mississippi man who woke up late one night in 1996 because, as he would later explain, something told him "to go outside and spit."

While spitting, Thompson noticed that his neighbor's house was on fire. He ran over and kicked open the front door, rousing Elizabeth Mayes and rescuing her six children.

As newspaper humorist Dave Barry observed: "When guys engage in allegedly gross or pointless behavior . . . these guys may actually be obeying a crucial survival instinct that places them in a position to notice stuff that could benefit humanity in general."

Here at Spittoono XIX, held on the baseball field behind Clemson's National Guard Armory, pride was the only thing at stake.

After three days of beer and blues, the psyching and smack-talking had begun to resemble pro wrestling's SummerSlam. "I hope Barrioz is here because I'm gonna kick his rooty-poo candy ass," said his closest rival, two-time winner Walter Hawkins, a quality-assurance technician for a mobile home company.

"You just keep drinking, Walter," said Steve Cureton, a lawyer and former prosecutor who has taken home just one Spittoono trophy in 15 years of competition.

As soon as the eight contestants were called to the edge of the stage last Saturday night, surrounded by several thousand unflinching revelers, the pros were separated from the dribblers. Cureton's landed at 17 feet. Hawkins' fell so far shy that the judges didn't even bother to measure.

Then came Barrioz, lean and fit, more comfortable alone in the woods, aiming his juice at a skeeter or a yellow jacket, than showing off in public. "I used to look forward to this," he said, "but now it gets almost embarrassing." When his glob finally returned to Earth, a gasp rose from the crowd. The tape measure read 20 feet, 1 1/2 inches. Not a record, but good enough for first prize: an empty beer cooler.

"You the man," Hawkins said afterward, wrapping an arm around Barrioz' shoulder.

"It's just something I do," said the reluctant hero, his chaw still in his cheek, squirting another stream into the moonlight.