

*At Least They Speak English*

By Steven Jones

The bus trip has just started, so no one has had time to settle in and put on their headphones yet. For the moment, I own the crowd. Some people might panic in this situation – it's tough to come up with material when you know you have about a 20-second window to grab everyone's attention. Not me, though. I live with two Germans and an insane Irishman. I have jokes to spare.

“So, there are two main ways to confuse European people. The first is on the phone – all you do is tell them that the person they're looking for isn't there. This throws them off *completely*. They have *no* contingency plan in place. Whenever my roommate's dad calls, I'll just be like, ‘Um, he's still at lecture’ and then there's this 30-second pause while his dad tries to comprehend it, before finally rushing through a ‘goodbye’ and hanging up.

“The second way is to just start a normal conversation with them – just say, ‘Hey, what's up?’ and you can literally see the wheels spinning.”

Emmett, sitting on my right, starts laughing. “Yeah, they're thinking, ‘What *is* up?’”

I'm laughing too by now. “Exactly, exactly – just the greatest degree of confusion. I feel really bad about mocking them, because their English is really good, much better than my German certainly. But it's still funny.”

Sligo, Ireland is about a two-and-a-half-hour bus ride from Galway. A year ago I didn't know that either place existed. Now I'm devoting the better part of a day to

making the journey there and back. I'm not complaining, though – I'm a college athlete. These are just the obligations that come with the territory.

I became a college basketball player yesterday at 3:00 p.m. I played my first game instead of going to tutorial for my American History class. I felt bad about that, because my discussion leader is a good guy and I felt like I was letting him down, but it was an easy choice.

My first game, I was 1-for-5 from the field with two points, an assist and one or two steals. It was a forgettable stat line, hardly worth missing a class for, except that it was mine.

I was about 13 when I had to give up my dream of playing basketball for a living, or even at a major college. Realizing that you're never going to be much taller than 5-9 can do wonders for your sense of your own limitations. So I kept working hard in school and got myself to a good college, and watched as much college and pro basketball as I could and played whenever possible.

Then in the fall of my sophomore year at USC, I sat in my Medieval Civilization class and listened to someone from the Overseas Studies Office talk about the new programs they were adding in Scotland and Ireland. I thought to myself, Ireland was a great place when I visited seven years ago, but I'm too busy to take a semester abroad.

Professor Jason Glenn, one of the best teachers I'd ever had, then told the class, "You know, the biggest regret of my undergrad career is that I never went abroad anywhere. Because I thought I had too much going on at school that I couldn't miss out on." He might have gone on talking, but I didn't have to listen after those two sentences. I just had to wait for the start of the next semester, which was the earliest time I could

pick up an application for the new program in Galway, not even knowing where it was. Ten months later, I started my college basketball career.

I didn't go to Ireland just to play basketball, but it was funny that I had to go 6,000 miles in order to fulfill my dream. I thought I was getting off easy – there was a time when I would have sacrificed several vital organs, or even some friends or family members, to have the chance to play in college. Really, I just had to find the right country.

When I told people at home, they usually laughed and asked if I was the tallest person on the team, or the best player. It was tough to explain how neither was true – the Irish take their basketball seriously; it's just that so few of them play, because it's not quite the path to fame and glory that it is in the U.S. and even other European countries. I was well-suited to the competition level, which I assessed at about as good as a decent American high school program. It wouldn't have mattered if I was playing against the Oompa Loompas from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*; I was just happy to be on the team.

No one cared that I was American once we'd had a few training sessions. I wasn't the best player but I was by no means the worst. The whole enterprise was fairly disorganized – we didn't even have a coach until our first game. The captains from last year's team ran the practices and tryouts.

They held the last tryout on a Thursday and posted a team list in the Sports Hall that Monday. I took my camera along just to take a picture of my name on the list, third from the bottom. A week later, my career began against Limerick I.T., which only had

six players, none of whom were taller than me. Now I was on a bus to Sligo to play some more. In the meantime, I had 150 minutes to kill. Telling my new friends about my German roommates seemed as good a way as any.

I was 6,000 miles from home and every bit as foreign as the Germans were. For now, though, they were the foreigners. I was with my teammates.

I played a good amount that day in Sligo, and in our last game of the year against G.M.I.T., a local rival. We had a good team and were never seriously challenged. It wouldn't have made the slightest difference if I had missed any of the games; I never played a critical role, nor did I ever play particularly well. I just played.

Some people function better as part of a team, and I'm one of them. If the rest of my semester in Ireland had been unrelenting toil and boredom – and nothing could be further from the truth – it still would have been worth it just to be part of one last team. Once you're an adult, unless you were the one in a million talented and dedicated enough to become a professional athlete, you can't really be part of a team in the same way. The people in your office aren't going to give you high-fives or yell at you to get back on defense.

I had a speech planned out for my last day of practice with the NUI-Galway basketball team. I was going to thank them for being so welcoming and tell them it had made my time to be able to play with them. I was possibly going to choke up and shed a tear or two, and make things nice and awkward.

I never got the chance because I wasn't sure which one was our last practice, and after what turned out to be the final training session, everyone dispersed too quickly for

me to say goodbye. But I got a few of their e-mail addresses and said I would stay in touch, and I did get to thank Padraic, the team captain, for letting me be a part of the team, although I just told him “Thanks for everything” and didn’t elaborate.

On the bus ride back from Sligo, most people stared off into space, exhausted and drained. One of my teammates heroically tried to study, his engineering book balanced on his knees while he squinted in the dim overhead light.

For the ride back, I had a window seat all to myself and some time to think. My college basketball career was two games old, and almost over. I’d spent more time on buses than I had on the court. We would arrive at campus that night at 11:30, more than eight hours after we’d left, and I would have to ride my bike back to my apartment in the face of winds stronger than any I’d ever seen, which made biking literally slower than walking.

None of this occurred to me as I stared out the window into the empty night. Instead I thought of how my mom used to tell me that I lit up whenever I played basketball. “You radiate joy,” was how she put it. The games she watched me play were back in high school, when I was the star player on my recreational teams. Now, I was a bench player on a college team in a country far away from home. The only familiar things were the ball and the court. That, and the joy of playing for a team.