

i love bocce

THERE WAS A time I thought most everyone should play bocce. I was like Rico Daniele, author of *Bocce: A Sport For Everyone* and president of the Wonderful World of Bocce Association, who would say to anyone, “Let’s get bocce courts in schools and playgrounds for the kids, parents, and grandparents.”

I wasn’t well.

I was in nursing school and that was plenty. I had an unrequited crush on a girl named Lilly. I had a chronically sore Achilles heel and couldn’t exercise.

Overall, I was slightly depressed.

This is what the university therapist said:

“You’re confusing your feelings for a young lady with the game she introduced you to. It’s classic transference.”

“You have to let it go.”

“I’m not one of those New York shrinks with a fancy office.”

“Everything isn’t about bocce.”

Of course, everything wasn’t about bocce. But tell that to my world.

Example, the very next day:

My OR rotation and we were standing around a blue-mummied patient with a defunct gallbladder. There was the head surgeon and me and my nursing instructor and a medical student and a circulating nurse with long, stringy hair—like something out of a clogged drain, etc.—and a scrub nurse and a nurse anesthetist with a sad smile.

My instructor and I were only observing. We’d been going about an hour, routine stuff, clamp this, cut here, watch that bleeder, and so on, when the head surgeon yelled out, “Anyone here like bocce?”

I startled, and sweat popped up on my forehead.

“I dated an Italian guy who was crazy about it,” the circulating nurse said, following the surgeon’s lead. “Liked bocce so much he would shoot the balls out of a replica cannon, or store them in the refrigerator fruit drawer. Sometimes, he’d swallow the balls, and, well . . . wait.”

“That’s what I mean,” the surgeon said, as he sutured a neat bow over a vein. “Dedication. Extractor.”

Handing over the extractor, the scrub nurse added, “I

once played a round with inflatable bocce balls, inflated with helium, at a side show in Indiana.”

“I like bocce as well as anyone,” the medical student said. He followed the surgeon’s fingers as they lifted a lung. “I once drove a convertible bocce ball cross country.”

Everyone ignored the student. He was trying to impress the surgeon.

The nurse anesthetist sighed and said, “The last man off a bocce field rarely looks back.”

Everyone nodded his or her head. I felt like a cloud in someone else’s dream.

“Has anyone seen a snake that’s eaten a bocce ball?” said the surgeon. “Suction.” He stood away as the scrub nurse cleared the surgical field, then continued. “I did once. In Africa. I was up 13-4 on a group of native chaps—Masabis or whatnot—and a cobra snatched my ball, of course couldn’t digest it.” He paused and snipped away a layer of fascia. No one answered him. Surgeons were always assuming everyone routinely traveled to Africa.

“I played in Haiti,” the medical student said, “with coconuts, during a tournament. I actually grouped the balls so close that several laws of physics were altered.”

No answer. The Pulsox beeped; someone paged someone over the intercom.

Finally, the nurse anesthetist offered, “I play decent

bocce when dreaming, or just unconscious. Compared to unconscious, my conscious bocce is nothing.”

The surgeon grunted. “Now,” he said, “I’m sure your conscious bocce is something, too.”

“Not at all,” the nurse anesthetist said, reaching up to adjust the drip on an IV.

All this talk about bocce, I felt I was going to faint. I felt normal.

“I love bocce,” I blurted out, and everyone turned to stare at me. The surgeon frowned, eyed my instructor, and said, “Let’s close this up.”

Later, my instructor wrote me up for unprofessional behavior. To top it off she passed me a tiny bottle of Scope and said my breath smelled like pizza. I think it was pizza, but she may have said ravioli.

It was a while ago.

I wasn’t well.