



County fairs now are fun and there are wild rides to go on and bad candy and antique hot dogs and clip joints to take your money for throwing a ball or pitching a coin onto a plate or tossing a ring over an impossible peg. All of that was the same back then, except there were other things that aren't allowed anymore:

Sideshows with strange people and animals and closed tents where there were large glass jars full of alcohol and some really *ugly* body parts. Wild things. Snakes with two heads or human kidneys in the shape of Rhode Island. There was usually a strip show, called the "Hootchy Cootchy Dancers," where women well past forty would dance to raspy music and take their clothes off. We never got into those tents because we were too young and even if you went around to the back and tried to peek under the canvas they had a second flap hanging down inside that made it impossible to see anything, and even if you somehow got past the second flap

all you saw was the back of the stage. Or so I'm told.

And there would be the "Wild Man from Borneo!" show that had a half-naked man in a pit, wearing rags, who would pretend to be the missing link trapped in the jungles and bite the heads off live chickens.

Ah, those were the good old days, before there was all this control. If it sounds a bit weird, the history of fairs in medieval times is even more bizarre; for a couple of centuries there was a contest, a wildly popular sporting event that involved hanging a live cat from a post and killing it by beating it to death with your *face*. It was taken very seriously and men who were good at it became grand heroes. Talk about extreme sports—you have to wonder what tailgate parties would have been like. This makes even golf look sane.

But back to *our* fairs. Along with the rides and body parts in alcohol and strippers and other good times there was the Circle of Death.

Or Pit of Death.

Or bear pit.

It was a small boxing ring set up in the center of the midway. A man with a trained bear would stand in the middle of the ring on the canvas and keep the bear on a leash—the bear was also wearing a muzzle—and people could pay a quarter to get into the ring and test their strength by “wrestling” the bear. A big sign read:

**STAY IN THE RING WITH BRUNO FOR ONE
MINUTE AND WIN TWENTY-FIVE DOLLARS!**

Of course it sounds silly. Bears are immensely strong. No human on earth could wrestle one and win. It just couldn't be done.

And yet...

The bear pit was as popular as beating a cat to death with your face was in the Dark Ages. (And probably for similar psychological reasons.) Young men from the farms were always looking for ways to prove their strength and they flocked to the Circle of Death and we flocked there to watch

them pay their quarters and get thrown out of the ring.

And what's more, Bruno seemed to like it. He would stand in the middle of the ring on his back legs, weaving slightly, his trainer next to him, watching as the next victim climbed in. The bear actually knew how to wrestle. He probably weighed four hundred pounds and could easily have flattened an opponent with a swing of his paw. But he didn't hit. Instead he would get into the stance, one paw on his opponent's shoulder, the other on his arm, and they would lean into each other and the handler would yell, “Go!” and Bruno would simply throw the other man out of the ring.

Then he would get a bottle of Coca-Cola, which his trainer would open and hold up to his mouth. Bruno would drain it and emit a huge belch before getting ready for the next farm boy.

Of course we were too cool to try wrestling the bear. Or too chicken. It amounts to the same thing. We would watch and cheer the bear and

tease the farm workers—although not excessively, considering how strong they looked—but we didn't really think of climbing into the Circle of Death.

One day we were watching the bear wrestle, and laughing, and when I happened to glance at Orvis I saw a strange look come into his eye. It was very similar to the look Carl had after viewing the newsreel about breaking the speed record on skis.

"Are you all right?"

He nodded. "I'm fine, why?"

"You looked at the bear kind of funny..."

"Not the bear so much as the sign. Did you see that sign?"

"What about it?"

"It doesn't say anything about actually beating the bear at wrestling. It just says you have to stay in the ring with him for one minute."

"Orvis..."

"I think if you just hung on to the bear—"

"Orvis, that's a bear. A real bear. One minute is

a long time. There's farm boys here who could pinch your head like a pimple and they can't stay in there with Bruno."

"Loan me a quarter. I'll pay you back when I get the twenty-five dollars."

All right, I know what you're thinking; that twenty-five cents was a lot of money to waste, that Orvis wouldn't make a good bicep on those farm boys, let alone be a problem for a bear. But, remember, I still had that scientific curiosity and I was starting to wonder just what *would* happen if Orvis took a try at the bear.

So I gave him a quarter.

And he stepped into the ring and took the stance with the bear.

Orvis came out of the ring a little faster than he went in—of course the bear tossed him out—but he got up and dusted his pants off. I said a permanent goodbye to my quarter and had started to walk away when I heard soft giggling and looked up to see Elaine, Eileen and Margaret watching Orvis and laughing. I thought, Oh no, and turned

to pull him away. Too late. Orvis had seen the girls.

"Give me another quarter."

"Orvis . . ."

"Now."

"I don't think it's a good idea."

"Now!"

It was as if I weren't there. It was just Orvis and the girls.

And, oh yeah, the bear. Let's not forget the bear.

I talked to the trainer later while we were bandaging Orvis. The trainer was a nice guy, and so was the bear, who really did love to wrestle. "But he has his pride, too," the trainer told me. "Bruno has his pride." The thing is, the bear had trained himself after countless contests to match the strength of his opponent; he would kindly feel the other person out, then just apply enough extra strength to win the match.

But he hated it if they came back a second time. "It's like they don't believe him," the trainer said. "Like he was being nice and they didn't be-

lieve it, so when they come back he makes it a little worse for them."

That would begin to describe what happened to Orvis: The bear made it worse for him.

I still do not believe you can do those things to a human body without breaking it.

Orvis took the stance, the bear took the stance, the handler pocketed his quarter and looked at Orvis and asked, "Are you ready?"

Orvis nodded, the trainer said, "Go!" and the fight was on.

Well, it wasn't a fight so much as Orvis just trying to stay alive. Initially the bear decided to make it just a little worse, and with one paw on Orvis's shoulder he used the other paw at Orvis's stomach to bend him in the middle, pound his butt down to the ground, fold him over like he was folding a piece of paper and slam Orvis's face down between his own knees on the canvas so hard I saw snout fly out of Orvis's nose. Whereupon the bear held him flat that way and calmly used his other paw to scoot Orvis out of the ring under the bottom rope. Kind of like a big hockey puck with legs.

Except that Orvis didn't go.

As the bear tried to push him out Orvis grabbed a back leg and held on. ("I looked up and through the haze I saw the girls watching," he told me later.) This new tactic surprised the bear and he danced back into the center of the ring.

Dragging Orvis back with him. Which could be a good thing, as Orvis thought much, much later. Or a very, very bad thing, as Orvis thought at the moment.

He was still in the ring and I heard somebody say, "The kid's made twenty seconds."

For a beat—actually it was three seconds; I had started counting, thinking I might somehow get my quarters back—the bear looked down, as if studying him, at Orvis hanging on to his back leg.

Then the bear bent down and, using both paws, picked Orvis up, fashioned him into something like a ball and shot-putted him out of the ring.

Or tried to.

Just as Orvis was leaving the bear's paws his

hand reached back and grabbed a chunk of fur on the bear's shoulder and hung on. Orvis swung up and over in a tight arc and landed on top of the bear's head.

Big mistake, I thought.

"Thirty-five seconds," the same man yelled, and then they all began chanting, "Thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight..." And I looked over and saw that the girls weren't giggling any longer, and they were counting too. "... Thirty-nine, forty..."

For the bear, having Orvis land on his head was the last straw, and what followed were the longest twenty seconds in Orvis's life.

The bear bundled Orvis into a ball and virtuously dribbled him around the ring, batting him back and forth, flipping him in the air like a toy, catching him, dropping him to the ground and flipping him up again, at one point sitting on him while he braided Orvis's legs together. Orvis wouldn't admit it later but I swore that, girls or no girls, at one point he tried to crawl out of the ring.

But the bear dragged him back and kept working on him until finally the trainer, pulling on the leash, got him off Orvis and the man next to me yelled, "He made it! Give the kid twenty-five dollars!" and we were all cheering and the girls were jumping up and down and waving and even Bruno looked happy as the trainer gave him a Coke.

The trainer and I pulled Orvis onto a stool in the corner and wiped the dust out of his eyes and the trainer gave him a towel to use to clean himself up a little. Orvis looked as if he'd been pulled through a knothole backward. Then the trainer got out some bandages and we started covering the scrapes and minor cuts from hitting various things around the ring, like the floor, and the corner posts, and the floor, and again the floor. Then the trainer gave Orvis two tens and a five and right then the girls came up to him.

"That was great—you were great!" they said, surrounding him, and they smiled and laughed and they were laughing with and not at him but it didn't matter. He didn't say a word, couldn't say a

word, and they walked off shaking their heads and Bruno, I swear, put out a paw and gently ruffled the hair on Orvis's head.

"Nice girls," the trainer said, but Orvis was just staring down at the floor, his head wobbling only a little as he tried to focus on his feet. Then he looked up at me and in a plaintive little puppy dog voice he asked:

"Wasn't I wearing shoes when we came?"