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Kevin O'Hara: Making a spectacle of myself

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By Kevin O'Hara

PITTSFIELD — As a kid, I wore short pants all summer long and thought little about it. Just slip `em on and run outdoors into the brilliant sunshine. But after I came home from Vietnam, where my pale legs were severely sun-scorched, I swore off shorts for good.

Of course, wearing long pants every summer for the past 50 years has brought me nothing but ridicule from friends and casual observers alike. Some years ago, playing tennis on a blistering day behind Reid Junior High, a woman in the adjacent court stopped her game and shouted, "How can you play tennis in long pants? Just looking at you is giving me heatstroke!" After her brazen admonition, I looked down to see that my chinos had wrapped themselves around my tender white shanks like steamy Turkish towels.

Ditto on the golf course: "Hey O'Hara. It's 93 freaking degrees, so why the long pants?" This time I had a ready answer. "Did you ever see Tiger Woods playing golf in shorts? Besides, wearing long pants protects me from poison ivy and tick bites while searching the woods for your errant tee shots."

During the July heat wave, I finally caved in and bought myself a pair of khaki shorts that hovered just above the knees. The item felt so sparse in my hands that I fidgeted at the counter, feeling as though I was purchasing some scanty women's apparel. Once home, I slipped them on, and lacquered my legs with enough sunscreen to survive a solar flare. Then I calmly walked out into our sunny but secluded backyard, no longer afraid my milk-white underpinnings would get fry-o-lated.

For me, buying a pair of shorts was a major breakthrough, but to wear them in public and thus expose my bleached legs to the world would be a humiliating, yet life-changing event. To achieve this unlikely goal, I'd have to set out bravely on my daily two-mile stroll through the neighborhood, sporting my new shorties. The following hot and sunny morning, I set out briskly on my roundabout though, in truth, I'd sooner run a gauntlet of savages. Fortunately, no sharp-tongued neighbors were around to razz me about my porcelain pegs as I passed. My luck prevailed down Lenox Avenue, though I confess to cowering behind shrubs, trees, and parked cars at every opportunity.

Blinded by glare

Wahconah Street, however, was a virtual DMZ — no sandbags, no foxholes, no bunkers — just a steady stream of slowing motorists who dropped their visors to gawk curiously at my milkfish fillets. Meanwhile, approaching pedestrians shielded their eyes from my shimmering shanks. Joggers lost their footing. Cyclists wobbled aimlessly away.

I lumbered on past the Gulf station, where my Sri Lankan friend, Asri, rubbed his eyes in disbelief. Further along, Tracy blushed at my passing from where she stood at Nichol's Package Store, and Roberta did a double-take from her cash register at Harry's Supermarket. Even my longtime buddy, Jim Mazzer, stopped to tell me how he could spot the legs of an Irishman from a mile away.

With the world closing in around me, I took refuge beneath the leafy canopy near the now-dilapidated footbridge, and gave myself a much-needed pep talk. "C'mon, Kev, get a grip! You can do this! You gotta believe!"

I resumed my humbling journey beneath the insufferable sky, my exposed shanks beginning to feel like sausages sizzling in a pan. On the home stretch, a neighbor's dog, always docile and friendly, gnashed its teeth and growled ferociously, struggling to break free from its chain and attack. His master, sitting passively on the porch, studied me from ankle to knee, and chuckled, "Don't worry, Kev, my dog only eats red meat!"

Like a winded marathon runner, I stumbled to the finish line and collapsed in our front yard. There I lay, catching my breath, as my family dashed from the house to check on me. Still flat on my back, I was abruptly filled with a sunburst of inexplicable joy, suddenly realizing that I'd accomplished the inconceivable. Yes, I had just circumnavigated the vast North End territory of Pittsfield -- in short pants!

Kevin O'Hara is a longtime Eagle columnist. Visit his website at thedonkeyman.com

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