



The Perils of Pint-sized People

...And Selected Short Subjects

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I have never forgiven my high school classmates for the atrocity. I was a senior, my high school yearbook had arrived and I flipped immediately to my picture to see what quoted bit of wit or wisdom had been placed under my name. After all, that vagary of verbage lives with the victim for a lifetime and longer. It would sum up my place in the cosmic scheme of the Class of '65. Would I be remembered for my good nature or my bubbly personality? Maybe the yearbook editors would recall the three years I toiled as a sportswriter and columnist for the school newspaper. "The Grantland Rice of HHS," they might call me. I was sort of an all-around guy — playing some sports, singing in the choir, making decent grades. Could I have made an impression that way? Heck, I didn't even care if they made some snide remark about my having a pug nose.

But I should have known. My heart sank to the pit of my stomach when I perused the insultingly brief caption under my photo: "Life is short and so am I." Such is just one example of the inundation of indignities loosed on any poor lad whom the good Lord chooses to single out as an example of regressive evolution. Cuss and discuss race and sex discrimination all you want; the truly downtrodden of this earth — and especially this nation — are short men.

Oh, short women have a rough go of it, too, especially in this age of 5-foot-10 Miss Americas and broads in the boardrooms. But the women are the weaker sex, aren't they, to be protected by the male animal? Petites are cute and cuddly.

Talls have their problems as well, having to bear such boorish barbs as, "How's the weather up there?" or, "Do you play basketball?" But be honest with yourself, men, which would you rather be — 5 feet 4 or 6 feet 4? When you've fibbed a little about your height, have you subtracted an inch or added an inch? Let's face it. Given the choice, most men, especially those under 6 feet — the vast majority of us — would choose to be taller.

Just consider some of the adjectives that describe tall people: aristocratic, burly, commanding, distinguished, formidable, gallant, hulking, imposing, impressive, king-sized, Lincolnesque, lofty, rangy, regal, strapping, striking, towering. Short folks are known as: bantam, boyish, brash, cocky, diminutive, elfin, feisty, impish, munchkinish, pint-sized, pugnacious, runty, sawed-off, spunky, squat, stumpy or wiry. Try to find a compliment in there somewhere.

"Bigger is better" ... at least that's what we've been taught through history ... and nowhere is that ages-old treatise followed more fervently than in 20th century America.

The last time I allowed anyone to take official measurement of my height was in my ninth-grade physical education class. I stretched to a statuesque 5 feet 4 3/4, which I promptly rounded off forever to 5 feet 5. Never mind that the average man loses height after age 30 or that my 5-2 wife looks me eye-to-eye in 2-inch heels. I will die at 5 feet 5.

Men, especially, are preoccupied with height. Psychologist Abraham Maslow put it this way: "When two people come together in a face-to-face relationship, a conscious or unconscious sizing-up process ensues that looks much like what we see in infra-human primates." In other words, it's a basic law of the jungle, machoism, masculinity. This sensitivity to size leads to lies and is the major reason, perhaps, that such a relatively poor job has been done of chronicling the height of historic figures. Another problem with height in history is that it's so caught up with symbolic measurements that have little to do with actual ones — and the little man usually gets the short shrift.

We equate power with size. We've debated for centuries whether Jesus was small and meek or tall and commanding. But most would prefer to picture Him in their mind's eye as larger than life. Julius Caesar also has been chronicled in various historic records as both tall and short, with his critics usually picturing him on the short side. We so relate power and size that when power is abused, we belittle the offender. A quote from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police training manual: ... "if we think for a moment how many small men have become dictators: Napoleon, Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin. All were men of relatively small stature." Although Hitler, for instance, is viewed as an extremely small man, in reality, at 5 feet 8, he was of near normal height for his time.

In one Australian experiment, the same man was introduced by varying titles to several classrooms of students, who then were asked to estimate his height. The range fluctuated 4 inches, with power always on the high side.

A startling relationship between height and self-esteem was uncovered by Dr. Alfonso Prieto of Arizona State University and Dr. Michael Robbins of the University of Missouri. The two men asked 69 junior high school boys to estimate their own height — mainly short, somewhat short, average, somewhat tall, mainly

tall. Each student's height also was judged by his classmates and teacher. Later, each boy was given a battery of tests to measure his self-esteem. As you might have guessed, those boys who thought themselves short also ranked low in self-esteem.

Author Ralph Keyes points out in his book, "The Height of Your Life," that moviemakers — knowing how strongly we associated power with size — cast tall actors to play legendary figures even when this flies in the face of history: James Caan as Billy Rose; Paul Winfield as Martin Luther King Jr., Anthony Quinn as Aristotle Onassis; Max Von Sydow as Jesus.

The quintessential little man of history, of course, is Napoleon — the main man since Oedipus to have a complex named for him. But, according to historian Michael Burns, "Napoleon — the scrawny Corsican who overcame his shortness (historians tell us) and grew into a colossal leader, the model of the feisty little man, the hero of countless small persons with gigantic complexes — when placed shoulder to shoulder with much of French population was tall. Not symbolically tall, as in 'tall in the saddle,' or 'a man of towering accomplishments,' but physically, measurably tall." Burns says estimates of Napoleon's height varied from 5 feet 2 to 5 feet 6. Even a compromise at 5 feet 4 inches — Burns contends — still would have placed him at average or above for men of his day. But the issue matters little. Without Napoleon, we would have assigned another name to the mental malady attributed to all ambitious short men. Alas, tall leaders have vision; short leaders have Napoleonic complexes.

In America, the excesses are even more pronounced. "So pervasive is the American bias against the short man," 5-foot-4 Saul Feldman told a 1971 meeting of the American Sociological Association "that no one notices it — no one, that is, except the short man himself. American society is a society with a highest premise: to be tall is to be good and to be short is to be stigmatized."

We have only to look at our presidents to prove the point. We started early because George Washington, at 6-2, was well above average for his time. Since 1900, only twice has the shorter of the two presidential candidates won — Calvin Coolidge, who at 5-10 was a mere inch shorter than John Davis, and Jimmy Carter, who at an estimated 5-10 was 2 inches shorter than Gerald Ford. Moreover, every winning candidate except one since the turn of the century has exceeded today's average male height, and that lone exception, Harry Truman, matched it at 5 feet 9. Our shortest president was James Madison, who stood 5 feet 4. He suffered by comparison to tall predecessors, Washington, and the 6-foot-2 Thomas Jefferson, but also to his famous wife, Dolly — she of the tall, feathered hats. Our tallest president, of course, was the immortalized Abe Lincoln, who at 6 feet 4 lost the political battle but not the war with 5-foot-4 Stephen A. Douglas.

In the world of business, the taller the executive, the fatter the salary. Typically, an extra inch is worth an extra \$600 a year, say Irene Frieze and Josephine Olsen, professors at the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Business, who recently surveyed about 1,200 graduates of the MBA program. "People imagine a male manager as tall, strong and powerful," Ms. Olson was quoted in an Associated Press story. "And the man who meets that image gets rewarded." Frieze and Olson said the average salary of those surveyed was \$43,000, but a typical 6-foot professional earned \$4,200 more than his 5-foot-5 counterpart.

The University of Pittsburgh study was an apparent follow-up to a more informal survey conducted between 1968 and 1971 by Leland P. Deck, then personnel director at the same institution. Deck, whose findings were quoted in the May 1980 Readers Digest, said he found a \$1,000-a-year salary penalty for being under 6 feet. The overall salary bonus for being 6 feet 2 rather than 5 feet 11 was 12.4 percent; the bonus for being cum laude was a mere 4.2 percent, Deck discovered.

David Kurtz of Eastern Michigan University marketing department once showed visiting corporate recruiters two equally qualified candidates for a sales job — one standing 6 feet 1, the other 5 feet 5. He noted in a March 1977 U.S. News and World Report article that 72 percent preferred the taller applicant. In the same article, another college placement director said he overheard one corporate recruiter say: "I wonder if so-and-so's ready for management? He's only 5 feet 4."

What's so strange about this preference for bigness in business is that the few studies undertaken on the subject show that the shorties perform at least as well — especially when selling is involved. Dr. Joseph Murrey, in his 1976 Ph.D. thesis at North Texas University, found that the agent's height had no bearing on

his life insurance sales. On the other hand, clothing consultant John T. Malloy, in researching his book, "Dress for Success," found that prospective buyers reacted more favorably to shorter salesmen. "I came to the conclusion that when a man who's selling is much larger than the man who is buying, he can and often does frighten the buyer. ... A frightened man ... will escape from you, even if it means throwing you out of the office."

"The bigger they are, the harder they fall," short people are told from the first minute they enter the sports arena. Unfortunately, the originator of that famous quotation — according to the April 1977 Smithsonian magazine — was Robert Fitzsimmons, the pint-sized ex-heavyweight champ, who was preparing to give away 50 pounds in a 1902 rematch with the towering James J. Jeffries. His philosophy was refuted swiftly when Jeffries proceeded to beat him for a second time, thus lending support to the converse dictum that a good big'un will always beat a good little'un.

That's no major problem in America, however, because the little'un seldom gets the opportunity. Mort Weiser, writing for Family Health magazine, noted that the individual who is just a little shorter than average will carry a thousand hurts with him as he moves from adolescence into adulthood. "He will, that is, if he's a boy, a boy growing up in a society that worships athletic skills in young men." American fans generally reject all size-neutral sports such as soccer, gymnastics and cycling in favor of football and basketball, in which the combatants mostly are Goliaths. One might argue that baseball, "America's pastime," is immune to size consciousness unless he knows that Hank Aaron and Joe Morgan, among many others, were rejected by their original teams as too small. Likewise, 5-foot-4 Mario Andretti was turned down for his first job because he was too "short" to handle those big racing cars. Why are courses on the Professional Golf Association tour laid out to favor the long hitters? Americans worship size in their athletes.

I remember many times as a kid trying out for Little League and high school teams in baseball, my favorite sport. The hard part was getting the coaches' attention long enough to show him whether I could play or not. I eventually turned to sportswriting to satisfy my love for athletics before finally giving even that up after years of interviewing necks, navels and knees.

This fear of being overlooked by coaches prompts many short people to develop the hustling, holler-guy style exemplified by Pete Rose. He and others like him quickly are labeled as "hotdogs" or "showboats." Although Rose is no little man at 5 feet 10, 200 pounds, he was a small youngster who maintained his brash style throughout his career. Another example of a baseballer who fits the mental picture of a "short" athlete is Billy Martin, the brawling former player and manager. It surprises many who meet Martin in person that he is almost 6 feet tall.

Belittling awaits those few gifted "Davids" who are able to slay Goliath and make it as professional athletes in a big man's sport. They immediately lose their given names in favor of "PeeWee", "Tiny", "Spud", or simply the universal adjective, "little." At the very least, according to author Ralph Keyes, they fall victim to the "short-but" syndrome. "He may be small, but he's got the heart of lion." "The guy's little, but he's got exceptional speed." It's no wonder so few short men make it in American sports. All it costs him, Keyes notes, is his dignity.

What hits hardest at the heart of a short man is romance. It is no woman's fantasy that her dream lover be short, dark and handsome. So even if the little man lands a luscious lady, he must rest uneasily with the realization that he was a compromise, of sorts, or that someday a tall "Mr. Right" will come along and sweep her — literally — off her feet. Author Keyes polled 79 women at Cedar Crest College in Allentown, Pa., and found that only two, both 5 feet 11, said they'd go out with a shorter man. Even at my exaggerated height of 5 feet 5, I am only an inch above the national average for women. And since even women my size

look taller, my hunting ground was limited to girls 5 feet 3 or shorter. For that reason, there was no such thing as a totally "blind" date; I, at the very least, had to know her height. As a 22-year-old college senior, it was embarrassing to take my 18-year-old freshman date for drinks and have my identification checked ... when hers wasn't?

But my personal pet peeve is the massive macho type who gets off playing father figure to some petite partner. After all, the guy has all of womankind from which to choose, and he moves in on my already limited territory.

Short guys sometimes make it as lovers in the movies. But then movies are fantasies, and the fantasy is that leading men are taller than leading ladies. That's why the handsome, muscular, but 5-foot-4 Alan Ladd spent much of the movie, "Boy on a Dolphin," on a catwalk, while his co-star, 5-foot-8 Sophia Loren, stood in specially dug trenches. Ladd should have maintained his film partnership with Veronica Lake, a mere 5-footer. When risers, stools, elevator shoes or extremely short actresses aren't available, kissing scenes between short guys and tall dolls normally are done for comic effect. It's hard to appear sexy when your lady love gives you a peck on top of the head.

That may be why many shorties in show biz — Mickey Rooney, Woody Allen and others — gravitate toward comedy. Comedian David Landsberg, who is 5 feet 2, said he learned how to make people laugh as a way to gain popularity. Naturally, he plays off his size in his performances. He mentions walking up to Raquel Welch and saying, with some censored paraphrases: "I swear to God, one of these days I'm going to" (make mad passionate love) to you." Her response is: "If you do and I find out about it, I going to be (upset)."

"Short People," says the popular song of the late 1970s:

*"... got no reason to live.
They got little hands and little eyes;
They walk around telling great big lies;
They got little noses and tiny little teeth;
They wear platform shoes on their nasty little feet."*

That song was written in 1977 by the 5-foot-11 Randy Newman and not, as you may have guessed, by the 5-foot-1 Paul Williams or the 5-foot-6 Paul Simon. Newman claims in the May 1978 issue of Redbook magazine that the song was meant as a parody of all prejudice and narrow-mindedness. If that's true, and we short guys doubt it, why didn't he pick on male chauvinism or racial bias — or, heaven forbid, tall people? All he managed to accomplish, from this admittedly biased viewpoint, was supply still more grist for the already overflowing mill of "short" jokes. Such jokes leave the little man with little choice — either laugh along at your own expense, or not laugh and risk being labeled "touchy."

Frankly, I like the rebuttal tune offered by Burton L. Levine, owner of radio station WROV in Roanoke, Va. One verse says of "Tall People":

*"They got arms like gorillas and long hairy toes;
When you're standing beside 'em,
You got to look up their nose.
They got long skinny fingers and big floppy feet;
And they're starving the world
With all the food that they eat."*

Naturally, that version never made it to the top of the charts.

Five-foot, 2-inch writer Jane Clark probably sums up “short” best with a few brief observations:

- *Short people can't bend their knees when they wear high boots.*
- *Tall people slide into a hot bath and prop their feet comfortably under the faucet; short people slide into the tub and keep sliding.*
- *Short people have to undergo the humiliation of having tall people try to lift them at parades.*
- *Tall people stride; short people scamper.*
- *Tall people may leave their fingerprints on high cupboards, but short people leave their footprints on kitchen counters.*
- *Short people are the ones who have to climb in the bathroom window when tall people get locked out of the house.*
- *Short people have to sit on the edge of deep couches so their legs won't stick straight out.*
- *Tall people look elegant in mink coats; short people look like minks.*
- *Short people never get to dance cheek-to-cheek. In fact, Confucius say: Short man who dance with tall girl get bust in mouth.*

In the course of my research and writing on height, I finally have put my personal feelings in proper perspective. Maybe it's because this paper has allowed me to vent my frustrations. How I feel now about my height could be summed up in a couple of quotes.

Talk show host Dick Cavett was asked if he is self-conscious about his height: “No,” he answered, “but I'm self-conscious about other people's.”

Comedian Mel Brooks states my view best: “Being short never bothered me for three seconds. The rest of the time I wanted to commit suicide.”