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Every Pun Intended

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Every Pun Intended

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Sunday March 10, 2024

By Jerry Zezima

When it comes to wordplay, I'm the pun and only. Or I had been for the past decade.

In 2014, I competed in Punderdome, a contest billed as "New York's Most Puntastic Competition."

At the ripe old age of 60, I was the eldest competitor. But I had the ripe stuff because it was my first appearance, I faced 16 other contestants and I beat them all.

The grand prize was a fondue maker, which I gave to my wife. It was the least I could fondue.

Slow forward to 2024, the 10th anniversary of my champ-pun-ship. To mark the occasion, I made a return engagement, even though I am married.

I was greeted at Littlefield, a performance and art space in Brooklyn, by Fred Firestone, the founder and ringmaster of Punderdome. In the fine art of punning, Firestone never tires.

“JZ!” he exclaimed, calling me by the name I use in Punderdome.

All contestants are required to have punny labels, which are written on labels that are then stuck on their shirts, dresses, pants or whatever they are wearing, which is, of course, immaterial.

Among the 250 or so attendees were a dozen competitors in the All-Star Tournament of Pun Champions, made up of punsters, like me, who had won previous Punderdome events.

They included Lingo Star, the all-time Punderdome champ with 42 victories. He also has been a winner in the O. Henry Pun-Off World Championships in Austin, Texas.

“Do you drive a Beetle?” I asked.

“I’m just trying to drum up support,” he replied.

Lingo was one of my five adversaries in the preliminary round, which had two separate competitions of six contestants each.

Here’s how it works: A half-dozen punsters are given a topic and can write down their ideas on small whiteboards before Fred tells them to stop. Then he calls each one up to a microphone on a stage in front of a crowd. The contestant has two minutes to rattle off as many on-topic puns as he or she can before the clock beeps.

When the group is done, the Human Clap-O-Meter — this time it was a young woman named Laura — gauges the audience reaction to each contestant.

My group’s category was stores, appliances and devices. When it was my turn, I referred to an earlier competitor, who made a joke about a friend named LG. I said that at 70, I was old enough to know LG’s father, EKG.

It got a big laugh.

I went on to say that my wife likes my coffee so much that she doesn’t have grounds for complaint. Because she wants me to clean up after dinner, “Dishes my life.” And if I do laundry, it’s a “clothes call” and a “vicious cycle.”

On a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest), I got a 9.5 and made the semifinals.

During the 15-minute break before the next round, I was congratulated by several audience members. I was even lauded by my competitors, including Hot Cross Puns, a nine-time Punderdome champ who in her first try was the PunSlingers winner in the 2023 O. Henry competition.

“I’m a theology teacher,” she told me. “I use puns in my lessons.”

“You must have spirited discussions,” I said.

“It’s a testament to my students,” she noted.

Hot Cross Puns made it to the semifinals with me and four other punsters. The topic was snacks, living rooms and furniture.

I said my father liked snacks and that I was a chip off the old block. I made several couch potato, furniture and carpeting puns (“expensive rugs are too much toupee”), but since “sofa, so good” and “ottoman empire” were already used, I conceded “de-feet.”

I got an 8.5, but the two finalists, Daft Pun and the eventual winner, When Wit Hits the Fan, each scored a perfect 10.

Although I didn’t win again, I had a great time.

“You should run for president,” an audience member told me afterward.

“I’m just Biden my time,” I replied. “And I’m sure I would Trump any opponent.”

“JZ, you did great,” said Fred. “Don’t wait another 10 years to come back.”

“By that time, I’ll be 80,” I said. “Pun for the ages.”

—Jerry Zezima

Jerry Zezima writes a humor column for Tribune News Service, which distributes it to newspapers nationwide and abroad. He is also the author of seven books, *Leave It to Boomer*, *The Empty Nest Chronicles*, *Grandfather Knows Best*, *Nini and Poppie’s Excellent Adventures*, *Every Day Is Saturday*, *One for the Ageless* and his latest, *The Good Humor Man: Tales of Life, Laughter and, for Dessert, Ice Cream*, all of which are “crimes against literature.” He has won eight awards from the National Society of Newspaper Columnists for his humorous writing.