

March Madness

By James Lambert – Copyright 2024

Reporter's Notebook – 2/15/21 -- They finally killed one last night over on Death Row, Jimmy Jones. Claimed he wanted to die. Dropped his appeal, admitted he murdered a lady and her daughter back in 1987. New governor ran for office on killing more death row convicts. He was glad to oblige. Jimmy said he was sick of living like a hen in a chicken coop. 23 hours a day in a 12x 8 cell, plus one to walk around a chain link cage and take a shower. Told his tier mates he was ready, and just wanted off this earth. Wasn't scared at all they said. Warden told him the shot would just make him sleep. Socrates said death may be like a night of dreamless sleep that even the Great King of Persia would covet. That's how they sold it to Jimmy. He wouldn't feel a thing. That's not how it went down. Not at all.

I was a witness. They wanted someone there from our prison paper. They want all the other convicts to know they mean business over on Death Row. It was a shit show. Jimmy apologized to the girl's family, and to his momma. Strapped to a table, head, arms and legs. Jimmy had several long seizures. Gagged on his vomit. Eyes spun around like in The Exorcist. Warden used his handkerchief to wipe Jimmy's face. The priest tried praying harder, louder, like maybe God would show mercy. Must have taken 30 minutes. This new drug was supposed to be quicker, no side effects. Wrong! None of this will make our paper of course, but the word already got out back in the dorms and cell blocks.

Gary Shultz's handle was "The Professor." He wrote well, had some college. Classification liked him a lot. He never did field work, even during his first year. They first made him a clerk in the hospital, then put him teaching reading back in the schoolhouse. Somehow, he talked his way into the Communication Center where they run the radio station and publish the monthly newspaper. Warden heard about that NPR podcast, Ear Hustle. It got a bunch of awards and lots of good media coverage. Warden got to meet the Ear Hustle hosts at a big convention for corrections officials in Atlanta. So, Warden figured if California could make San Quentin look good, why not us? We got a wad of stories up here. That's how Shultz was given a tape recorder, a camera (yes, that's right, a camera!) and was told to roam around a 30,000-acre maximum security prison and just talk to people. We needed all the positive press we could get after screwing up several executions in front of the whole damned nation. It was Shultz's job to find something good and put it out into the world as a podcast. Warden wasn't exactly sure what the heck a podcast was, but he wanted one.

The Professor and the inmate editor of the paper were drinking their Friday afternoon coffee, kicking around ideas about covering the upcoming rodeo. The free man overseeing the Communication Center was Joe Gill who worked for years covering political scandals in the state capitol for the big morning paper. Having retired to a nearby farm, he took the job for some extra pocket change. Joe walked into the office, plopped down next to The Professor in one of the beat-up metal folding chairs, opened the case with the Center's tape recorder, and said, "Prof, we got our first podcast. Tomorrow morning you and me are covering a frigging basketball tournament on Death Row. Your schedule clear?"

"What's that you said?" asked The Prof.

“You heard me. Those death penalty lawyers been up our ass about how cruel we are to those guys. You know, botched executions, how solitary confinement fucks with people’s minds. That kind of stuff. Well, Warden thought we’d show we can be kind, even to losers on Death Row. They’ve cleaned up the yard and put new basketball goals out there. They gonna’ hold a three-man tournament, and you and I are going to watch and get us some interviews. Warden says it’s the first in the nation. How’s that for a first episode of our podcast? So, you clear tomorrow?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” said Shultz. “But let me ask you something. These guys never been together, except maybe talking to the guy in the next cell. How they going to act when everyone’s in the same place? How they gonna’ form teams, play together? Any grudges up there? Anyone thought that out?”

“DOC -- think something out in advance?” chimed the editor. “C’mon, man! This is just a damned publicity stunt, and it’s your job to see that it works. You know, happy, happy, joy, joy.”

“I’ll write you a pass for the eight o’clock bus to Death Row,” said Joe. “You bring the camera. I’ll have the recorder. Prof, you’re a Class A Trustee, right?”

“Yea, four years now. Shouldn’t be a problem. I ride the bus all the time for the paper. I gotta’ see this with my own two eyes.”

The prison bus dropped Shultz and three visitors at the Death Row sallyport on a clear fall morning. They were all processed through the first gate, but Shultz was told to wait on a wooden bench. A burly gray-haired sergeant pointed him to the spot. “Son, you sit over there. A’int no way I’m letting a convict holding a damned camera into Death Row without seeing some serious paperwork. That badge with the paper’s name don’t mean nothing. Your free man

should be here shortly. He better have something signed by Warden. Tape recorder you say? Shiit!”

Gill arrived and indeed had some serious paperwork, enough to satisfy the sergeant. The huge, barred gate buzzed open, admitting Gill and Schultz to a long breezeway leading to a central command station where all cells and passageways are monitored. Gill showed his paperwork to security manning the station. An officer walked the pair to a side door which opened onto a courtyard where roughly fifty condemned inmates were standing. They were in the process of picking teams. It looked very much like a bunch of teenagers dividing up for a playground tournament. Awaiting the players was a square of fresh asphalt and two newly installed poles and backboards. Over to the side, under a drooping mimosa tree was a large metal barbeque pit. Two inmates were helping a free man grill up a huge box of sausage and a bunch of burgers. Several ice chests held soft drinks and water.

Schultz couldn't believe his eyes and ears. Beside the playing surface was a row of folding chairs. Sitting in them was an entourage from Warden's office, including the man himself. Next to him was the head chaplain and the assistant warden overseeing Death Row. They were chatting and sipping sodas. This was Death Row, the same bunch who shot Jimmy Jones full of some jack legged poison from God knows where just a few weeks before. It was, wasn't it? Yes, it damned sure was.

Gill pulled an unused folding chair up under the tree. “Here, Prof. You sit here and I'll go round up a few guys for an interview. Chap should know who might be a good get.” Gill walked over and knelt in front of the chaplain and began a discussion about the podcast. Chap looked over at Warden who nodded. Gill started to round up men to interview. Chap whispered

something to Warden. After several nods, Warden stood up and walked over to the chair where Schultz was sitting, his camera around his neck and a tape recorder in this lap.

“Howdy Shultz,” he said. “I’ve been reading your articles for a year or so. Good work. They call you The Professor?”

“Sure, I’ll answer to that.”

“Well, Professor, Mr. Gill has a lot of faith in you. That’s why you’re the only convict I ever recall holding both a camera and a tape recorder. So, this podcast. Let’s keep it real, but not too real. We’ve got to approve every word, you know that.”

“Sure, Warden. Same with the paper. Understand completely.”

“Yes. I know you do. That’s why you’re doing this. Let’s keep it light. This day is about a bunch of guys playing ball and having some fun. And that’s all it’s about. Capisce?”

“Got it, Warden. Count on it.”

Twenty men formed into four teams. The team members started talking and began shoot arounds at each goal. The rest were spectators drinking in sodas and the unfiltered sunshine of the new yard. Gill led his first “get” to a chair beside Shultz.

“Prof, this is here’s Joe Brennan. He’s willing to talk.” Shultz turned on the recorder.

“Joe, give me your name and DOC number.”

“Joseph Brennan, 086695.”

“So, Joe, do I have your permission to record this interview?”

“Sure.”

“You realize it’s going to be broadcast on the prison podcast?”

“What’s that?”

“It’s like a radio show, but instead of being on radio waves in the air, it’s broadcast through the internet. You know, like streaming movies. But with a podcast, you just get the audio. You cool with that?”

“Sure man. Shoot your questions.”

“How long you been on Death Row?”

“Twenty-two years. Got here just before the turn of the century. Never see nothing like this today. Fact is, other than being shipped to the hospital couple years back, I ain’t seen direct sun since ninety-nine. Never met most of these men. Haven’t picked up a basketball in many years. This here is something.”

Schulz looked over the yard at the players doing their shoot around. The men had grouped into four teams. Each had five players and a coach, each of whom was barking encouragement to their charges. “Joe, you play ball back in the day?”

“Oh yea, down in the city, every boy played ball. That’s how you got the girls to pay attention. Had to be a good baller. Hell, we knew every college team, every NBA team. Magic, Shaq, Kobe. Those were my heroes. Had a poster in my room of Shaq breaking that backboard. Oh yea, all this takes me back.”

“So, this is a good day for you?”

“Good? Prof, I can’t explain. To see free men cooking burgers for us. To feel sun on your skin. To hold and shoot a basketball? To see fifty men who I only knew through bars, heard their voices down halls, knew only through whispers and rumors. Yea, it’s a damned good day. And yes, I’m thankful for it. But let me ask you a question. How did all this come about?”

“Not entirely sure, but it’s something to do with doing away with solitary confinement. We’re here to let the public know.”

“You tell the public that the birds enjoy a day out of their cages. We’re flapping our wings in the sunshine, at least for a day. All I can say is that I’m happy. Today. You tell ‘em that.”

With that said, Shultz took a snapshot of Brennan who immediately scurried back to his team. As he did so, Gill approached with another interview.

“Fred, this is The Professor. He’s gonna’ ask you some questions. He’s got that recorder, and this will be broadcast on our podcast. Prof, this is Fred Williams.”

Shultz rose and motioned his new guest to sit. *“Fred, give me your full name and DOC number.”*

“Fred K Williams, 078347.”

“So, Mr. Gill explained everything to you? You’re ok with us using this interview for a podcast?”

“Sure, anything to make Warden happy.”

“Tell me how it feels today to be talking to all these guys, playing ball? I guess you don’t get much talking done in there.”

“You might be surprised. Talking, like one person to another? Sure, that’s limited. You can chat with the guys on either side of you on the tier. You can pass a message down the tier. But I talk though letters to all kinds of folks, all around the world.”

“You mean family, lawyers, that kind of thing?”

“Yea, that. But I got pen pals in three different countries and eight different states. We always sending letters out to each other.”

“You kidding me? I know guys in the general population that hadn’t got a letter in decades. Hell, I haven’t got one in a few months. Even my daughter slips up on holidays. How did you get a pen pal?”

“There’s a website. Death Row Pen Pals. You can put up your photo and a short profile. Chap’s office does it for us. All sorts of people want to write you. Maybe it’s knowing you got a death sentence hanging out there. I chose a few who seemed interesting. My family stakes me to cost of letters and stamps each month. I’m lucky. Most guys got nothing, no one on the outside to help.”

“Sounds like another podcast. So, tell me about your team. Can you guys jell together and play ball?”

“We divided up by region, best as we could. We got four teams. Two from the city, one east bank, one west. Then we got a north team and a south team.”

“Y’all got a name yet?”

“What you think? Northside Jailbirds, what else?”

“And the others?”

“Eastside Gangsters, Westside Ball Hawks, and Southside Stallions. You know, just pull them names out our asses. It’s just for a day. I guess you’ll want a team photo?”

Fred slowly extended his arm and put his hand over the microphone. He whispered, “Can you cut it?” Schultz obliged.

“I read in the paper you went to Jones’ execution,” he said. “It was quick and fast, so say. But I heard different. Free man told me it was slow and painful.”

“Fred, you know what our paper is, and it ain’t a paper. Good news only.”

“Prof, can you tell me what you saw?”

“Wasn’t pretty. Took a while. Jimmy threw up. He shook, like he was having a seizure. Before he died, he apologized to the family members of the victims. Had a priest there. I’d say he died with dignity, acted like a man all the way through. But I tell you this; I ain’t going to another one. I’ll go to work in the fields before I step in that Death House again.”

“I been down on the row twelve years. Jimmy was the first to die since I’ve been down. They took him to the waiting cell in the Death House two weeks before they killed him. I knew him, was on his tier once, so we kind of got to know each other. That was a few years back.”

“That’s got to be on your mind,” Schultz said. “You know, your execution date. So much uncertainty and delay. How do you deal with it?”

“I’d say I never think about it. Most guys just put it away. Live whatever life you got to live. Stay in today. But this damned new governor. He gets off on ordering this shit. Word is that two new death warrants have been issued and that any day now, two men will be sitting in waiting cells over at the Death House. And here we all are, playing ball and eating hot dogs.”

“You got names?”

“Not for sure, but you see that skinny guy over with the Eastside Team? There, the one just dunked. That’s Joey Baird. Supreme Court just denied his lawyer’s argument about the use of that new drug. And over there, the big fella sipping a coke. Harvey Smith. Attorney General mentioned him by name in the paper the other day. Killed two cops. Said he needed to die. It’d been long enough.”

Shultz and Fred stood and went back to the tournament. Warmups were over, and the games began. Two forty-minute games comprised the semifinals. The two winning teams would take a thirty-minute break and face each other in the final. Lunch would be served afterwards.

Warden even arranged for a first-place trophy. Warden said he'd engrave their names on it. Shultz took a courtside seat beside Gill and began to write in his notebook.

Reporter's Notebook – 3/19/21 – Death Row. Basketball, Burgers, and a Sunny Day. In the middle of the complex that is Death Row now lies a newly refurbished basketball court. Today, thanks to the efforts of our Warden and other DOC staff, a group of men living with the knowledge they are sentenced to die are playing basketball and enjoying a picnic in the spring sun. There is always a tension in the air, knowing your case could be called for execution any day. But today, there seems no sign of tension, just a bunch of overgrown kids playing a game they all loved in the free world. Some of these men haven't been in the direct sun in years, much less handled a basketball. But they are eager to snatch this little bit of joy in play and competition.

Four five-man teams were formed for this three-man tournament. Each team picked a coach and a name representing areas of our state – Eastside Gangsters, Westside Ball Hawks, Southside Stallions, and Northside Jailbirds. Three men started the game, and the inmate coaches substituted throughout the forty minutes. Sitting courtside were our Warden, his wife, our head chaplain, Assistant Warden Walker over Death Row, and Assistant DOC Secretary Jim Willis.

The first semifinal pitted Eastside and Westside. The Gangsters took an early lead on the three-point shooting of Johnny Hubbel. The Ball Hawks fought back with the powerful inside play of Gene Robbins. At the half, Gangsters led 35-30. During the second half, Hubbel filled up the nets. Smothering defense by his teammate, Eric Williams proved decisive. It was Gangsters 58-48 at the buzzer.

The second semi was a battle of North versus South. The Jailbirds led this one from wire to wire. The two referees were put to work calling fouls in this heated contest. Each team quickly exceeded the five foul limit and both teams shot plenty of free throws, although no one lost their temper. Carl Redden led the Jailbirds with 18 points scoring from outside and in the paint. After building a ten-point halftime lead, the Northside Jailbirds won 60-42.

What we all witnessed Saturday during the final in the yard outside Death Row was a close and hotly contested game. Recognition and honor are hot commodities here behind the walls, and the teams from Eastside and Northside both wanted that championship trophy with their names engraved upon it. Coming off the bench for the Gangsters was a rail thin six-foot four inch shot blocker, Joey Baird. He'd played back in the day for McDonald High in the big city, for a team that reached the finals one year. Joey blocked seven shots for the game. At the half Eastside led 30-22. Northside drew to within three in the second half, but in the end Eastside pulled away for a ten-point win, 55-45. Winning coach, Robbie Roberts said, "Great team effort. For guys who hadn't played in years, it was just a pleasure to see them kind of gel. Can't say enough about Joey B. Hell of an effort off the bench."

After the final, all the men, players, coaches and observers were treated to sausage poboys, hamburgers, red beans and rice, and black-eyed peas. There were smiles all around.

Shultz gave his notebook to Gill. "Look this over. For a story in the paper. I want to talk to Warden and Chap. Get their quotes. Can you get Warden to do an interview for the podcast?"

"Sure, I'll go ask him now. Hey, got an idea for a headline. March Madness. What you think?"

Shultz walked back to his chair under the tree and opened the recorder case. Warden ambled up and sat in the other chair. "Ok Professor, what you want to ask me?"

“Tell me how all this came to be. What caused you to do this for these men?”

“Here at our facility, I view my role and the role of everyone on the staff as that of caretakers. These men, no matter how long they are sentenced, are our responsibility. We must care for their health, the welfare of their bodies and their souls. Even if the state says they must die, we must care for them up until the day they are to die. Things change in the world of corrections. This podcast for example. We learn about these changes from other institutions and the American Correctional Association. We get certified by their standards. There’s a lot of discussion around the country about the negatives of solitary confinement. So, we took a close look at these men on Death Row and found there wasn’t a good reason to continue the practice of solitary here. Most of these men have been here over a decade, most without the type of infractions which would lead Classification to put them in isolation. So, we decided to change. This event here is evidence these men can be treated much like any prisoner in the general population. You saw it. They showed they are like any other prisoners here. The cooperation, men having fun. It’s really proved we are right. Today they have earned our trust.”

The side door to the year opened and three men walked through. One was wearing a black bomber jacket with a large state seal on the chest and the words Attorney General in large yellow blocked letters on his back. He was holding a large envelope. He was flanked by two state troopers. He walked toward the tree where Schultz was sitting and waived for Warden to join him. He showed the papers in the envelope to Warden who took his time reading every word. He slowly handed the papers back to the Attorney General and motioned his assistant warden to join their meeting. Warden whispered something to him. The assistant warden and the state troopers walked over to the barbeque pit where Harvey Smith was helping cook the remaining burgers. Smith was cuffed and walked back to the side door and disappeared along the

troopers and the Attorney General. Warden returned to the interview chair. The yard was dead quiet.

“Don’t turn that thing on yet, Prof. Goddamned showboating politician. That prick found out about our tournament and chose this morning to personally serve the Death Warrant on Harvey Smith. Said he was the chief law enforcement officer in our state, so he decided to serve it himself. Claimed he didn’t know about this, but also said he didn’t approve and told me that there will be a story in the paper. Goddammit!” Warden composed himself, took a few deep breaths. “Ok Prof, Let’s go.”

“Warden, any further thoughts on this tournament?”

“It’s a sunny day, God is in His Heaven, and today a bunch of grown men got to play and bask in this beautiful sunshine. Now, get your camera ready, we got to do the trophy presentation. And I want team photos of every team.”

“Thanks Warden, for the interview. For this day.”

“You bet Prof. Remember. Keep it real, but not too real. Got it?”

Shultz sat down with the tape the next day to prepare the first podcast episode. He did what he was told to do, but only through a few tears as he thought about the young boys playing hoops and eating hot dogs. He didn’t know how the episode would be received by Warden, officials at the DOC, or if it would ever see the light of day in the free world. But there was one thing he knew for certain – he was never going back into the Death House.

