

Smiling at People on the Tube

My mate, Yvette, who greets absolutely everyone with a smile, suggested I should try smiling at other passengers on the tube, so against my better judgment I determined to give it a go but I'm afraid with no great measure of success. As I sat down this morning, there was a lady in a burka sitting across from me. I stole a glance or two at her while she looked at me furtively, until I felt the moment had finally arrived. I beamed at her and it was at that point that I realised I hadn't thought this through properly. I couldn't tell if she was smiling back or not.

I'd intended to discuss New Age beliefs with my fellow passengers, but she didn't look as though she lived on a narrow boat or a bus, or had spent August ankle deep in mud at the V-Festival. I was also a little unsure how susceptible she'd be to discussing the metaphysical traditions of both Eastern and Western spirituality without the confining borders of more traditional so-called religions.

I carried on smiling and I thought that maybe she was smiling back, so had just about decided that she could perhaps be a Scientologist – and that should be my approach – when we arrived at another station and the doors opened. I'd missed my chance.

A black lady got on, shooing a kid in front of her. I smiled at her. "Choo looking at? Choo find so funny?"

I looked down, suitably chastised.

Sitting a couple of seats away was a Polish bloke on his way to work on site, and even though I was convinced the sincerity was slightly slipping from my smile I felt duty bound to give it a go. I smiled at him and he looked at me. I didn't want to be beaten so I carried on smiling and he carried on looking. Polish people look, you see. They have little expression to their faces. If they had Poles in the Bible, when everyone else was always falling on their face and rending their clothes, the Polish bloke would just look.

Opposite me was now a rather attractive older woman with grey hair. Not really MILF material, you understand, but rather well-proportioned and with graceful features. I caught her eye and smiled at her. She coughed an, "Ahem," and carried on reading her Metro, so I thought I'd see if I could take a peek up her skirt. Unfortunately she looked up again and caught me. Another louder, "Ahem," made it clear in no uncertain terms that she was less than impressed.

This wasn't going well, and I was aware that my smile had now degenerated into the kind of smile you offer at a family gathering when some dick picks up the camera and says, "Smile!" just as you've stuck a forkful of food into your gob. Once the guy in the suit had finished his phone call I gave a half-hearted attempt at smiling at him, but relinquished that effort when he ignored me to dial another number.

Then a schoolboy got on, an Asian kid about twelve years of age. "Here's a good one," I thought to myself. At least I hope I thought it, I hope I didn't say it out loud, because it turns out I've been muttering to myself recently about other passengers on the tube.

I beamed at him. His eyes widened and he hurried on down the carriage. "Oh bollocks," I thought (at least I hope I thought it), "He's got the wrong idea!"

I wanted to rush after him to assure him that my intentions were honourable, but felt that in a carriage full of passengers I'd be in danger of drawing even more attention to myself.

And then the weirdest thing happened – and this is absolutely true – there was a loud “POP!” and a blue plastic bottle top ricocheted around the carriage and landed on my knee. Everyone looked around. I looked at a bloke with a beard who told me it was nothing to do with him. I looked at his wife, and she shrugged her shoulders. Then all three of us looked at this Mexican woman, who appeared suitably embarrassed and murmured something about Coca-Cola. The rattling of the train had evidently caused the pressure in the Coke bottle in her bag to explode the lid off. We passed it down the carriage back to her and she replaced it.

At Finchley Road a farmer got on the train. What a farmer was doing getting on a tube train, I have no idea, but he came complete with big belly, flat cap and a piece of blue rope to hold up his manure-stained trousers. He sat down and fell asleep so I felt my smile - which I have to admit was really wilting by this stage - would be wasted.

There was a bloke with one of those faces that somehow manages to leave the mouth hanging open, but with the nose and chin almost touching. His baseball cap was pulled low over his eyes and if the truth were known my enthusiasm for smiling at strangers was seriously waning.

A bloke got on at Baker Street, but by this time there were no seats left. He had this stupid face. I mean really stupid. Stupid stupid stupid face. A face that was too small and kind of imploded on itself if you know the type. Normal size head but a face that just got smaller and smaller as if his face was a sponge and someone was squeezing it from the inside.

Anyway, that's not what annoyed me. He can have whatever kind of face he wants, I suppose. No, it was his jacket that annoyed me, and I'll tell you why (if you're still listening, that is). You know the cloth loop on the inside of your jacket for hanging it on a hook, or if you're ultra-cool casually looping it through your finger and slinging it over your shoulder – I don't know what it's called – well on this geezer's jacket it was on the outside and hung down just below the collar. What an idiotic place to put that little cloth strip!

But that's not what annoyed me. What annoyed me was that he'd actually bought it like that! His wife must have said, “Oh yes, dear, that looks nice. It's a good fit too. Be useful for work that will.” And neither of them thought there was anything unusual about the cloth loop on the outside.

Anyway, he's edging towards this seat as he obviously suspected that the girl sitting in it was going to get off at Euston Square. I was paying close attention because even though he had a stupid face I was going to give it one more bash at smiling at him. The girl in the seat was one of these Irish girls – probably still is – with that pink Paddy skin and really big plates of meat, about size 12. Stupid Face just about had the seat covered, but anything can happen. Sure enough at Euston Square Ms Pink Paddy stands up and he completely outmaneuvers everyone else to get in there. Good move. He sits down and then shat his pants in a hugely satisfying manner. At least that's the only explanation I can come up with because he sighed with relief and put this squashed up blissful smile on his stupid distorted face.

At this stage I could find nothing more to smile about at all, and I abandoned the whole idea as a bad job.

Sorry, babe, but I did try.

The Penalty Shootout

A week after Chelsea beat Bayern Munich (in Munich) on spot kicks in the Champions League Finals, FIFA President, Sepp Blatter, announced that he wanted penalty shootouts scrapped and asked German football coach Franz Beckenbauer, who is currently charged with improving football for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, to find an alternative 'to this tragedy.'

Blatter stated that, "Football can be a drama, even a tragedy, when we go to penalty kicks. When football goes to penalty kicks, it loses its essence as a team sport."

Blatter's correct in one respect; there is nothing quite like the drama and suspense of a penalty shootout. The player tasked with taking the penalty can thunder the ball home or smash it against the crossbar, or even sky it completely over the bar. Nothing will bring housewives into the lounge or shush the pub into complete silence quite like the theatre of the penalty shootout, no matter who's playing. No one can be apathetic about the penalty shootout

It's as if for just those few seconds a player's soul is laid bare for the entire world to see. The camera pans in and we can clearly see the hesitancy and heroics, the expectation and exultation, the self-doubt or self-glorification, the uncertainty and relief or disappointment.

Nothing matches the thrill!

The World Cup Final has twice been decided on penalties, with Brazil seeing off Italy in 1994 and Italy beating France in 2006. In June 2007 England and the Netherlands went head-to-head in an U21 European Championship match with each team taking 16 penalties until the Dutch returned home the victors with a score of 13-12.

Over the last few years countless people have debated the penalty shootout; A.S. Bryant, writing in The Observer stated, "One does not remember the winners. One remains haunted by the losers." Terry Venables has argued that, "Penalties put too much strain on one player. It could ruin his career if he's not a strong character," and having watched Kai take a penalty from time to time, not always successfully, I can attest to the fact that it's no easy feat on the parents of an 9-year-old either.

Former Italian player, Roberto Baggio, said, "It affected me for years. It is the worst moment of my career. I still dream about it. If I could erase a moment, it would be that one."

Former Brazilian goalkeeper, Claudio Taffarel, "Penalty kicks don't necessarily mean the best team came out on top." Peter Shilton, "The main factor in a penalty shootout is luck. You need to stay calm and focussed but the biggest thing you need is luck." Alex Smith, former Manager of Aberdeen, "Penalty shootouts have nothing to do with football. It's like shooting poor wee ducks at a fairground."

Former French Player, Laurent Blanc, "Penalties are awful, unfair, but what else is there?"

I don't necessarily agree with all of these statements, but indeed what alternative does Blatter have in mind? How about Rock, Paper, Scissors? You could have John Terry and Philipp Lahm play Rock, Paper, Scissors in the middle of the pitch. I mean the game starts with a toss of the coin that none of the fans see so why not finish with something nobody can see either? In fact, instead of tossing a coin why don't they spoof to see who wins the choice of which end to attack or whether to kick-off? That would be more interesting well, at least for the two captains and the ref.

But if Blatter doesn't want a penalty shootout, and Rock, Paper, Scissors is too private and thus open to claims of possible collusion or even corruption, maybe all 22 players could play Musical Chairs. They bring 21 chairs onto the pitch, play some daft music, and when it stops everyone races to sit

down in one of the chairs. The player without a chair is red-carded, and so on. Can you imagine Wayne Rooney playing Musical Chairs in the middle of a football pitch to decide the winner of the Champions League final?

I've got a better one; they carry on with the game, but play Musical Statues as well. Whenever the music stops all players have to freeze, and if any player doesn't stop playing fast enough he's red-carded. If he's just crossed the ball he's allowed to place his foot back down on the floor, but then has to freeze. The temptation to move as a striker's being fed a good through-ball from midfield would be overwhelming, but in Musical Statues he'd have to suddenly freeze. Likewise for a goalie as a ball rolls slowly towards his net. If the music stops then so must he, and watch in agony as the ball rolls in. How's that for drama?

No, no, wait, no, wait! I've got it. You get 11 of the fattest and drunkest supporters from each side and sit them on the subs bench with a can of Special Brew each. The game progresses into extra time but with one drunken fatty on the pitch instead of a regular player from the first team. Every three minutes another sub is made on each side, until after 33 minutes you've got 22 overweight pisseheads on the pitch, smoking fags and supping from cans of lager. Another three minutes of play should decide the winner.

And if there's still a draw after that, well how about a penalty shootout?

..... but with the pisseheads taking the penalties. And this is how they do it. Remember those 18-30 holidays we all used to go on to Benidorm or Lloret de Mar when we were 17? On the beach they'd get you to down some crazy cocktail consisting of Well, everything I suppose. You then had to place your forehead on a pole stuck in the sand, move around it five times and then race a bunch of other wrecked 18-30ers to the sea. You could see the ocean, but you could never quite make it there.

Well you do the same for the penalty shootout. Get the penalty taker – who's completely Janet Street Portered to start off with – to neck this wild cocktail, spin around the wooden pole as many times as he can manage and then aim himself at the ball on the penalty spot.

You could even get the goalie spinning round and round and round and round before trying to save the penalty.

Sepp Blatter may well be onto something.