
Pro Rege

Volume 48
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue 2019*

Article 13

December 2019

Level Bs

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Recommended Citation

Elgersma, Bill (2019) "Level Bs," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 48: No. 2, 19 - 24.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol48/iss2/13

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Level Bs

Bill Elgersma

The loading zone on the north side of the Recreation Center crawls with activity. A hound quietly growls, the relief valve for the air brakes routinely exploding as it waits for its load. The players arrive like ants from various parts of the campus, meandering toward the bus while the manager scrambles to ensure everything is in the cargo bays. Several women carry pillows and blankets and backpacks loaded with books—homework to do on the trip—while the less diligent carry food, snacks, and movies.

“Bibs, bags, balls, med kit?”

My manager, T, looks at me and says, “Check, check, check, and check.” And then, “Oh, I brought an ice chest. You want towels? Sounds like hot today,” as she tugs at her sweat-glued tee shirt.

I pause for a moment, “Yeah, pack some along. It can’t hurt. Thanks.”

Scanning the cargo bays, I see a mountain of black bags. Some have stuffed animals or ribbons attached for quick retrieval. Others, nothing at all, and those players have to wait until the end to identify theirs. I take my bag with an orange Netherlands scarf tied to it and throw it in the driver’s bay so I don’t have to be in the sorting party.

At precisely 2 p.m., I take my seat in the front, to the driver’s right, and call out to Angie, an accounting major, “Ange, how many?”

Accounting majors are good to have on a team. They will make their living crunching numbers, and continued employment will be dictated by the attention to detail and accuracy. I rely on that understanding and so does the rest of the team. We get on the bus; Ange does a head count; we leave. Once we are on the bus, everyone has a bus buddy, so a second accountability system comes into play, but she is my go-to. We all understand

that no one wants an English major to ensure an accurate count.

I don’t have a litany of rules, but a critical one that all understand is: *Don’t be late. We will leave without you.* The team hears this at the introductions-and-survival meeting that begins the season. I have explained the theory that suggests chronically late people are both selfish and ego-centric. Wherever they are, they are too important to leave that group, and wherever they are going, they are too important for that group to start without them. Nope. Nope. And nope. For those whose brains have been conditioned to stop listening the moment an adult speaks, waking up to the sound of the bus passing their dorm window and realizing they are no longer traveling that day has them reflecting on what the theory suggests. It only happens once....

“Twenty-one, Coach!” Ange calls from the back of the bus, and I say thanks and tell the driver he can go. Someone is missing. I am supposed to have twenty-two, but that isn’t my problem. However, the team also knows the number isn’t right, and as we are passing the Ford dealership north of town, Weez calls out from the back of the bus, “TC overslept on her nap. Just woke up!”

The driver looks over his right shoulder at me with his raised eyebrows silently asking the question. I shake my head, “Just keep driving.” And pull my shoogily-soft, purple bus blanket over me and contort my body in an effort to find comfortable sleep.

We will travel four hours, get out, warm up, play, shower, eat, get back on the bus, and do a head count; we should be home by 1 am. By having the pizzas delivered to the bus, I can cut the trip down by 90 minutes. But there will be a revolt. The worst part of this job isn’t the training, the discipline, or the bad games: it’s the food. I

learned a long time ago that the group will never be happy with what they are fed, so I look to a 60 percent satisfaction rate. If I can keep that many happy, we are okay. We dine on sack lunches going there and pizza coming back. By the time the season is done, this group won't touch pizza for a semester. The brown bags—forever. If the game is early afternoon and we get back to campus at a decent hour, I occasionally deviate from the menu, but that opens a completely new can of worms relative to selection and budget, so it doesn't happen often. My rebuttal to their complaints? "At least I feed you" and go on to explain that the former coach of one of our opponents would not feed her team when they lost. For just a moment I look like both Santa Claus and Pooh Bear—a *heart so big you can fall in it*. But only for the briefest of moments.

Thirty years of coaching covers a lot of games, too many games to keep things straight except perhaps the most hilarious or traumatic events. Television sports programs feature pivotal games from the '70s, '80s, '90s. Fanatics talk about the Bears/Packers games, but I don't remember much with my teams. Sure, I remember Morty stopping to pull his shorts back up before scoring when an opponent, diving outstretched in a desperate effort to deter him, pulled them down as he burst out on a break away, and I remember a black lab coming out of the trailer court on Becky's break away. A brilliant attacker, she put three moves on that dog, successfully shifting him on the first two, but in the end, he anticipated the fake and won the ball. She came off the field in a storm of angry tears, and it didn't get better when I wondered out loud if I should get that mutt a jersey as a fan dragged it back to its owner.

Another time, Junkie got cart-wheeled as he went up for a head ball, and as he lay in a motionless heap, I walked across the field toward him, trying to figure out the word choice in the phone call to his parents if his neck was broken. A heart-wrenching call at 3 a.m. from a player who had just lost a parent, ambulances, helicopters, stitches, the singular scream of a torn ACL—I remember those incidents in games. Not much else.

But even as I squinch around in my seat on this Hound, attempting to get some bus sleep, which isn't so much sleep as a stupefied state induced by road vibrations and the lulling hum

of the diesel, I consider how much has changed in our team travel. Life doesn't get much better than a Hound. I have my group housed in one space with everything from movies, to wif, to a toilet—almost a tiny home. And I am not driving. No adventure here. Mostly the drivers know their way, and except for a defroster failure in North Dakota that left the coaching staff steadily hand-wiping condensation off the inside of the driver's-side windshield in five-minute shifts for 90 miles in driving rain so we could get back to our motel, everything has been easy.

The world looks different when you and a student are the drivers and Dordt owns the vehicles. Don't get me wrong: there is nothing wrong with the vehicles. They are safe, reliable, and well-maintained when they leave the motor pool. But as drivers with a few miles on them know, not everything can be controlled on a journey—and those memories will never show up on a highlight reel.

In the middle '90s, the men's side played in a conference in Minneapolis—about a four-hour drive. We didn't like that conference much because they had arranged the schedule in such a way that all the midweek games had us missing class to travel to the Cities, and they came to us on the weekend. But there were not many teams to play at that time, so we had to accept it. What compounded their disdain for us was the perception that our team was receiving huge scholarships. To be fair, about four players received \$500 per year to play soccer, so there were scholarships—hardly huge—but that did not keep us from being the target of their antipathy and consequent aggression. Our membership in that conference ended when I refused to play a seminary a second time in the season because in our previous game, one of their zealots had shouted, "I come in the name of the Lord," and knocked my player unconscious. Really? But while we were part of it, significant memories were made.

On a Wednesday morning in mid-October, as bean dust from the combines frantically scurrying about the fields saturated the air, we had two vans loaded with 11 members each to play in the Cities. At this point in the history of team travel, cell phones and GPS did not exist. A road atlas was essential, and a two-way radio was desirable but not always available—for direction and communication. Sometimes the radios were being used

by other teams, so on more than one occasion, the second van would pull up 10 minutes before game time. I learned to place a keeper in each van.

The beauty of vans is their independence—the ability to weave in and out of traffic at a good clip, but on this day, that was not the case. Road construction on I-35 had one side of the Interstate closed, with two-way traffic flowing steadily on the other. It wasn't horrible, a steady 55-mph bumper to bumper; we would be on time.

Shortly before Burnsville, an oncoming dump truck passed us, and I heard this sound, somehow both familiar but also out of place. When safety glass breaks, it doesn't sound like the breaking of window glass; it has a slushy, cascading sound. I looked in my side mirror to see a shower of diamonds raining from my van. The truck had thrown a rock from its dualies and caught our back side-glass in just the right spot to shatter it and expose two rows of players. It was just like having rolldown windows, I suppose, except vans don't have rolldown back windows.

What to do? We are in the flow of traffic with no place to stop, and what would I do if I did stop, call maintenance? Go to a body shop? Not like anyone is going to have a side glass waiting for me. I check to see if everyone is okay, and the response comes back, "A little drafty, but other than that we are fine." So I drive on.

One of the great rewards of coaching is observing creativity, and this group rose to the occasion. When the road construction has ended and we have two lanes in one direction, I begin to receive looks, not glances, from drivers who pull up beside me. Although I may be a somewhat aggressive driver, I typically behave with the team, so I know it isn't me. Then I check the rearview mirror. Those closest to the missing window have taken to waving at the people beside them with their hand outside of the van—sort of in the beef or pork queen fashion in the local parades—elbow elbow, wrist wrist. I say nothing and drive on.

As we get closer to the park, traffic slows to about 15mph, and I glance in the mirror again to find they have lined up and are now rowing the van forward—canoe style. I don't remember the game, but the ride home was cold.

Those stories continue to pile up through the decades, but the memory indelibly stamped in my mind, the most vivid one that returns without ef-

fort, comes from the first year of being the head coach.

In the history of the college, the hockey and soccer teams were the two most reviled by maintenance. Neither team deliberately damaged the vehicles, but when they came back dirty and reeking of sweaty bodies, no one really wanted to claim them. So, when a van comes back missing a side back glass, and the coach tells you that a dump truck threw a rock through it, "yeah, right" is a fairly typical response. Combining that with the odiferous stench that emanated from that van after returning to Dorcht, despite having open-air ventilation all the way home, didn't change things. We were not well received. The truth of the matter was most of the teams in the Minnesota conference did not have home fields, so we played in city parks. If the park was upscale, a spot-a-pot might be on site, but locker room and showers, not so much. So, we would arrive at the parking lot, and the team would jump out and proceed to strip down and pull on their uniforms for all the world to see. A devoted mother who weekly traveled five hours to see her son play in the Cities, once remarked, "I have seen more teenage butts than their mothers!" I didn't think much about it at the time.

But that explained the physical and odiferous state of the vans when they arrived back in 51250. If it rained, we had no place to shower off the mud and grass, and if we sweated, same lake, different boat. So, maintenance strategically assigned us the oldest, most road-worn vans in the pool. Vinyl seats, rubber floor mat—industrial grade. Give the bottom feeders the appropriate steed. I suppose the team could have been insulted, but they weren't. They were soccer players, not prom dates, and besides, you can't break what is already broken, so those vans were sort of their playpen. They ran, and that was all we needed. In some ways, we complemented each other. We were sort of the no-chrome model of an athletic team, who enjoyed great success on the field where it mattered. Everything else was small potatoes.

That changed one afternoon. Upon arriving to pick up the vans for that Wednesday foray up North, I glanced at the envelop to see the van number was unfamiliar. I didn't think much about it, but I was puzzled as I wandered out of the building, looking for the vehicle. The vehicles

were neatly lined up, and I had to look at the color listed on the envelope—Champagne—to sort out which one was ours. Okay ... not sure what Champagne looks like, but it was not Dordt Ford van grey, so I had narrowed it down. One more scan down the line, and there before me was this glistening Champagne, I guess, van. Brand new. Like nubbies-on-the-tires, no bugs in the grill, brand new. I looked back at the building to see if someone was messing with me, but no one was around. This was for real. We got the new van!

The excitement was real for about 30 seconds until horror set in. I had been silently annoyed by the lack of respect subtly given us through van selection and knew we deserved better. Be careful what you wish for! Now, not only was I responsible for my team, but I was also responsible for a pristine vehicle. Unlocking the door, I was met with the new-car smell, that glorious scent that just might have a greater effect on males than Clinique's *Happy*. As I slid into the seat, cloth, not vinyl, greeted the bare skin of my legs. Cloth! No singe of flesh from vinyl seats in a sun-baked van. No back sweat glued to the seat, needing to be peeled away to get out. Next, I noticed the carpeting on the floor and had to take a moment. I must have whimpered. Someone had assigned us the newest van in the fleet—3,000 miles on it! I put the key in the ignition and went to pick up the team. Then the realist in me arose—this story could not have a happy ending.

As I waited for the team to load, the group that typically did not travel with me, juniors and seniors, pulled rank and went for the new van. I don't know how the food chain works, but clearly, new van trumped driver selection, so the group that usually traveled with the manager was with me, while he took the rest—in one of the grey ghosts.

Shortly after we left town on that early October day, the rain began, one of those soaking rains atypical to prairies, which doesn't strike hard and then blow to the next state. When these arrive, they decide they like the area and hang around for a while, thoroughly saturating the ground and making harvesting impossible for a week. We had rain throughout the game, and it was still coming down as we turned the vans homeward. I had made the team strip in the parking lot and put all wet clothes in a garbage bag to protect the van.

Although it was going to stink, the guys were reasonably clean, so we were in good shape. They settled in and went to sleep.

Sometimes the manager drove for me while I rode shotgun and prepped for class the next day, and one of the seniors drove the other van. This was the case that night. By the time we hit Highway 60, it was around 11p.m., and Case was tired. Four hours of driving in the rain after being soaked at the game is just not fun. So he turned to me and said, "Coach, I know a short-cut."

"Sure," I replied, although I had lived in the area long enough to know most short-cuts but maybe not this one.

He turned off on a road I didn't recognize and proceeded west. The other van was probably a half mile behind us. Between the darkness and the rain, I couldn't make out the road, but west is west, and this is Iowa, and it was paved, so we were fine. I went back to prepping.

One of the great things about Iowa roads is the Transportation Department's awareness of the ineptitude of drivers. Along with puzzling signs like Hidden Driveway and Do Not Pass, they decided to put rumble strips on roads when drivers are approaching stop signs. Unlike the mystery behind a Hidden Driveway—how would I ever find a hidden driveway, or am I being let in on a secret?—rumble strips are synonymous with, "Hey dough-head, wake up! There is a stop sign coming." And we innately register these, over time. That poor-man's massage is what drew my eyes from my books to the glare of the yellow sign in front of me.

Yellow signs sport a variety of messages, but the color dictates more than anything—Caution. As in, *something aint quite right and you better to be on your toes*. The sign had a simple T on it—the 19th letter of the alphabet, but we are not doing alphabet games here. What that means in this part of the country is "the road stops." This is a tee intersection. The. Road. Stops. But Case is not slowing down. I look over, and he's not sleeping. Then I see the sign beyond the tee, another yellow one that says Level B, and beyond it I see a glossy path the width of a vehicle that disappears into the night.

"Case," I yell, "that's a Level B!" but he never turns his head.

Staring out of the windshield while gripping

the steering wheel, he says, "Too late now coach. We're going for it," and that brand-new-smelling, cloth-seat-massaging, nubby-tired, glistening, champagne-colored vehicle launches off the pavement and onto the Level B.

For those who are unaware of this classification of road because they exist in very few places in North America, in Canada they might be known as mud roads, and in the States, they are dirt roads that the dictionary states, "[receive] a lesser level of maintenance." Essentially, that means someone made a shortcut on a ribbon of dirt long enough to pack it down and turn it into a reasonably passable surface as long as snow or rain are not in the forecast. Level Bs do not get plowed in the winter, and the clay that supports the tractors and trucks is just fine until it gets saturated with rain. At that point it can become gumbo of the slickest kind. Ours was of the slickest kind.

At this point, the van is awake and watching as we proceed to float, not drive, on this river of mud. Clay does not let water seep, so everything that stays on the surface becomes a soupy adhesive, and we are about 100 hundred feet in by the time the glue absorbs the van. Once the mud has stopped our forward motion, Case's first reaction is to grab to the radio to warn the other van, whose lights are not yet in sight.

He shouts into the two-way, "Save yourself while you can!"

Then, in a moment of naïve optimism, he puts the vehicle in reverse. He's a city kid; he doesn't know Level Bs. The rear wheels spin, and the van moves sideways instead of backward. I tell him to stop. No sense going into the semblance of a ditch. That might be worse than the road.

By now, the second van has arrived and is parked in the tee intersection with the high beams trained on our marooned ship. Tim is driving, and he is reasonably local. That means he knows this attempted shortcut was a bad, bad idea. And he subtly retaliates on the upper classmen for leaving him with the freshmen when he instructs his group to stay in the van. They are spectators.

Initially, I think we need a tractor, but as I look out into the soggy blackness, I can't see any lights. Farmers, like chickens, are asleep by 11 pm. The news, weather, and farm reports have long gone off the air, and morning comes early. So I tell the boys they have to push. As they pile out of the

van, Case once more reaches for the 2-way and mutters, "I have never been so embarrassed in all my life."

It takes about 30 minutes to get the van back to the road. Most of the group pushes while four of them keep it centered in this greasy mess, and Case contributes by showering them all with mud from the frantically spinning back wheels. As they push, some of the guys lose footing and fall face-first, laughing as they get up to join in again. This might be the highlight of their month. I sit shotgun, wondering how the Athletic Director is going to tell me I'm fired. Brand new van, spotless, cloth interior. One season ... short career.

Once we get back on the black top, I get out to look. The falling mud reminds me of National Geographic scenes where chunks fall away from icebergs. Nothing is neatly running off the Champagne paint: the accumulation of mud slowly succumbs to gravity and plops to the ground. I groan. At this point Tim has backed up far enough to put his high beams on the group who were pushing, and I look in horror. They are slathered in mud. I think about the cloth seats, the carpeted floors, and tell them to strip. Nine naked guys standing in the rain at a tee intersection on the back roads of Iowa under the high beams of a Ford van, attempting to flush off mud in the rain. Looks like a really low-budget movie. They pull out whatever is semi clean from the game and proceed to sponge bath. No one has soap, but the rain is doing an adequate job, and, in time, only a film of mud is left. They think it's hilarious. I wonder if I can get to the border before the college finds out. They cover the seats with whatever is clean to protect them and climb back in. The rest of the ride home is noisy; they are wide awake, and the birth of a game called Summer/Winter occurs.

Nights get chilly at this time of year, and after this mud bath with a rain rinse, their teeth are chattering as they climb in wearing nothing but a smile. "Turn on the heat, Case!" and the heaters run full blast to warm them back up. After a little while they are hot, and someone from the back calls out, "Open the windows and turn on the A/C," and the game is on. They sit there until the cold is unbearable, and then they go back to heat. And then repeat the cycle. The ride home went quickly but that game lasted for years.

Back on campus, once everyone has gathered

their belongings and disappeared back to their rooms, I look at the van again. Sure, the rest of the trip has removed some of the mud, but the wheel wells are packed, and the rims full. It's 1 a.m., and I sludge to the car wash. Twenty bucks and one hour later I decide that I can't flush more off the undercarriage. A backhoe may be needed to clear what I have left in their bay. The worst of it is gone, but I know there is mud in places that my power washer is not going to reach. I also know I have to teach in the morning, so I park the van and head home.

No one said anything. When I went to training the next afternoon, I parked beside it, and the champagne sparkled in the sun. I noticed some mud balls had dropped from various points around the van, a little like the outlined shape of a victim on a tv program, but not a word. Still uneasy, I watched that van and waited. It dropped mud for three weeks before I stopped seeing evidence of the Level B.

Whether the group thought it was a routine road trip and didn't realize I was making too much of the incident or knew this was trouble and not something to be mentioned, I don't know, but the only time it came up was at the awards banquet the team holds at the end of the season.

With a nod to creativity and counter-culture, the awards are always named after specific incidents that occur in the season, and all are inside jokes. There are no traditional awards like most valuable players, most improved, defensive or offensive, or most sportsmanlike of the year. Instead, these awards are truly reflective of the cohesive nature of the team and its chemistry. They love to laugh, and they know what is funny, and the only time a person is singled out beyond the team is when the extra-ordinary not-related-to-the-game occurs. This year there is one I understand: Case receives the Level B award.

I feel the vibrations lessen and hear the growl of the Hound change pitch as the transmission kicks down a gear. I open my eyes to see the stop light and the lit-up Casey's and Hardees' signs that greet me. I look at my phone. 1:15 AM. The driver turns on the lights, and the group begin to wrap up their blankets and load their back packs. There was no drama; there was little noise on the trip home. Some spent the entire trip on their phones with persons far removed from this team, from this college. Others have had their lights on, studying for big tests and doing homework, while others have simply slept. And I have not given any of it a thought. Things have changed.