

States of the Union

EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT STREAKING

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

STREAKERS HAVE invaded the Walter Cronkite show, the Johnny Carson show, the Oscar awards, and the Yankees' home opener. In my town they have been arrested in forests and along state highways. The high school principal, a tweedy fellow, has threatened to suspend anyone caught naked on school grounds.

Many parents, educators and clothing manufacturers are worried. Some insist that streaking constitutes an even more sinister threat to our way of life than whispering in the classroom or smoking in the john. Others fear a dangerous ideological showdown between Karl Marx and Hart, Schaffner & Marx. Will our children seize the former while shedding the latter?

There is plainly a need for mature understanding and endless discussion. Herewith, for the use of local police departments and PTA panels, some background notes on streaking:

Etiology—In dreams begin streakings, and for most of us that is where the matter ends. But not for Arthur Symons, the English symbolist who suffered periodic bouts of

insanity. Here is Symon's awkward vision of streaking: "Life is a dream in the night, a fear among fears;/ A naked runner lost in a storm of spears." It is probably just as well that students do not read Arthur Symons these days.

Streaking dreams are advertised by Revlon and Chanel. We had similar fantasies in the '50s, but they were half-hearted, and left us with the gloomy feeling that our Krafft was ebbing. *I dreamt I went shopping in my Maidenform bra*—a paltry hallucination. Today's youth watches TV commercials in which a handsome boy and a beautiful girl float in slow-motion toward passionate embrace across a green never-never land. Only the regulations of the Federal Communications Commission prevent the models from disrobing.

Genetics—Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* has become a standard wedding text, and Gibran was a born streaker. Many of the parents of today's streaking children took Gibranish vows. "He who wears his mortality but as his best garment were better naked," Gibran obscurely warned. This sort of thinking

has worked into the children's genes.

In another place Gibran instructed streakers how to behave in a group: "When one of you falls down he falls for those behind him, a caution against the stumbling stone. Ay, and he falls for those ahead of him, who though faster and surer of foot, yet removed not the stumbling stone." It is a key passage in the annals of streaking. Just the other day a young streaker said to me, "I wish the fellows up ahead would remove those stumbling stones." "Ay," I answered, "they remove them not."

Etymology—According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the verb "streak" derives from the Teutonic prefix "streig-," which means "stroke, rub or press." This will come as good news to the prurient, who equate streaking with mere exhibitionism—"the compulsive exposure of the sexual organs in public." But puritans are silent on the subject of *joyful* exposure of same. Besides, various "streig-" mutations have given us such words as "strike" (streaking for protest?), "restrict" (streaking for discipline?) and "prestige" (streaking for sta-

tus?). There is little agreement, in short, on why children streak or whether they ought to.

Psychiatry—The best guess is that streaking is vaguely therapeutic, like a whirlpool bath or hot milk. We have, for example, testimony from Dr. Dick Diver, the melancholy psychiatrist in Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*. Dr. Diver had a patient "who thought that if he could walk unclothed and unmolested from the Etoile to the Place de la Concorde he would solve many things—and perhaps, Dick thought, he was quite right." Fitzgerald was on to something here, but he failed to follow through.

Exegesis — Actually, streaking seems less an expression of neurosis than of innocence. The game was invented in Eden: "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed." Shame rushed in as soon as Eve bit the apple and slipped into something uncomfortable. It is hard to streak while a fig leaf—the deciduous conscience of the race—keeps slapping one's thighs.

The rest of the Bible has little to say on the subject. Job observes that he has come naked into the world and will go out the same way, an apparent suggestion that he is streaking through life. Matthew, on the other hand, praises apparel:

"For I was . . . naked, and ye clothed me."

Paganism—There was a time when all serious streakers were pagans. Among the Norse, men raced naked in competition for brides; to the fleetest went the fairest. Every Anglo-Saxon language, notes Sir James G. Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, "possesses in common a word for marriage which means simply bride-race." Ours is "nuptials."

Lycurgus, king of Sparta, ordered virgin girls "to exercise themselves in running, wrestling, and throwing quoits and darts." And, adds Plutarch, "he accustomed the virgins occasionally to be seen naked as well as the young men, and to dance and sing in their presence. . . ." Plutarch assures us that "there was nothing disgraceful in it, because everything was conducted with modesty, and without one indecent word or action."

The Athenians, meanwhile, were streaking happily at Olympia and winning trophies from the gods. The Greek word *gymnas*, whence comes "gymnast," means "one who exercises naked." All of which explains why the Christians, during the reign of Theodosius II, journeyed to Olympia and dismantled the Temple of Zeus.

Politics—We hear nothing more

about streaking until the 11th century, when Lady Godiva got on her horse and cantered through Coventry. Her husband, the Earl of Mercia, had ordered the streak in protest against excessive taxes, and it worked: The taxes were lowered. (Everyone in town that morning had closed his shutters and forborne peeping at the lady—except a fellow named Tom.)

Lady Godiva's successful tax protest raises questions about the politics of streaking. Why didn't the American colonists simply streak through Boston instead of dumping tea and starting a revolution. And why did it not occur to President Nixon, in his hassle with the Internal Revenue Service, to put Pat upon a white motorcycle and send her streaking down Pennsylvania Avenue?

Similarly, Nixon might have nipped the Watergate weed in the bud had he agreed with Congreve that "To go naked is the best disguise"; or, reacting to crimes committed by his aides, had he adopted Emilia's streak-scheme in *Othello*: "O heaven! that such companions thou'dst unfold,/And put in every hand a whip/To lash the rascals naked through the world. . . ."

In sum, I trust I have proven to everyone's satisfaction that there is less to streaking than meets the eye.

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