

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

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HYPOTHETICAL HOMELESS OLYMPICS

Redefining “Dumpster Diving”: Is it a sport or a crime?

By Wanda Sue Parrott

THINKING about the forthcoming Olympics in Rio on Aug. 5–21 led to comparing Olympians’ athleticism, strength and grit to homeless persons, and wondering: *If Monterey were to stage its own form of special Homeless Olympics, which category would win the Gold, Silver, and Bronze medals: divers, cyclists, or beach volleyball players?*

The answer seemed obvious. Gold would go to the divers—meaning, dumpster divers also known internationally as “garbage pickers” and “trash fishers.” Such scavengers can be found at all hours of night and day, digging through refuse like legendary treasure hunters of old.

This photo of a European man filling his bicycle basket with valuables people cast away is similar to local homeless survivalists who raid trash containers in my neighborhood during evening hours every week.

I am in awe of their skills. The closest I have come to trash picking for food was by boosting a bowl of salsa a patron left in Jose’s Mexican restaurant in Seaside the same night the Seaside City Council inspired me to consider a hypothetical Homeless Olympics.

During its June 2 meeting, the council was discussing a change of rate for city-wide garbage-collection and councilman Dave Pacheco asked about the legality of trash picking. Aha! This column was born!

The Peninsula’s After-Sunset Scavengers

On Monday nights, scavenging men glide through my neighborhood like silent, shadowy super-sized urban raccoons making their rounds.

They are equipped with boxes, baskets, trailers, or large trash bags for collecting their bounty from containers that owners have wheeled from their private property onto public curbsides for Tuesday-morning pick up.

A typical trash picker wears gloves, carries a flashlight or has a headlamp attached to his cap, which frees both hands while the beam shines into the depths of the trash container through which he dexterously

rummages and then moves on. These men are fleet-footed, sinewy, swift and seem to vanish like raccoons slipping into stormwater drains.

Conversely, women trash pickers are more visible, appearing on well-lit streets that house fast-food restaurants. They push shopping carts filled with plastic trash bags and may wear knitted stocking caps and heavy overcoats even in warm weather.

I watched a barefoot woman in Seaside work as a trash picker. She wore dirty shorts under an overcoat while bare-handedly pulling chicken skin and bones from a trash can.

Dumpster Diving In A Nutshell

Various online legal sources define Dumpster Diving as “the act of scavenging or foraging through other people’s trash or garbage in order to obtain discarded materials, goods or information.”

A “dumpster diver” dives into a sea of garbage the way a swimmer dives into a pool of water. Treasure hunters are the grandparents, hypothetically speaking, of today’s dumpster divers.

Back in the 1960s, a Monterey art lover worked as a trash collector under the business name Good Old Roy. He went through garbage his clients paid him to haul to the dump. Roy salvaged so much good stuff that he ran a high-end antiques and collectables business from his home-gallery near Cannery Row.

A Sport Or A Crime?

Today, dumpster diving is often aimed at stealing people’s identities (i.e., identity theft), which is a definite crime even if the act that leads to procuring such information is not.

Dumpster diving is generally considered legal if people rummage through trash that has been left in a public area such as a curb for pickup. Once the garbage is placed in such a place, the owner has basically forfeited his or her ownership rights to the items now in the public domain.

If a dumpster or trash container is in an enclosed area or on private property, a person could be cited for trespass or even for theft if they try to rummage through the garbage.

My neighbors and I hang our recyclable bottles in plastic bags on fence posts, to help our homeless trash pickers earn a few cents per bottle. We put FREE signs on giveaway items we place for pickup by the curb instead of in containers, which is legal.

As hype about the Olympics in Rio increases as the dates of August 5-21 come closer, the question continues: Is dumpster diving a sport? The same could be asked about cycling and beach volleyball.

Pastor Jim Nelson, executive director of Pass the Word Ministry, serves the homeless and hungry. He lives in Seaside, where his backyard is full of donated bicycles. After repair, the bikes will be given to homeless men who attend his Saturday morning “Breakfast in the Park” beach services at Lake El Estero, Monterey.

To date, more than 329 bicycles have gone to homeless men for whom cycling is more than a mere sport; it’s a life-and-dignity saver and, therefore, winner of the hypothetical Homeless Olympics Silver Medal.

That leaves beach volleyball as the Bronze Medal winner. Right? Visit Windows on the Bay and you be the judge!

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