CASPER STAR-TRIBUNE, OCT 26, 1997

Vanessa Hastings

STAR-TRIBUNE

Bingo: Harmful to your health?

Many games and sports require players to perform under intense pressure. One such game may prove too much for some: Bingo.

I had my first bingo experience a couple years ago. Home from college for Christmas break, I decided to take my dad and his girlfriend up on their invitation to play at the Sheridan Veterans of Foreign Wars.

I envisioned a room full of sweet grandma types calling out "Bingo!" in frail voices. I imagined they chatted about their gardens and whispered and giggled about the elderly bachelor at the end of the table. I figured I was in for a mellow evening.

I was wrong.

When I walked in the door, the tension was as thick as the cigarette smoke. As we stood in line waiting to shell out $40 apiece for our games, I scanned the room.

In one corner, people were urgently loading down paper plates with every kind of artery-clogging food imaginable: fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, potato chips, pie. It was the quest for bingo sustenance.

Others were at their seats, performing pre-game ceremonies sure to bring luck, and strategically placing their cards and "daubers" – bingo lingo for oversized markers.

I took my seat next to my dad, who sat next to his girlfriend. Suddenly, the older ladies across the table who seemed to be friends almost came to blows. One had tried to move the other's cards over slightly. Apparently, touching another's Bingo gear is a huge no-no.

"What the (bleepity-bleep) do you think you're doing?" the offended yelled shrilly.

"Uh, sorry ..." stuttered the offender as she shrank into her seat. "Geez."

I was making sure I had enough room to escape when my cousin showed up. Relief washed over me but soon dissipated. This woman – who used to invite me to hang out with her at the Sturgis Bike Rally – was toting around her own personalized bingo bag full of daubers. And she had a strange I-want-to-win-at-all-costs look in her eye. That's when I realized she was hardcore.

We settled in to play. I soon detected a constant murmur beneath the announcer's monotone:

"B-14 ..."

"Dammit!"

"N-38 ..."

"I'm on. Are you on?"

And eventually,

"G56"

"BINGO!"

A collective grumble floated up through the smoky haze, and the crumpling of paper spread across the room as players threw away cards full of bright dots and unfulfilled dreams. The winner gloated for a few seconds, and then it was time for the next game.

The pinnacle of the evening came when a disgruntled member of the Bingo Mafia, evidently attempting to make a statement, cracked glass in the VFW's front door in a BB gun drive-by shooting. Players were genuinely concerned for about two minutes, but their thoughts quickly returned to more pressing matters. There was bingo to play.

Before the night ended I discovered my dad's girlfriend is the Queen of Bingo. We were nearing the final and most profitable game and she had yet to bingo. She was getting antsy, muttering profanities under her breath sporadically. However, she persevered and bingoed on the jackpot, winning enough money to take us out to dinner and then some.

Thank God – who knows what chaos, death and dismemberment would have ensued otherwise.

After that night I swore I would never go to bingo again, especially with members of my own family. I had my own safety to think about.

But now that I live in Casper, only two hours from Sheridan, I am filled with fear. I can feel their burning eyes as they look toward the horizon. My family members know uncharted bingo territory exists here.

And they know where to find me.

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Vanessa Hastings

STAR-TRIBUNE

Last of a dying breed

My grandmother is the last of a dying breed – the true cowboy.

To a "city" kid like me, the ranch she shares with her husband in the southwest corner of South Dakota seemed like a huge playground. There were pigs to chase, horses to pet and eggs to steal from protective hens. Caught up in mischief, I didn't give a thought to the 24-hour-a-day job ranching is.

I realized on a long overdue trip recently just how strong my grandma Marcelene is and how much she's endured over the years.

After a two-hour late-night drive I pull into the muddy lot where the old ranch house sits. A single yard light shines down on the barn, a large storage shed and trailer a few yards away. I can't see the buildings clearly, but I can tell they're a little worse for the wear.

Grandma greets me at the door, and I see the toll the place and its demands have taken on her. She holds my hand in her arthritis-gnarled fingers as she hobbles toward a chair. Hip-replacement surgery and bone spurs along her spine create constant pain, but she has places to go and things to do, and she's not about to let such a trifle as pain stop her.

I notice the lines in her tanned Lakota skin. As we talk into into the morning, I realize that laughing, more than the wind or the sun, has carved them.

At 4 a.m. I head for bed. Grandma decides to stay up, since this is her normal wakeup time.

"Got to get the coffee on," she says.

Two days later we drive 100 miles to Rapid City. Grandma, 73, makes this trip at least once a week to run errands for the ranch.

She gets up before the sun and prods me out of bed. Standing there in her polyester pants, flowered cotton shirt and sandals, she doesn't look like a rancher.

We climb into her used pickup and fly down worn dirt roads at 60 mph, past fields of frost. She points to the ditch where she spent a cold night years ago hanging upside down after she rolled her car. The seatbelt saved her but broke her hips.

Halfway to Rapid, the truck's alternator catches on fire. Grandma slowly and calmly steps out of the truck, opens the hood and smothers the flames with an old pillow. Someone stops and takes us into the nearest town, where she calls a tow truck and makes arrangements at the local garage for repairs. Before long, we're on our way, as though nothing happened.

When we arrive, our first chore is to drop off four truck tires for repair. Next, we stop at a lab, where we leave hay for testing. We hit several department stores, the grocery store and a farm equipment business. Then we manage to squeeze in lunch with my aunt and cousin. At sundown, we head home to fix minute steaks and fried potatoes for the ranch hands.

As we cruise through the Black Hills, I am exhausted. Grandma still has plenty of energy to spare.

"I don't know how you do it, Grandma," I say.

She looks at me with her pale blue eyes. "If I stopped, I would die," she replies.

I believe her.

As we pull up to the house, an oblivious Tom kitten – one of several who live on the ranch – stumbles into the path of the truck. Grandma doesn't see her.

"Aagghh!" I cry. "Watch out!"

Navigating deftly around the little beast, she tells me why she quit letting herself care for the sheep, cattle, dogs and other numerous animals long ago.

"It would hurt too much to get attached just to watch them die," she says.

And then I remember the day she gathered my cousins and me around to watch a fat ewe give birth. I remember her indifference and our tears when a ranch hand said the lamb was a breech and he would have to break its bones to get it out. Better to save one than lose both, Grandma explained later.

On the last night of my trip, I lie in bed thinking about Grandma, about how she doesn't drive a shiny, new truck, or wear fancy Roper boots, Wrangler jeans or even a hat.

Grandma is the toughest, most independent woman I know. She's also the truest cowboy I know.

CASPER STAR-TRIBUNE, JUNE 27, 1999

Vanessa Hastings

STAR-TRIBUNE

Free of the ivory ball and chain

Some things just aren't meant to be.

The gods made it clear that my engagement at age 20 would not blossom into blissful marriage, but failed to do so before my mother bought what became the most burdensome but beautiful dress I'd ever own.

The gods also decided that out of that concoction of satin, lace and beads I would never see the return of even half its cost.

It's been almost five years since I walked into that Laramie bridal shop.

"You know, you might want to go for ivory," said the sales lady with a bright smile. "Ivory looks best on brunettes, and white looks good on blondes and women with really dark hair."

"Mmmm," I grunted skeptically, wondering if "not-so-pure" was tattooed across my forehead.

But once I let her talk me into trying on this dress, with its form-fitting bodice coated with tiny, pearl-colored beads, and a heavy, shiny skirt that filled out into a train of delicate cutouts, I was in love with ivory, the garment and weddings.

A wedding, however, does not a marriage make. And we didn't even get that far to find out.

When I moved to Casper nearly two years ago, I decided that I could finally bear to look at my mother's $500 investment. Taking the dress out of the dry cleaner's specially sealed box, I had one thought.

"What the heck am I gonna do with this?"

I realized that even if I ever did lose my last shred of sanity and tie the knot, it wouldn't be in this dress. It had lost its luster in the shadow of that failed relationship.

At first I advertised in the classifieds. After a few calls, one diminutive woman (a blonde) came over to try it on. Though it fit her upper body and actually complemented her honey-toned hair, she would have needed six-inch spiked heels for the skirt to hang right.

No sale.

Determined to get rid of it without taking a total loss, I hauled the dress down to a consignment shop, where it's spent the last lonely year.

Recently, I submitted to the gods' will. Or rather, goodwill.

I almost felt like consoling the consignment shop employee, who seemed ready to cry when I shared my plans for the dress. "Oh, honey..." she trailed off repeatedly, wincing sympathetically in my direction as she wrestled it into a plastic bag.

As I later stood in line at the Salvation Army, the dress heavier in my arms than ever, I imagined one other alternative.

I'll wear it to work, I thought.

My co-workers can shove cake in my face to celebrate not getting married.

During break, my bosses can participate in the money dance; for anywhere from $1 to $20 they can take turns spinning me around the newsroom.

My peers can bring single-person gifts: TV dinners, towels monogramed with "Miss Hastings," and small microwave-safe dishes, instead of a crockpot.

And as deadline nears, perhaps I can talk the pressmen into becoming honorary nonbridesmaids. If I ask them nicely enough, they might carry my train as I transport a copy of the front page back to production, with the stipulation that they get to wipe as much ink on the satin as they want.

Afterward, I can take the whole staff out with the money dance moolah. At the bar, when other patrons ask if I just got married, I'll mess with their minds a little and say, "Huh? Are you crazy? What makes you say that?"

Back in the real world, another Salvation Army customer nudged his daughter out of the way and me out of my reverie so I could heave my ivory ball and chain onto the counter.

I abandoned my fantasy. Maybe this dress isn't meant for me, I thought, but it is for someone else.

"I have a donation," I said a little breathlessly.

"Thanks," said the cashier.

"No, thank you," I thought, as I headed — a little lighter — out into the rainy June day, a day fit for not getting married.

(Vanessa Hastings is an assistant wire editor at the Star-Tribune.)

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Vanessa Hastings

STAR-TRIBUNE

Returning to the last frontier

"God bless Wyoming,
and keep it wild."
– Helen Mettler, age 15,
last entry in her diary, 1925

The adage "You don't know what you've got until it's gone" fits moving away from Wyoming.

All through college I swore that upon graduating I would leave this state, a place I considered one of the most boring, lame places in America. A trip to see a friend in Portland, Ore., convinced me that the progressive, growing city would someday replace Wyoming as my home.

Six weeks of living there proved otherwise. Rain, smog, capable young adults begging for money on the streets, the fact that I couldn't afford to do anything fun – this and more pushed me out to a little town on the coast, where I worked for the local newspaper, and where I realized how much I missed home.

"So, do folks in Wyomin' say 'y'all' all the time?" fellow reporter Kelly asked in an exaggerated drawl, thinking she was extremely funny.

"Or how about 'rig.' Do people call their cars and trucks 'rigs'?" she asked, giggling.

"No," I said, rolling my eyes. "We actually still ride horses to work and school."

She actually may have believed me for a split second.

A little annoyed with her stereotypes, I tried to explain that many Wyomingites know how to use the Internet. Most even speak without Southern accents, I told her, and not everyone wears 10-gallon hats, cowboy boots and six-shooters.

And besides, "Wyoming is very beautiful," I said simply and rather defensively.

How surprising. Why had I let a stranger's comments about the state I supposedly loathed get under my skin? Was I suffering from Wyoming denial?

As I later walked along the beach in the chilly ocean breeze, oblivious to the spectacular sunset trying to warm my cheeks, I dwelled on my steadily, quietly growing yearning for Wyoming, despite my determination to become an Oregonian.

I actually missed driving long stretches of highway between towns, through country ranging from dry, high desert to endless green pastures to dark, looming mountains. I longed for the violent evening thunderstorms that followed steamy summer days, or burrowing under the covers all morning after a heavy snowfall.

The great appeal I saw in the anonymity of living in Oregon – the not knowing anyone and starting fresh – became a burden of loneliness. Former Gov. Mike Sullivan is fond of saying that Wyoming is small town with 300-mile long streets, and he's right; I had taken for granted the comfort of knowing at least one or two people in most of Wyoming's major towns, of possessing the ability to reach family in less than six hours.

The December day I returned home to Wyoming, the sun momentarily came out from behind a gray, wintry cloud just as I crossed the western border, and I took it as a sign that this is where I belong.

Today, I am in love again with Wyoming, its wild beauty and wide open spaces, its cleanliness, and the people, who still make eye contact without fear. I am not ashamed to admit that the thought of ever moving away and the encroaching population along the front range scare the hell out of me. Though I am proud of this state, I'm also selfishly possessive of it.

After all, this is it – the last frontier.