

Frank Mazer

## **Portsmouthcoaching**

I am on the edge. It's A January night in the U.K. It's a dark mass I see ahead of me. A few lights twinkling in the distance. I am at the edge of the sea staring through the windshield over the hood (bonnet) of my little red car. A small stone wall and a sudden dose of human sense is all that provoked me to hit the brakes rather than find myself briefly becoming part of the Royal Navy. Not that I lack any respect for the Royal Navy as a Yank aware of its heroism throughout World War 2 and with all due admiration of Admiral Nelson , Trafalgar and much more. It is just that I would rather not attempt to do an imitation of a British submarine, or an American spy sub for that matter, while seated in a fiat near the great harbor of Portsmouth.

I arrived here on the simplest of missions. I am working for a British Basketball league team. I am here to help coach their

“B” level team at an important game to take place in a large Leisure Center (sports hall to Americans) located in the harbor town of Portsmouth. I have driven here, to my near launching point by the sea, from Kingston –upon Thames located to the Southwest of London town. As is often the case in my months here, the drive has been an interesting one along motorways often through suburban areas and then past hilly tree lined fields and various towns. The wheels of the “team vehicle” have taken me rolling along smaller highways toward Portsmouth with forests lining roadsides and dusk descending as my headlights (headlamps) stab small beams into the big darkness of unfamiliar winding road space ahead. The car and I proceed slowly through patches of fog. It is as if I am smelling my way to the gymnasium like a bloodhound. I feel certain of my path because I am well equipped. The latest technology is my friendly guide.

My team has kindly given me a GPS motorway device which I shall refer to as a “Jane-Jane”. This is in honor of the lilting, smooth, female voice with what we yanks call an “English accent” firmly guiding me along. She pulls me along gently

with her arms of road wisdom taking me by the hips. Oh she has much to teach me. She knows the way. So it is that I throw myself into her arms as she intones to me gently and confidently “turn left 200 meters” or “enter the round-a-bout and turn at the second right”.

My team members have kindly explained to me the name and address of the sport hall in Portsmouth where I am to meet them at 8:00 p.m. for the start of the game. My day has been filled with presentations to several schools in the Surrey area. Now I am following my “Jane–Jane” to the Portsmouth gym. I’ve been to Portsmouth a year before as a tourist and I know it is a fine harbor city possessed of fascinating history and many an interesting ship both old or new.

In the dark which comes early on the winter evening I find myself being directed along a busy street with my companion sweetly telling me to turn at the next left. It seems odd to me to be turning into what appears to be an area of three and four story apartments and small shops on the corners. I proceed slowly along the two lane road. This is a rather typical road

of this sort , thus I have grown familiar with the vehicles parked blocking my lane as if they are part of a driving test to see if I can discern decoys from the real objects only temporarily stationed in my path. I sweep around one small parked truck (lorry) and then wait for the car coming from the opposite direction to grin its way past me. The voice of certainty and direction instructs me to turn left 100 meters. As I reach the turning point and follow her directions I begin to wonder if this is a short –cut of some sort. It appears to me to be an alleyway which is narrowing ahead as it proceeds along a darkened path only lit by my conspicuous rays of light which bounce off of the sides of the back of old apartment house abodes connected without separation to the left and right. Within 30 meters along glistening pavement it becomes a further test of skill involving “don’t remove the wing mirror”. My sweet friendly guide coo’s to me to proceed ahead 100 meters and then turn right. I have choice words to share with her as I slow to measure the inches between my mirror and that of a parked blue mini-cooper. My trust is beginning to run on fumes and I slow the car to a

crawl while, with the voice telling me to continue on, instinct tells me to hit the brake. It also may have been the low wall directly ahead glowing in the headlight beams. I've learned from previous fascinating trips with my Jane-Jane that built up suburbs of London with odd dead-end streets or multiple construction sites can include more than Jane knows even as she intones her instruction to me. In the past Jane-Jane may have taken me to places I had never been before but on this night we are struggling.

I stop, seated in my red car with the team name and logo emblazoned on its side. I need to refer to my good old paper road atlas which is lying here somewhere on the passenger side floor. After I plunge my hand into the darkness feeling for the road atlas I hear "Jane-Jane" telling me to proceed. I am now telling her that our relationship has come to an abrupt end on this night. She ignores me. I fumble for the atlas and then, being once upon a time an athlete, my peripheral vision takes over and I notice that there is someone standing to my left. In fact, this causes a shot of adrenalin and a rapid reaction to sit up and look.

I see more than one person. I see four. They are young men in a small group. It is clear that I have just interrupted some sort of transaction. Two of them stand there with their hoodies drawn up over their head. They do not look pleased as they look at me. Two others stand with black leather jackets on and something in their hands. They are looking at me with a confounded look which shouts suspicion. Not being of completely dense material I realize I may not have interrupted practice for the church choir. I decide upon my best course of action. Just then, the sweet voice of useless map direction begins to tell me to go forward. With a wave of my hand not meant to alarm my new friends who are watching I push the button to quiet her. I hit the switch to put the window down and lean over to acknowledge the gathering. I lean towards them as two of them shuffle towards me with a look which says “this guy must be more dangerous than he is acting or he is really stupid”. I nod and I figure my best hope is that maybe one of these fellows is a hoops fan of some sort. I figure the course of action is to reveal my true

identity as a coach. A lost coach. They are getting closer and are waiting for me to say something.

“Hi, I am a pro-basketball coach and I’m looking for the Portsmouth Arena, can you help me out?” There is a moment of awkward hesitation. They take a look at the car and me and then at each other. Now they are fixed on me. A deep, very unfeminine voice speaks to me now, “Shit mate, you almost went for a swim. This ain’t the way.” A leather jacket steps forward and explains the directions to the arena. The instructions begin with me backing the car up the alleyway nautical launching pad. I am feeling a wave of relief in my being. My new mates tell me they like basketball. They nod, They turn their backs on me and get back to business. I back up. Whispering to myself that I am one lucky sucker.

After a journey through the obstacle course and back to the main street I turn right and in 15 minute, thanks to the reliable directions from my high tech hoodie navigators I am coming to a stop in the large parking area and hurrying my way in through the doors of the leisure center. I can hear the

sounds of loud voices and cheering. Most of all I can hear the bouncing of the ball on the court. The game has begun. I enter on court level and stand at the corner of the court. I see the bench across the way and the other coach of the team watching the fast action rushing down the court. Two of the seated players nod at me and wave. A third comes sliding on the court landing at my feet as he dives for a loose ball going out of bounds. Jon, sweat dripping down his face, looks up at me, “good to see you coach, we need you” he shares with me as he lays there , rolls over and heads back on court.

Following the game we all share a victory snack at the arena and some good discussion of directions on the court. All are wondering what made me arrive late. They are not surprised when I relate the result of this night with my “Jane –Jane”. By golly, they share, these are the streets of England, man , carry your atlas and trust to your vision or directions from some friendly folks.

On the return drive I listen - to the radio. The form of my technological queen is present but silent. I follow the team



bus. Our lights spraying the edge of the mystery of the forests on the roadsides. Thoughts of the next game expedition in the beautiful UK are dancing in the head. Perhaps she'll be in a better mood. I'll keep my maps handy.