



CAROLYN HAX

## One-upmanship is no substitute for sympathy

Adapted from a recent online discussion:

Dear Carolyn:

How do you deal with people who always feel the need to top a story or an event, or make your legitimate gripe seem like a "my tiara's too heavy" kind of problem? The first is when your conversation partner needs to top your story somehow with one that's better, worse, more egregious, whatever. With the second, you mention a hard issue at work, and the response is, "Well, at least you have a job." My mother is master of this. I feel like I am always at a loss for the socially graceful way to handle these things.

Anonymous

I don't think there's a uniform response that works. That's because sometimes a one-upping is just sympathy that lands with a thud. Let's say, for example, you're complaining about the scare you had on a recent flight. It is a natural, congenial reaction for people to recall similar nightmares they experienced, and to share them. If theirs is scarier than yours, then that might just be incidental, and not a reflection of competitive intent.

In those cases, the best response is to go with the conversational flow. Sympathy works, as does a lighthearted "Wow, I thought I had it bad."

If instead you have reason to believe it's an intentional one-upping — the person has a history of being competitive, say — then "Wow, I thought I had it bad" gets the job done just the same — only it's a different job. Here it's both a conversation-ender and a polite "Okay, you win, I'm going to go talk to someone else now." With competitive people, the only victory is in declining to play.

Which brings me to your unsympathetic mom. Without knowing her, I can't be sure about her intent — she could be trying (and failing) to make you feel better, or she could be telling you to suck it up.

Either way, though, if coming out with deflating responses is a skill she has elevated to an art form, then it's time to realize Mom isn't the shoulder to seek out when you need even a minor cry. Maybe she's great at figuring out practical solutions, or being honest with you when no one else will be, or one of countless other ways people can support each other — but if she's no damn good at the empathic pat on the back, then do yourself the favor of not expecting her to become miraculously good at it next time you're upset.

If there is a universal answer, it's one that addresses the source: Your desire for sympathy. Perhaps it's time to cut back on that.

**Re: The master:**  
It could be that Mom is just sick of hearing the constant complaints. Some people's only form of conversation is to complain. Maybe it's not the poster's case, but it's worth thinking about.

Anonymous

Yup, could be that, too, thanks. If so, though, I wish Mom would come out and say it: "It's getting to the point where complaints about work are almost the only thing we talk about. Why don't we talk about ways of fixing the problem?"

Read the whole transcript or join the discussion live at noon Fridays on [www.washingtonpost.com/discussions](http://www.washingtonpost.com/discussions).

Write to Tell Me About It, Style, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071, or [tellem@washpost.com](mailto:tellem@washpost.com).



NICK GALIFIANAKIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

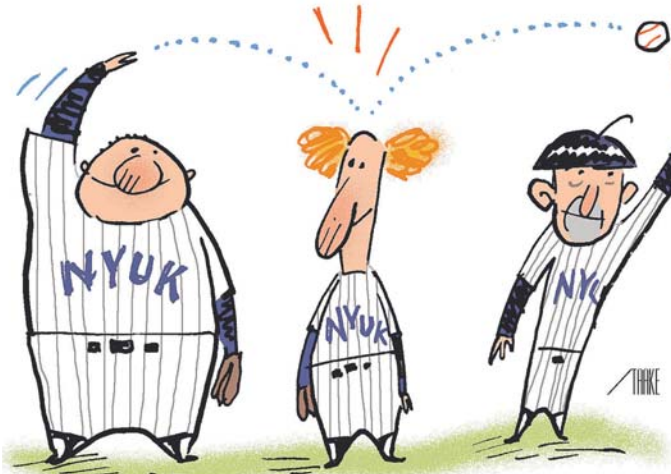
# THE STYLE INVITATIONAL

## REPORT FROM WEEK 890

in which we asked you to combine the names of two professional sports teams (of whatever sports) and describe the result: Many of you combined the Green Bay Packers with the Miami Heat to produce Pucking Heat, a new name for the Wizards.



**Montreal Canadiens + Oakland Raiders = The Cander, a team that rarely plays in Washington — especially in even-numbered years.** (Keith Maynard, Annapolis, a First Offender)



BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

## MORE SPORTMANTEAUX: HONORABLE MENTIONS

**San Jose Earthquakes + Chicago Fire = Earth Fire, a soccer team that plays well only when the wind is with them.** (Gary Crockett, Chevy Chase)

**Montreal Expos + Oakland Athletics = The Expos-A's: The steroids, the point shaving, the arrests — now it can all be told!** (Brendan Beary, Great Mills)

**St. Louis Blues + Los Angeles Clippers = The Bluepeers, a team that never wins but whose game films are a riot.** (Jeff Seigle, Vienna)

**Charlotte Bobcats + Florida Marlins = The Bobbins, an ill-fated baseball team managed by Bill Buckner.** (George Vary, Bethesda)

**Chicago Fire Soccer Club + Pittsburgh Pirates = Socrates, a team whose "Gatorade" is best avoided.** (Gary Crockett)

**Chicago Blackhawks + Washington Redskins = The Blackskins — what, NOW you're offended?** (Jeff Seigle, Ward Kay, Vienna; Phil Wilbur, Arlington, a First Offender)

**Phoenix Mercury + Tulsa Drillers = The Hg Wells: Their defense is so bad that they call them the Invisible Men.** (Brendan Beary)

**Los Angeles Clippers + Houston Rockets = The Mohels, who always get the tip-off.** (Kevin Dopart, Washington)

**Philadelphia 76ers + Utah Jazz = 76 Trombones: Oh, they got Trouble, with a capital T and that rhymes with P and that stands for**

**performance-enhancing drugs!** (Brendan Beary)

**Carolina Panthers + New York Yankees = The Pant Yanks: Its players have an embarrassing habit of adjusting themselves on TV.** (George Vary)

**Dallas Cowboys + Nashville Predators = The Boy-Predators, a team whose games are shown on "Dateline NBC."** (Ira Allen)

**Indianapolis Colts + Buffalo Bills = Indi-Buff: No helmets, no pads, no uniforms.** (Howard Mantle, Lafayette, Calif.)

**Minnesota Twins + Colorado Rockies = The Twinkies: Their defense is rarely successful (probably because they're soft in the middle).** (John Winant, Bellevue, Neb.)

**Detroit Pistons + San Francisco Giants = The PisAnts, a team of fired lawyers who stop every play to challenge the decisions.** (Maggie Lawrence, Culpeper, Va.)

**Los Angeles Rams + New York Yankees = The Los Kees: Locked out of the playoffs again this year.** (Pie Snelson, Silver Spring)

**Chicago White Sox + Boston Red Sox = The Pink Sox: Just agitate them and they'll run like mad.** (Rick Haynes, Potomac)

**Pittsburgh Penguins + Phoenix Coyotes = The Peyotes, who give new meaning to the term "road trip."** (Jeff Contompasis, Ashburn)

**Los Angeles Lakers + New York Islanders = The Los Angeles Islanders:**

**2** the winner of the knickknack of a cow standing on a gondola and wearing a gondolier costume:

**3** **New York Yankees + Vancouver Canucks = The NYucks, featuring the great double-play trio of Larry to Curly to Moe.** (Nan Reiner, Alexandria)

**3** **Chicago Bears + Washington Redskins = The Bearskins: Every week, they lie there and let another team walk all over them.** (Roger Dalrymple, Gettysburg, Pa.)

**4** **Atlanta Falcons + Boston Celtics = The Falics, the team with the most embarrassing costumed mascot.** (Ira Allen, Bethesda)

**They changed their name in anticipation of the Big One.** (Beverly Sharp, Washington)

**New York Mets + Toronto Maple Leafs = The New Leafs, a team that commits far too many turnovers.** (Jim Lubell, Mechanicsville, Md.)

**Baltimore Orioles + Philadelphia Phillies = The MoreLies, a team that's guaranteed to be much, much better next year.** (Jim Lubell)

**Chicago White Sox + Albuquerque Isotopes = The Nerds, whose quarterback always has pocket protection.** (Kevin Dopart)

**El Centro Imperials + Washington Freedom = Impeedom: Top defense in the league.** (Kevin Dopart)

**Detroit Pistons + New York Knickerbockers = The Pistonknickers, a Little League team.** (Ellen Raphaeli, Falls Church)

**Brewers + Patriots: Brewlots, a bunch of drunken losers.** (Paul Kocak, Syracuse, N.Y.)

**Kansas City Chiefs + Cleveland Indians = The Mismanagers: They'd have a better record, but there are too many Kansas City players.** (Lois Douthitt, Arlington)

**Phoenix Mercury + Minnesota Twins = The Phoe-Mer Twins: Best legs in the league.** (Craig Dykstra, Centerville)

**Next week: Mirror, mirror, and vice versa**

## THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

### Week 894: Look back in Inker

It's coulda-shoulda time again, when the Empress deigns to receive entries a week late — or 49 weeks late.

This week: Enter any Style Invitational from Week 841 through Week 890 (except for Week 844, which was the same contest for the previous year). The only restriction? You can't send more than 25 entries total. Yes, normal people, we realize that's not much of a restriction for you. Inveterate Losers, just live with it. You may refer to events that have occurred since the contest was published; for contests that ask you to use The Post from a certain day or week, use today's or this week's. For Week 850, don't write poems about people who died in 2010, since we'll be asking you for those soon. You can find all the contests at [washingtonpost.com/styleinvitational](http://washingtonpost.com/styleinvitational).

Winner gets the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. Second place receives a bottle of "Valerie Flame Hot Sauce," given to us long ago by Reliable Source gossip columnist Amy Argetsinger. And we'll throw in some genuine Splat brand toothpaste from Russia ("Dream" flavor) courtesy of Loser Dean Meservy.

**Other runners-up** win their choice of a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt or yearned-for Loser Mug. Honorable mentions get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational Loser Magnets. First Offenders get a smelly, tree-shaped air "freshener" (Fir Stink for their first ink). One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to [losers@washpost.com](mailto:losers@washpost.com) or by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, Nov. 22. Put "Week 894" in the subject line of your e-mail, or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Contests are judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results to be published Dec. 11. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. The revised title for next week's results is by Peter Jenkins. The honorable-mentions subhead is by Chris Doyle.

**Online discussion** Have a question for the Empress or want to talk to some real Losers? Join the Style Conversational at [washingtonpost.com/styleconversational](http://washingtonpost.com/styleconversational).

# Glory to God and a \$50K prize? That'd be 'Sweet'!

GOSPEL FROM C1

talks strategy. "They're judging on dynamics, presentation and interpretation of the song," he says. "So I tried to make sure that we hit everything they're looking for."

And while he's dedicated to dazzling the judges on Saturday, Young wasn't always so keen on the concept of "How Sweet the Sound." "The reason I didn't jump on it the first year was because of the word 'competition,'" he says. "That's something in gospel that you really don't get into."

But the contest's surging popularity made it impossible to ignore for long. Verizon, the event's corporate sponsor, launched "How Sweet the Sound" in Memphis in 2007, and expanded the contest in 2008 to 11 cities, including Washington. This year brought another growth spurt for the event: contests in 14 cities.

Calvary boasts six separate choirs, but none competed in 2008. After members of the church attended the local competition that year, Young reconsidered. "They came to me so excited, saying, 'Why weren't our choirs in it?'"

Last year, Calvary sent its coed Sanctuary Choir to the regionals. It didn't win, but Young was impressed with the community-building element of the competition and appreciated the overdue recognition it gave to church choirs, both locally and across the country.

"Even in secular music... it starts in the church," he says. Young considers gospel the foundation of modern soul and R&B, "but it seems like where the foundation comes from is treated the worst. So to actually see the foundation being treated so amazingly, I think that touched me more than anything."

The Men of Valor won their church \$10,000 after September's regional competition, besting Largo's Greater Morning Star Bishop's Choir, Baltimore's Voices of Empowerment Temple, and the Sanctuary Choir, also of Baltimore. The prize money will be funneled back into Calvary's music programs, says Young.

Saturday's concert has been sold out for weeks and promises plenty of gospel star power, including hosts CeCe Winans and Donald Lawrence, and judges Marvin Sapp, Karen Clark Sheard and Fred Hammond. But the Verizon Center lights will shine brightest on the contestants.

Outside of Young's office, a handful of choir members huddle around a grand piano in post-rehearsal chatter.



JAH CHIKWENDU/THE WASHINGTON POST

**ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING:** The Men of Valor compete in the finals of "How Sweet the Sound" on Saturday, facing a national slate of choirs.

It isn't the nervous kind, they insist. "Just anxious," says Willie Lyles. "I think the regional competition kind of broke the ice, so now we're ready to get it done."

Terry Hawkins, a bespectacled man who's been singing at Calvary for 22 years, reassures them. "It's not something we don't do every Sunday," he says. "We always present ourselves with the same spirit of excellence."

Jeremiah Worrell agrees. "The goal is always to do it to the very best of your abilities and do everything as if you're doing it unto God," he says. "When you do the best you can for God, then the rest of it will fall in line."

"Five hundred or 5,000," adds Hawkins, imagining a Sunday audience.

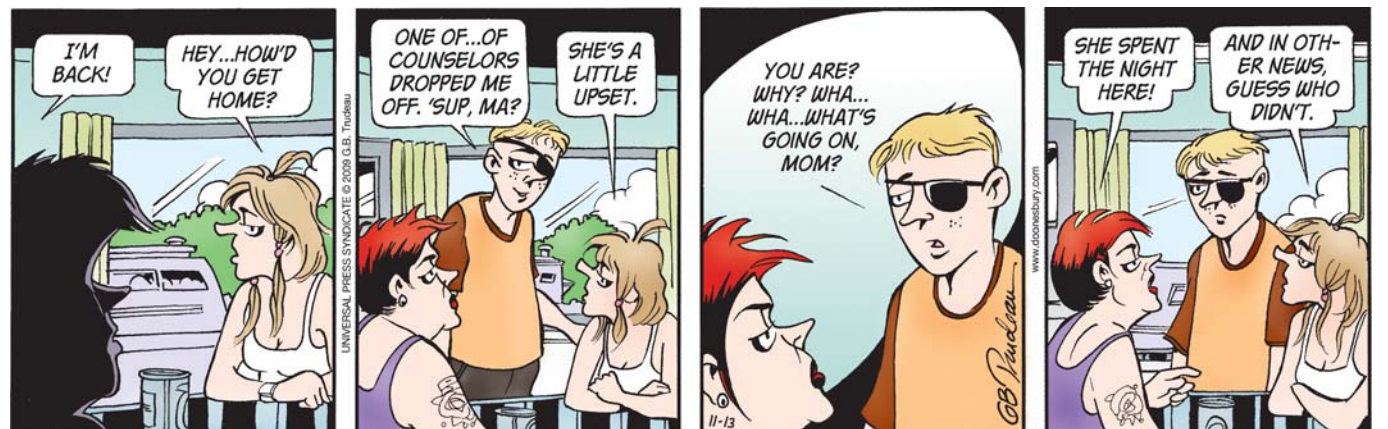
Worrell imagines Saturday's audience at Verizon Center.

"Or 15,000," he says.

[richardsc@washpost.com](mailto:richardsc@washpost.com)

**VIDEO ON THE WEB** To see video of the Greater Mount Calvary Men of Valor performing, go to [washingtonpost.com/style](http://washingtonpost.com/style).

## DOONESBURY FLASHBACKS BY GARRY TRUDEAU



## CUL DE SAC BY RICHARD THOMPSON

