

A Night with the Hot Dog Man  
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Every weekend the students of Ball State University make their way to the village to wash down a week full of classes and hassles. As they shuffle from bar to bar the streets begin to come alive.

It's Saturday night, a little before 12, and Mark Carter is just beginning his late night shift at Carter's "Nearly World Famous" Hot Dogs. He unhitches his hot dog stand from the back of his light blue Corsica and wheels it over to its usual spot on the corner of University and Dill Street. He is digging through a compartment in the back of the stand as I approach him.

"How long does it take you to set this thing up?" I ask.

"Oh, not too long," he says grabbing a pair of tongs and a box of tin foil.

He throws a handful of frozen hot dogs in the steaming water, fills the warmer with hot dog buns, and places a pair of red and yellow condiment bottles next to the onion, relish and cheese containers. A 15-person line accumulates in the five minutes it takes him to set up. A little past midnight Carter turns to his first customer – the hot dog man is on the job.

"What can I do for you, young lady?" he asks.

"Can I have two hot dogs with ketchup and mustard?"

"Two painted red and yellow," Carter confirms.

His hands move quickly, but his body stays still with a slight pivot at the waist. He grabs a bun with the tongs and a piece of precut tin foil from the box. The bun goes in

the foil and a dog goes in the bun. He paints it red and yellow and wraps the foil over the top then makes the second dog in the same fashion. He flips a brown paper bag open and drops both dogs in.

“What else can I do for you, young lady,” he asks.

“That’s it,” she says handing him a ten-dollar bill.

He digs in his apron pocket for change and counts it back to her in pennies, “two singles gets us to 500 and a five gets us to 1,000. Have a good morning.”

I just observe as the first few customers come through. Carter’s pace holds steady – never really slowing but definitely not speeding up. His interaction with people in line is his only cause for hesitation. Other than that, he’s a hot dog making machine. His line continues to grow, but he rarely looks up from his work.

Although Carter is quick, averaging about a minute per customer, the purchase of a “Nearly World Famous” hot dog is usually preceded by a wait in Carter’s “Nearly World Famous” line. It is not uncommon to wait 20 minutes for a Carter dog on a regular night, and the wait can get up to an hour on busy weekends.

“Does your line ever die down once it starts?” I ask.

“Not usually,” he replies.

“Do you ever feel swamped?”

“You can only do so much an hour no matter what time it is,” he says.

The next customer comes up and places an order, “I need three chili-cheese doggy style painted red and yellow,” he says.

“That’s the spirit,” Carter replies. He says this to everyone who orders more than two dogs.

The bun goes in the foil and a dog goes in the bun. He adds red and yellow followed by smelly, then applies chili with a ladle. He returns to the tongs for a nice big helping of shredded cheddar cheese then wraps the foil over the top. He repeats this formula for the next two dogs then flips a paper bag open and drops them all in. Less than two minutes go by and Carter is ready with the man's three "chili-cheese doggy style painted red and yellow."

Many of the customers know Carter's slang terms. To paint it red or yellow means to put ketchup or mustard on it. Asking for yellow and smelly will get you mustard and onions. If you want it Doggy style then he will just add onions only.

I ask him why he uses the term "doggy style" for onions.

"That's why man invented doggy style," he replies, "so he could eat onions."

One thing that makes Carter's long lines all the more bearable is his spontaneous humor. Carter is a large man with a soft voice, and most customers are rewarded for their wait with a laugh from his arsenal of short cracks and one-liners once they finally reach the stand.

The next customer places her order and then tells Carter that he could make a lot of money if he set his stand up at Broad Ripple in Indianapolis.

"But then the hot dog union would probably get mad at me," he says, "and all those air-do-wells will stand out on the corner and be upset."

"But you could make so much money," she repeats.

"Yeah, but I got to drive all that way and..."

"Don't you ever think about opportunity costs?" she asks.

"There you go, let's graph it baby," he responds.

It starts to get a little rowdier in the village at this point. It is well past midnight and Carter's line is probably around a half-hour wait.

The next girl in line asks Carter if it's true that you get a free hot dog on your birthday.

"Well, it's not my birthday but..." he says as everyone around the stand laughs, "I would be honored to give you a free hot dog, young lady. All is right with the world."

The next guy in line tries to get a free hot dog and says his birthday is Monday. Carter tells him to come back on Monday. He says he'll be there and orders a slaw dog.

"I didn't know you had slaw dogs," I say.

"Yeah, it's a large international menu."

"I didn't know it expanded."

"Well, it's kind of like the McRib; it's back for a limited time."

A little later a girl mentions Carter being in Playboy. Carter quickly corrects her. "Sports Illustrated actually. I was also in Hot Dog Men of the Midwest; they put me in provocative positions in my apron." The line laughs again.

Someone in line asks Carter to tell the story about when his car got stolen. "I left the company Corsica running when I was setting up the stand one night and some guy stole it. The police asked me if I wanted to press charges and I said no, but when I got my car back everything in the trunk was gone. So I said 'let's get him.' They showed up to his house and he had a bunch of pictures of naked women with bags on their heads all over his walls. Hell, I just wanted my car back."

"Do you ever go out to the bars Carter?" I ask.

"Very seldom," he says.

“Have you ever been to Dill Street Bar?”

“Oh yeah, I got a key to the back door at Dill Street. Hell yeah I’ve been to Dill Street.”

The next guy in line asks for a chili-cheese dog.

“Chili-cheese dog, that’s an excellent choice young man. That’s the number one seller right there.”

“Do most people just get a plain chili-cheese,” I ask.

“Well, you’ve got the purists that will stick with the basic chili-cheese and then you’ve got the more adventurous people. But you know what my motto is, ‘you can’t be afraid of the cheese.’ That’s the credo I live by young man.”

I ask Carter when he sold his first hot dog.

“I sold my very first hotdog April 15<sup>th</sup>, nineteen-hundred and ninety-four,” he says, “Actually the very first thing I sold was a polish sausage to Jerry Riggin right there on the corner of Main and Walnut.”

Carter sets up his stand downtown during lunchtime on the corner of Main and Walnut Street in front of the Delaware County building.

“When did you start bringing the stand to the village,” I ask.

“My first hot dog I sold in the village was in nineteen-hundred and ninety-five. I was right down there on the corner of University and Martin.” He looked up and pointed down the street. “The Locker Room wasn’t there yet, it was a bookstore. My very first customer I had in the village, well, he orders his hotdog and then proceeds to pee on the stoplight pole down there. I thought ‘boy, this is some interesting clientele we get down here. This might be good.’”

Carter spent his first four years selling from the stand. Then he bought a shop in the village and called it “Carter’s Nearly World Famous Hot Dogs.” He kept about 5 or 6 employees and they would use his slang terms when communicating orders to each other.

I asked Carter if he sold anything but hot dogs when he had the shop.

“Bratwurst and polish sausage,” he answered.

“Anything without a bun?” I asked laughing.

“We had 3-ways with spaghetti and chili and stuff. That’s about it.”

Carter had the shop for four years. When his lease went up he decided to return to his roots and get the stand back out. He is in his third year of the stand’s return. When asked if he would ever get another shop, he said maybe – because he’s getting older.

He replaces the cardboard menu sign on his stand every couple weeks because it gets torn up or stolen. “But the prices haven’t changed since 1994,” he says, “We’ve rolled back our prices to 1994.”

Once the line starts on a Friday or Saturday, it usually doesn’t stop until he leaves. I ask him if his line ever dies down. “Not on Fridays and Saturdays,” he says, “or Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays or Thursdays – most days ending in Y.”

Sometimes Carter will mention his agent. I ask if this mystery agent has a name.

“You know how little kids have an imaginary buddy and stuff? Well, I have an imaginary agent,” he says, “I wanted to get the one that represents A-Rod, but I need a shoe contract. I figure if you’re in Sports Illustrated you got to have a shoe contract. Everybody else that’s in there probably does. I don’t want LeBron James kind of money; I just figure New Balance might want to...you know. I mean, New Balance is the official footwear of Carter’s Nearly World Famous.”

The next girl in line mentions a demand for Carter in Indianapolis.

“Everybody talks about how people in Indianapolis know me. I don’t know how, I don’t know them. It’s probably from that big stint I did on the radio. That Rankin O’Brien guy had a hot dog serving contest I was in. IUPUI has a hot dog lady and Ball State has a hot dog man. I kicked her ass. She went down faster than a cold Miller High Life on a hot August day. When she saw the hot dog man arrive in that circle she got all weak in the knees. She was totally intimidated. One of my hot dogs wasn’t perfectly centered in the bun so they gave me a five-second penalty. I still kicked her ass.”

True hot dog fans may wish to purchase some of Carter’s “Nearly World Famous” merchandise. He keeps his “wiener wear” in a red cooler by the stand. “It’s my line of clothing – just T-shirts, just \$10. They get the chicks man, guaranteed.”

Carter’s chick happens to be his wife Kathleen. “I hear you got a call from my official secretary earlier,” he says. I had received a call from his wife around 11:30. She told me when Carter would be setting up the stand.

“How are you doing tonight, Carter?” the next girl in line asks.

“I’ll tell you what, young lady,” he says, “it couldn’t get much better than this. Anytime you get a chance to purvey processed meat to the masses, it’s a good day.”

Mark and Kathleen Carter have three kids. Dave, 24, and Megan, 23, both graduated from Ball State like their dad. Their youngest daughter Molly is 14 and is a student at Northside Junior High School in Muncie.

I ask Carter what his kids majored in at Ball State.

“Man, you ask a lot of trick questions,” he says, “I didn’t think you were going to be like Chris Matthews and play hard ball. I thought we were going to play, like, slow pitch softball or something.”

Carter majored in business, but he has trouble remembering what his kids went into. “They make up majors now. Back in the olden days they just had business and teaching and things like that. Now they’ve got all kinds of crazy stuff.”

I decide to take a little break from interviewing and I tell Carter I will be back to watch him close the stand.

“I’ll be here unless I get abducted by aliens or something,” he says.

“In that case I’ll look for a space ship.”

“It’ll be a big one.”

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I return to the village around 2:45 Sunday morning and the line looks to be nearly an hour wait. I ask Carter how he got the idea for a hot dog stand.

“I think I pulled a sword out of a rock or something,” he says.

The village is clearly more rambunctious than before and there is now a large group of loud, staggering drunk people standing on the corner chanting and pushing each other into the street.

“It’s getting pretty wild down here tonight,” I say.

“Yeah, it’s a little crazier than usual isn’t it?”

Carter seems to have picked up the pace a bit. He must have looked up at some point to see the hundred-foot-long line of inebriated college students trailing from his stand. The crowd has gotten much louder and it is significantly harder to hear what Carter is saying now.

Carter is a huge baseball fan and the only two hats he wears are his “Nearly World Famous” hat and his Reds hat. Many of his customers talk about baseball while waiting for their dogs. A guy in line sees Carter’s hat and asks him how he thinks the Reds are going to do this year.

“Well, all I know is if the Reds win all their games, they win the division.”

“Do you like football,” I ask.

“All football does is screw up the end of baseball season,” he says.

The next girl in line asks Carter what days he will be working the stand.

“Everyday that ends in Y except for Sunday,” he says.

“Hey, even God had to rest a day,” I add

“Yeah, me and God play golf together on Sundays.”

“Is he a good golfer?” I ask.

“I try to let him win at least every five years,” he says.

I ask Carter why he has an umbrella if he never comes out in the rain.

“Well I could get sun stroke,” he says, “And also, you can see that umbrella clear down at Ball Memorial Hospital.”

“Oh, can you?”

“No, but you can probably see it from the air. What if they decide to start dropping bombs like Pearl Harbor? I’ll be glad I have this umbrella.”

Carter seems to be in a very good mood despite the mob that is emerging not ten feet behind him. He begins to whistle a tune that I can't discern.

"I didn't know you were a musical man," I say.

"Yeah, I got the beach boys stuck in my head," he explains, "Earlier I was watching *The Jerk*, and you know that scene where he's walking down the beach with what's her name and they're singing that song?"

"Kind of, it's been a long time," I say, never having seen the movie before.

"Well, I had that one stuck in there earlier, and then the beach boys took over."

Carter then starts singing, "*Wouldn't it be nice if we were older.*"

"We need to get you a microphone," I say.

"They'd have to pay me more," he replies as the people in line laugh.

"I used to be in a band back in the mid-80s, late-70s," he says.

"Wait, I know, Guns 'n' Roses right?"

"No, that was a different one, Ned and the Tits was the name of our band."

"Oh, yeah? Ned and the Tits, huh?"

"Yeah, we didn't get a lot of church gigs...I was one of the Tits." The people in line laugh again. "Ned was the front man then he had us four tits standing behind him."

"Which tit were you?" I ask.

"I was the keyboard tit," he says, "We played at the Chug once. When we first started we were all so terrible...well, it was bad. We couldn't play covers so we had to play our own songs. They weren't that great, we only knew three chords."

Carter says if he doesn't have to do anything but make hot dogs, he can put out about a hundred an hour. Last year he sold four tons of hot dogs.

I ask him what the craziest thing he ever saw in the village was.

“Well, this one dude started shooting a gun one night. I just heard a pop-pop-pop like a firecracker and I thought ‘What the hell is that.’”

“Have you seen a lot of fights?” I ask.

“Not a whole lot,” he says, “I saw this one guy get jumped around the corner. That dude went down like a rock.”

As we discuss violence in the village, another rowdy group comes out of Dill Street Bar and starts exchanging some heated words with the rowdy group already on the street corner behind Carter. It is clear that a fight is about to break out.

“Any other time there would be cops all over this village,” Carter says. But right now, there is not a single cop in sight.

The fight erupts. Fists are flying every which way and the street becomes a mass of skirmishing people. The scene looks like a human spider web in the wind.

“Hey, call the cops or something man,” Carter says as some guy gets thrown from the rumble and lands on the sidewalk next to his feet.

I call 911 on my cell phone and report that there is a fight in the Ball State village on the corner of University and Dill. The operator asks how many people are involved. “More than 40,” I say. He asks me to stay on the line until an officer arrives. The fight begins to settle and is pretty much over with by the time the first officer shows up.

I return to the stand and Carter thanks me for calling the cops.

“Did you see that?” I ask him.

“No, I’m a little busy right now,” he says.

His current customers are discussing the fight and pointing at the street where it took place. They turn their attention back to the food and one of them says, “We’ve all been watching the fight, and Carter’s just been standing here making hot dogs!” All three of them start laughing hysterically and I join in. Even Carter gives a little chuckle and I hear him say, “I had dogs to make,” under his breath.

Certainly an interesting job for an interesting character, Mark Carter has had “dogs to make” for the last 12 years. Only time can tell how long he will continue to haul his stand down to the village to serve hot dogs to the hungry students of Ball State. I finish my interview with this very question: “How long will you continue to be the hot dog man?” He smiles and says, “Until they pry these tongs from my cold, dead hands.” Hopefully that won’t be the case. But one thing is for sure, he’s good at what he does.