

A List (with commentary)  
of Phraseology Commonly Used by My Father

by Stefan Pasti

“Got any new material?” (He’s was always hopeful in this regard, but none of us kids came through on a regular basis as stand-up comedians)

“Let’s get a little light on the subject...” (when we were reading with poor lighting)

“... is now an honorary member of the clean plate club.” (How he expressed his satisfaction when we ate all that we put on our plates)

“... enough food to feed the fifth army.” (Especially at Thanksgiving, but also on many other occasions, the amount of food available could only be described by referring to an army regiment)

“... chief cook and bottlewasher.” (There were times when someone’s official role in the proceedings was unclear, or not yet confirmed.... When this was the case, my father would award the person with this title, and thereby give him or her status as “part of the team”)

“... at the College of Hard Knocks.” (A lot of what my father learned—and a lot of what many people of his generation learned—was learned “at the College of Hard Knocks”)

“... sawing wood...” (I can’t be sure, but I don’t believe that any of us snored when we were sleeping... even so, my father often referred to our sleeping experiences this way—as in “He’s been sawing wood ever since we got home.”)

“Everyone present and accounted for?” (As if we weren’t only a family, but also a military unit just back from exercises, and now preparing for a strategic maneuver)

“Hold down the fort.” (He didn’t want us to forget that he hoped the house would still be there when he got back)

“We’re not trying to heat the outdoors.” (When it was cold outside, my father preferred that we close the door when we came in. There were times when some of us didn’t understand the urgency, so he tried this appeal to our common sense)

“We need to get you a violin case.” (His standard for when he thought someone needed a haircut)

“I see you got your ears lowered.” (His standard for letting someone know he noticed that they did get a haircut)

“Never played this game before..... wheeet!... (pretending to fancy shuffle a deck of cards) (The card games we played were common ones like “Kings in the Corner”, “Michigan Rummy”, and “Concentration”—but the dealer sometimes imagined more rarified circumstances....)

“Ding-Hao.” (While I always thought that my father was saying hello in Chinese when he said this—and that that was all he knew how to say in Chinese—I just looked it up on the Internet, and it means “good indeed” or “well done”. If I had only known that in high school, I could’ve used the phrase when I brought in the steak from the backyard grill on Sundays....)

“Sam made the pants too long.” (If there was anything too long, too short, too big, or too small about clothes, uniforms, costumes, etc., it was the fault of a legendary “Sam”, who somehow was involved in most of the clothing design and manufacturing that didn’t fit its intended victim)

“Paark the Caar in Haavard Yaard.” (I can’t remember the Boston accent sounding like this when I lived there, but it did when my father did his imitation of a Boston accent)

“Give it the ol’ college try.” (The efforts by college students over the years became so closely associated with determination, persistence, and faith that they became immortalized, commemorated, and incorporated into common American phraseology.)

“Just (remember to) use your common sense.” (I remember him saying this a number of times... enough times so that I finally felt that “common sense” must be something that I had—and that I ought to have a good idea about what it was)

“You’re a gentleman and a scholar.” (In some ways, this one was similar to his use of the “common sense” phrase... it seemed like a good thing, and so I gave some thought to what it would mean to actually fit the description....)

“Put on your thinking cap....” (He actually did have a ‘thinking cap’, which was a round and black Chinese “cap” with a red tassel on top, and he did wear it at times when he was reading in his favorite reading chair....)

“... a little English on the ball....” (My father was a fan of Willie Mosconi, and sometimes imagined he could shoot pool like Willie Mosconi....)

“... nothing but his fingerprints on the ball....” (there are times in baseball events, when it becomes clear that none of the pitcher’s stuff is working, that he is just serving up batting practice, and that—until the manager brings in someone from the bullpen—his only contribution will be that he is boosting the batting averages of the players on the other team)

“... right in the breadbasket....” (usually when football throws nailed the receiver in the stomach)

“Couldn’t punch his way out of a wet paper bag.” (My father’s officer’s training, at the commencement of World War II, was in San Antonio, Texas. While there, my father met an experienced boxer, and probably picked up this phrase in that boxer’s company. My father had “punching the heavy bag” and “jabbing the leather bag” in his exercise routine for a long time.)

“.... need a pretty good poke.” (I heard him say this many times on the golf course, to describe what he needed to do... however, and especially in relation to the three-wood, I can’t remember ever seeing a shot of his that could’ve been described in those terms)

“Looks like you got a pretty good workout....” (Regular exercise was most important to him, so any kind of activity that caused us to work up a sweat—like mowing the lawn—was routinely framed into exercise language)

“... a hundred pounds soaking wet.” (Description bestowed on us kids at times, and on adults in the “lightweight” category)

“Looks like he’s carrying a piano with him....” (There were sports professionals who were slow when they were running, and apparently some of them reminded my father of piano movers he had known)

“... couldn’t hit the broadside of a barn with a handful of rice.” (Some people, according to my father, did not have any sense of direction whatsoever)

“He/she doesn’t have far to fall.” (on the subject of little children falling down)

“No comments from the peanut gallery.” (An effort to stave off challengers...)

“... going to need a little elbow grease....” (this was his form of encouragement, when there was a tough cleaning job ahead)

“...take a dim view....” (He rarely used strong language to describe a dislike of a person or something that had happened. He just “took a dim view” of that sort of thing.)

“... leaves me cold....” (a phrase that made it clear when he had a strong negative opinion of someone....)

“... nothing to write home about....” (His standard for a routine or somewhat dull event or happening)

“... doesn’t do anything for me.” (similar to “nothing to write home about”)

“Gentlemen’s Bet.” (His form of gambling was all fun and nothing more. It was usually on sporting events, and amounted to betting \$1 on the outcome)

“My horse went out at 5 to 1, and came in at quarter to 4.” (Another lighthearted look at gambling; this particular phrase was worked in often, and it never failed to cheer him up when he said it)

“... you mean the one and only....” (I heard this most often when I called home, and he was trying to determine if it was really me)

“... spraying the roses....” (He did not understand, or desire for himself, the kind of retirement where people become less and less involved in meaningful activity. These thoughts and feelings came out as “... and all they’re doing now is spraying the roses....”)

“... pretty good kids—when you were sleeping.” (He thought a lot of us, but enjoyed saying it this way)

“... when you were a little shaver....” (how he harked back to earlier memories of one of us)

“Slow ‘er down....” (Activity in the house, or in the back of the station wagon on road trips, sometimes got to be a distraction for him when he was trying to do paperwork at the dining room table, or trying to drive....)

“Keep it down to a dull roar.” (A variation of “Slow ‘er down”)

“Atta boy.” (There were times when I took a “dim view” of this one, but it was something he liked to say.... If I had known what I know now, I would’ve requested that he use “Ding Hao”—see above reference to “Ding Hao”)

“That’s using your head for more than a hat rack.” (which in some ways implies that there were times when that’s all it was....)

“C’mon Baby!” (As readers might suspect, this was encouragement directed towards the machine that was in use at that moment—especially when the machine seemed to be malfunctioning. I remember hearing this sometimes when we were in the car....)

“It didn’t quite hack it.” (There were times when the performance of workers on a contracted job, or the performance of some household item, did not live up to expectations)

“Flip it....” (As my father got older, he became more cavalier about giving us his permission to throw something away)

“... one horse town. (If you blink, you’ll miss it.)” (Occasionally, conversation would reference a very small town, which he was fond of describing in these terms)

“... top notch....” (This was also a standard phrase, which he used mostly to describe people)

“... combed the beach....” (My father really liked water—lakes, oceans, swimming pools; he swam hundreds of miles a year as exercise, for many years. He also liked to walk on the beach, but his idea of walking on the beach was not to drift along aimlessly, but to actively seek out items of interest)

“It worked out pretty well.” (He had many occasions to use this, due to his good natured outlook on life)