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# 1. THE MYSTERY

## WHAT PICKUP ARTISTS REVEAL ABOUT THE NATURAL WORLD

It was the ultimate infiltration into a man's world. I stepped off a train at New York's Penn Station and headed up Eighth Avenue toward a place called the Ripley-Grier Studios. There, I was to witness a "boot camp" for prospective pickup artists. I'd been invited by a publicist for Erik von Markovik, a.k.a. Mystery—a pickup artist, magician, and the main character in Neil Strauss's 2005 best-seller *The Game*.

Von Markovik was not just a pickup artist but a pickup guru with a worldwide network of male admirers and disciples. Some of those disciples were teaching his "method" everywhere from Las Vegas to Sydney. He'd also laid out his technique in his own book, *The Mystery Method: How to Get Beautiful Women into Bed*.

The class, officially called Seduction Boot Camp, was one of several offerings I'd found on a pickup artists' website. The goal, as advertised, is to equip men with a method to get women into bed within seven hours of meeting them. It cost \$2,150 a head and included three days of six-hour classroom seminars plus several nights of in-the-field training amid New York's nightclub scene.

The instructor for this one was a twenty-six-year-old U.S. Marine and part-time stand-up comic who went by the moniker Future. In a phone conversation several days earlier, he'd admitted that before he took the course himself in 2004 he had trouble attracting women. "I had this image that New York would be rife with women clamoring to get some veteran ass," he said, but somehow, they weren't.

Being a U.S. Marine and having fought in Iraq didn't help him because he'd drive women away before he'd get the chance to segue his service into the conversation. "My natural personality is rather exuberant," he said, "but I had to moderate my behavior so it didn't look like I was having a verbal seizure." But his transformation wasn't so simple. The method involves many steps and repeated practice. As I thumbed through von Markovik's book, I saw he'd included more acronyms, flowcharts, and diagrams than you'd find in a Space Shuttle flight plan.

It's a very systematic procedure that breaks down into nine steps—three parts of attraction (A1, A2, and A3), three parts of comfort building (C1, C2, and C3), and three parts of sex (S1, S2, and S3). You start the whole thing by approaching a "set," then pick a "target," throw her a "neg," assess her IOIs, use your wingman to help you with a DHV, then, working your way from the final attraction phase, A3, you change location for C1 through C3, always ready to counter her ASD and disarm or escape the AMOG. Who ever said women were the more complicated sex?

I'll explain what all that means later, but in any case, if all goes as planned, you get to S3, which is the goal, the end point, the score. It's become popular wisdom that modern society puts too much emphasis on sex, and yet we may really underestimate its importance in shaping the living world. Not only is the desire for

sex etched into the human psyche by eons of evolution, but sex itself guides evolution's course.

Competition for sex pushes the evolution of males and females in different directions. With the popular discussion of human sex differences mired in political controversy, why not move forward by examining ourselves in the bigger context of the natural world? Males, for example, face many common challenges, whether they're penguins or peacocks, Marines with flattops or marine flatworms, or even male wildflowers growing along the side of the road.

At this point it might help to clarify the universal definitions of male and female. Males don't necessarily have to have penises. Penguins and many other birds and fish lack one. They're not always bigger than their female counterparts—many male animals are much smaller. Not all males carry Y chromosomes, either. The natural world employs dozens of different ways to determine who's a girl and who's a boy.

Stripped down to its essentials, the universal defining quality of males is the creation of sperm. And the universal defining quality of sperm is that they're smaller than eggs. Because their sperm are relatively small, males usually make more of them than their female counterparts make eggs. That little asymmetry lies at the root of all sex differences, from the male robin's song, the buck's antlers, and the elephant seal's tonnage to the pickup artist's lines, or at least the desire to learn lines.

The people running the pickup seminars weren't secretive about their teachings. They had no problem inviting me, a female journalist, to listen in. And since they greeted my request to audit their class with such open-mindedness, I tried to extend the same attitude toward them. Who knew what useful insights I might discover?

Seduction Boot Camp was held in a small mirrored dance studio, adjoining other rooms where young dancers were quietly warming up in the hall. The class was an intimate affair, especially since one of the five students who prepaid didn't show up, claiming a concussion. So it came down to me, four male students, and our instructor, Future, sitting in plastic chairs arranged in a circle.

Future looked younger than his twenty-six years —tall but with a layer of baby fat cushioning his cheeks, neck, and middle. He wore a Superman T-shirt, which added to the impression he was just a big kid. He wasn't a bad-looking guy, though there was something odd about his shoes.

After some small talk, our Marine/stand-up comic instructor asked each of the students to answer a few questions: who he was, why he wanted to take boot camp, when (or if) he lost his virginity, and how many women he'd had sex with.

The first student was a thirty-eight-year-old with a faint country twang in his voice that was hard to place—later he revealed he'd lived in Alaska before moving to New York. He'd made plenty of money recently and was taking some time off to find himself, he said. In his real estate business he'd always gotten what he wanted from people, but in love it was a different story. He seemed like a nice country boy until he revealed that after he lost his virginity at eighteen or so, he'd had sex with about twenty prostitutes and a dozen or so other women. "I do want the picket fence," but before he found his fence-mate, he said, "I'd like to have lots of good sex."

The next to tell all was a lanky red-haired young man of twenty-nine who said he'd also lost his virginity around eighteen, slept with a handful of women, and still sought that elusive soul mate and perfect woman. He wanted her to be not just beautiful but a "solid person," he said, not flaky or superficial. The third student,

a twenty-nine-year-old stockbroker and casino gambler, said his job had him shuttling between New York and London. He'd been banned from several casinos in Las Vegas for winning too much money. A man like that should have exuded confidence, but instead he slouched, as if hiding, and spoke in a barely audible mumble.

Then there was the oddball of the group—a tall, buff, personal trainer and part-time model who looked like a cross between Tom Cruise and a young John Travolta. He said he was there partly to write a column for a fledgling *Men's Magazine*, but he had also paid for the seminar. He had lost his virginity at sixteen and since then had slept with more than 200 women, he said, many of them glamorous models and actresses.

His revelation was met with a stunned silence. Future finally broke in to ask the obvious question: "Why are you here?"

"I'm a perfectionist," said the model/trainer. "I guess I want to be perfect in everything." And he hated getting stuck in those three-week-long dry spells, he said as everyone in the class winced—Future included. But like all the other guys, he would like to get married someday. He'd turned forty recently, he said. "My parents are hoping I'll settle down."

It took a few seconds for Future and the other regular guys to recover from all this. The taller version of Tom Cruise was an alpha male, the arch enemy of the beta males who made up the usual customers of Mystery Method boot camps. The method's acronym AMOG stands for "alpha male of the group," and according to the method you need to identify and disarm him so he doesn't beat you up. But apparently even the big, buffed-up, handsome guys don't always get everything they want. The alpha male of our little group was scribbling notes as fast as the others while Future attempted to explain the complex system known as the Method.

I'll return to the class soon, but first let's connect what's going on there to the rest of the natural world. At the heart of the Mystery Method is what the guru, von Markovik, calls S and R—survival and replication. I'm pretty sure from reading his book that he meant survival and reproduction, replication implying some sort of asexual cloning. But perhaps to the pickup artists, reproduction sounded too womanly and reminiscent of pregnancy and dirty diapers. Replication sounded more hip, high-tech, and masculine. In von Markovik's estimate, males are wired to excel more in the S part of the equation, females in R. As we'll see later, he had that part backward. In most animals, males put more emphasis on the R part, sometimes to the detriment of their S.

Future, however, felt he'd proved he could handle the S part at Parris Island boot camp, but he needed Mystery Method boot camp to get his R in line. Neither Mystery nor Future had apparently reproduced, or replicated, but at least they had plenty of practice with the first step, for what it's worth. In the end, the goal of the method was sex. What to do if a baby came of it was beyond the scope of their material.

At some point I asked Future why he thought men needed these courses. He attributed it to changes in male roles. No longer can men go out and kill mastodons to feel necessary, he said.

But was this really the reason behind the demand for the Mystery Method? Who's to say such classes wouldn't have gotten takers during the Stone Age? For all we know there was a caveman version of Seduction Boot Camp. Men I've interviewed nearly always assume that their ancestors had it easier—that women only became discerning and picky in recent times.

I suspect that the problems that confront Future and his pickup artists in training go back much further—to about a billion years ago.