

## The BFDP

This Thanksgiving, our family celebrates a holiday tradition, my dad began ten years ago, and that to this day, my family still maintains. Ten years ago, the day before Thanksgiving, my father died, and every year since then, within a week of Thanksgiving, a member of the family has either died, committed suicide, or been murdered. We've figured out, that if the tradition continues, somewhere around the year 2038, the family tree will be whittled down to a stump.

For the first few years our family viewed each death with tragic irony, first dad, then Uncle Jim, then grandmamma, but being Irish, it was in our DNA, that from any tragedy, we find a glimmer of hope, or a reason to drink and being Irish, we could always find a reason to drink, so we looked for hope. People find hope in many ways. We found ours in the creation of the Baltazar Family Death Pool.

The BFDP, as we call it, is the brain child of my Uncle Kevin, who as a kid, was a numbers runner in the Bronx, and is now an Executive VP at Goldman Sachs. Yes, there is a correlation.

Uncle Kevin and I got the death pool going one summer, by gathering data on each family member such as their health, career changes, type of car, marital status, things like that. Then Kevin took the database to an actuary friend of his at MetLife, and together they produced the Death Pool odds.

Now every year, just after Labor Day, we publish, what has to be, one of the oddest family newsletters, called the "BFDP News." Besides catching up on the latest family events and happenings, the BFDP News is a tip sheet, recapping each relative's former odds, their current odds and recent conditions that may have affected those odds.

At first, the BFDP was our way to laugh, at what could easily become morose and depressing. But after the pool's first year, some of the family members began including friends and co-workers in the betting, and now, the pool's become a small family business.

Earlier this year, my Uncle Kevin had a mild heart attack, and leads this year's pool, at 3 to 1 odds. Because Uncle Kevin's the favorite, his partners at Goldman Sachs, many whom have been betting the pool for years, have helped push this year's purse to over \$50,000.

To keep from turning the BFDP into some sort of perverse family death wish, we created a rule that states, if for some reason, no one dies during Thanksgiving week, the pool will be permanently retired, and the purse given to that year's favorite.

Last year, Cousin Francis, who was in deep credit card debt, tried to scam that rule with a doctor friend of hers, by faking an advanced case of Hepatitis C. We were totally buying it and she was the hands down favorite that year with heavy betting at 2 to 1. After surviving thanksgiving week, Cousin Francis planned to have a miraculous recovery, and use the bulk of her winnings to pay down the credit cards.

Unfortunately, her drug dealing brother, my cousin Tommy, thwarted her plan, when on Thanksgiving Day he was discovered, as the papers described, "dressed and stuffed" in the trunk of a burning Chevy Impalla, in the parking lot of the Roosevelt Field Mall.

At the time, the odds makers, my Uncle Kevin, had no idea Tommy was a dealer, and was listed at 200 to 1 odds. Interestingly, the winner of that year's pool, was Uncle Frank, a Detective for the Nassau County PD. He used most of his winnings to throw a huge wake for Tommy, thus completing the drinking requirements of the Irish genome.

One of my favorite bets every year, is fat Aunt Anne. Because she's so overweight, she always posts around 6 to 1 odds. I usually put about twenty, or thirty dollars on her. A few years back, she was polishing off her third turkey leg, and started choking. And even though I've never mentioned this to anyone one in the family, I have to admit, that for a moment, and just a moment mind you, I did some quick math, and had this inner conflict going on in my head: 6 to 1, Heimlich maneuver, 6 to 1, Heimlich maneuver.

There's something about the fact that one of us might not get through Thanksgiving that brings the family closer. Since the Death Pool started, conversations revolve around life and hope; we take interest in each other's well being, even if it is to get an edge up on the betting.

Monday morning, Thanksgiving week, at 6AM, the death watch officially begins. Besides Uncle Kevin, this year's front runners include, my mom, an insulin dependent diabetic who can't control herself around the holiday sweets. She's a traditional family favorite, at 4 to 1. My Aunt Jerry, who has two DWI convictions, and just fell off the wagon is underrated in my opinion at 5 to 1. My cousin David, who recently joined the Navy, is 20 to 1 but his odds get better every time President Bush opens his mouth. And even though I have thirty bucks riding on fat Aunt Anne, this year, I'm going to have a discussion with the family about liposuction and getting her odds back to 10 or 15 to 1.

I'm waiting for the year when our family tradition comes to an end and we have a simple holiday gathering, rather than a full blown wake. I will miss the philosophical discussions about family and what life really means, but after all these years of the death pool, I would trade all those soul searching conversations for an all day discourse about something as trivial as a misguided point of view proclaimed by Saint Rush Limbaugh.

In the mean time, at 90 to 1 odds, I head home for the holidays in my Volvo station wagon, both hands on the wheel, seat belt low and tight across my lap, with my fingers crossed, hoping I don't become this year's long shot that comes in. Happy Holidays everyone, and I'm taking action on the pool, if anyone's interested.