

## **Bowing Out**

by Barry R. Taylor

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Carlotta sighted down the arrow. Her vision was clear, and keen. Across the grass, exactly forty metres away, stood a target of five concentric circles in different colours. She aimed for the yellow ring at the centre. She carefully estimated the arrow's drop over forty metres, and aimed higher to compensate. She noted the light cross-wind. She slid her fingers smoothly off the nock, beside her right ear. The arrow flew straight and true. She heard a satisfying "Thwack!" as the arrow struck the target and buried itself in the straw. A murmur rose from the small crowd standing behind the safety line, including, as always, her coach and her parents. Five seconds later another, louder reaction as another arrow hit home. Dammit! Daphne must have out-shot her.

She lowered the bow to nock her next arrow. Coach had already talked to her about keeping her mind clear. "Carly, you've got this," he said, between rounds. "You can win this contest. You can be the first woman to win the North Region Traditional Archery Competition three years running. You have to stay on target. Daphne has been steadily improving, and now she's on your tail. But you have built up a good lead. Don't let her distract you. Concentrate on your aim and make each shot count. You're a winner, Carly. Show the world how you win."

It was a familiar speech, delivered with conviction. Coach did want her to win. That was his job, wasn't it. When Carlotta won, which she did often, it reflected well on him and on the school. Her parents wanted her to win. They came out to every match that wasn't too far from home. They encouraged her to keep practising, to keep up with her exercises, and above all, to cultivate a winning mentality.

Carlotta wasn't entirely clear on what a winning mentality was. It had something to do with an attitude of entitlement, as if you expected to win before the contest even began. Act as though you have already seized the crown and let others take it from you, if they can. Perform that way often enough and you come to believe it yourself. That confidence, that edge, could make the difference in a tight competition. Lately, Carlotta's performance had begun to waver.

She nocked her arrow and raised the bow. It was a traditional longbow, almost as tall as her, made of laminated wood and fibreglass. She aimed carefully. The breeze was tricky. She released the arrow and watched it fly. This time it found home nearer the centre. She could tell from the crowd that Daphne's flight wasn't quite as good.

She ventured a look across the shooting lanes to where Daphne stood, posed in the archer's stance with one foot forward. Daphne grinned back at her. She wore her blonde hair short in contrast to Carlotta's long, brown ponytail. The lanes on either side of her were empty. The organizers had deliberately placed Daphne and Carlotta, the best archers in the competition, alone on the last round, to build a little excitement. They were running very close. These last five arrows would decide it all. One of them would be the winner, which meant, by definition, that all the other contestants would be losers. Sometimes life was that simple. Carlotta's mother said so, anyway.

"Two minutes," the referee called. Carlotta nocked her next arrow. She sighted down the shaft. She stole another look at Daphne, who was doing the same thing. She hesitated.

Daphne was a childhood friend. They had both discovered archery in high school. For Carlotta, it had been love at first arrow flight. Athletic, but too slow and independent for team sports, she had been immediately taken by an individual sport that required patience and skill, but wasn't stupid, like golf. Archery had history. Archery had changed history. Carlotta's parents, in turn, had been delighted that their strong-willed, independent, doesn't-play-well-with-others daughter had finally found an avocation that she loved. They supported her almost fiercely. That was an only-child thing.

Carlotta and Daphne had been best friends throughout high school. They had gone on to different universities, though both in the same province. They had each joined the archery clubs associated with their school, so of course they ended up competing against each other.

Carlotta had been brilliant from the outset. In her freshman year she surprised everyone by winning the Regional against older, more experienced women. She won again in second year, though in her mind that didn't count because Daphne had taken sick so there was no strong competition. Daphne, always strong but not quite up to Carlotta's level, had improved steadily in her third year. Carlotta, on the other hand, began to struggle.

Coach had noticed her hesitation. Behind her, he stage-whispered, "Focus, Carly!" The rebuke brought her back to herself. She could win this. All she had to do was land a few more

half-decent shots. She released the arrow and watched it fly. It landed with a satisfying “thunk” not far from the bull’s-eye. The crowd was appreciative. Daphne’s arrow was equally close. She tended to drift to the right. Not so much this time, though.

Carlotta nocked her next arrow, lifted the bow. It hadn’t been inevitable that she would be here this year. She had been off her game all season. She had lost a couple of times, something that never happened before. Daphne had taken home ribbons that could have been hers. Carlotta’s winning mentality was fraying at the edges. Sure she wanted to win, but she mostly enjoyed the physical challenge of shooting arrows at a small target. She had won the Regional twice. Wasn’t that enough? Coach kept telling her to keep her eye on the target. She had a chance to set a record, he reminded her, the first three-time winner in the school’s history.

The school’s history in traditional archery wasn’t that long. Still, the badgering from her coach and from her mother had been effective. She had tightened her bowstrings, as Coach liked to say. She had scored well enough to join the team at the Regional again, where she had dominated. Except for Daphne.

She steadied her hands as she aimed the arrow. The crowd was silent. This shot mattered. Carlotta aimed a tad further right to allow for a gust of wind, then released. The arrow seemed to fly in slow motion. It drifted through the air like a soaring bird, then dove like a hawk to land a finger-width left of the bull’s-eye. Daphne’s release was almost simultaneous. The crowd was impressed by both. Carlotta felt herself smiling. That one was nine points for sure. She chanced another glance at Daphne. She was nocking her last arrow. She didn’t look at Carlotta.

Daphne nocked her last arrow as well. She couldn’t tell the exact score, but she and Daphne were clearly very close. Carlotta heard Coach cough theatrically behind her so she would look his way. He gave her a thumb’s up, out of sight of the referee. Daphne was behind. Carlotta had her.

Carlotta considered her rosy situation. Here she was, all set to win again. Land one good arrow, she could hardly do otherwise, and the trophy was hers. She would be a winner, once again, and her friend Daphne would be a loser. Because that was the dichotomy. At least, that was how her mother saw the world.

Was it really that simple? Or was this whole winners and losers business a false distinction imposed on a more complex reality? Daphne was an excellent archer, a good sport,

and a good friend. If Carlotta had been abducted by aliens or hit by a car on the way to the meet, Daphne would be the winner. The distinction was arbitrary. Away from the sports field, wasn't everybody just people trying to get along?

Carlotta raised her bow and pulled the string back to her ear. One good shot would win it for her. On the other hand, one bad shot, or even a clean miss, would probably let Daphne win. She deserved to win for once, or at least, to not lose. Carlotta was momentarily astonished that she was harbouring such thoughts. She had never considered such a gambit before. She could blame a poor shot on the wind. Coach might be suspicious, but Daphne wouldn't care. Her mother would be disappointed.

Carlotta's mother was openly proud of her daughter's accomplishments. She wanted Carlotta to win, always. Winning was the whole point. She dusted Carlotta's trophies. Her father was less competitive. "Do your best, Carly," he said, before every match. "And don't forget to have fun."

Having fun, that was the missing ingredient here. Archery had stopped being fun when the competition became everything; when her winning mentality morphed into an obsession with never losing. She couldn't throw the match; that would be cheating, even if she were only cheating herself. She promised her father she would do her best. Winning or losing seemed like the only choices. Unless . . . . She paused with her bow drawn. Maybe there was another option, one that everyone seemed to overlook.

She lowered her bow. "Hey Daphne!" she called across the lanes, "Hold on a sec. Do you wanna go to the beach?"

Daphne was getting set for her last shot. "Carly! What are you doing!" she cried.

"No talking in the lanes!" the referee snapped.

"Focus, Carly!" shouted Coach, or maybe it was her mother, who could tell.

"I've been thinking," Carlotta said, "It's a perfect summer day. The water will be warm. There's supposed to be a great beach near here, Moore's Beach or something. Wanna go?"

Daphne was confused. "You mean, like, after the tournament?"

Carlotta un-nocked her arrow, set it back in the quiver. She left the lane to approach her friend. The referee objected, loudly, but she ignored him. "No, I mean right now. You and me. Getting wet and dodging jellyfish and lying on the sand wasting time. We used to go to the beach all the time, remember?"

“Carly! We have one arrow left to go.”

“I know,” Carlotta said, “That’s the problem, you see. If we shoot the last arrow, one of us is going to win this competition. The other is going to lose. If we go to the beach afterward, one of us will be jubilant and trying to conceal it while the other will be dejected and also trying to conceal it. No fun! But if we both go, right now, nobody wins, nobody loses, we can go play in the water.”

Carly was incredulous. “Are you on something? We can’t just walk away from a competition. What about the provincial championships?”

“Oh, the provincials can go hang themselves. I’m not even sure I want to go. So don’t worry about it. Let’s go to the beach.”

“How . . . how can you do that?” Daphne was still confused.

“Watch me,” Carlotta said. She returned to her lane, took off her quiver and wrist guard, and set them down along with her bow. Then she walked over to the referee, who was watching the two young women in open perplexity. A brief conversation ensued. Shortly thereafter, the referee announced, in a rather uncertain voice, “Carlotta Mattie has withdrawn from the competition.”

Carlotta discovered she was grinning as she walked over to the safety line. Coach made a baffled gesture. “Sorry Coach,” she said, before he could object, “it wasn’t fun any more.”

“Carlotta Mattie! What on earth do you think you are doing!” her mother almost shouted. “I’m going to the beach,” Carlotta replied. “Can I borrow the car?” Her mother only stared at her.

“Why don’t you take the pick-up,” said her father. He handed her the keys. He was the only one there besides Carlotta who was smiling. “There’s more to life than winning,” he said. Behind her, Carlotta heard the referee announce, “Daphne McBride has withdrawn from the competition.” There was commotion among the spectators.

“Pick up my stuff, won’t you,” Carlotta said, as Daphne trotted up beside her. “We’ll be back around supper time.”

“Do you even know where Moore’s Beach is?” Daphne asked, as they walked away.

“No! But we’ll figure it out.”

“Loser!” Daphne shouted, but she was laughing.