

## DRINKING GAMES

*How much people drink may matter less than how they drink it.*

BY MALCOLM GLADWELL

In 1956, Dwight Heath, a graduate student in anthropology at Yale University, was preparing to do field work for his dissertation. He was interested in land reform and social change, and his first choice as a study site was Tibet. But six months before he was to go there he got a letter from the Chinese government rejecting his request for a visa. "I had to find a place where you can master the literature in four months, and that was accessible," Heath says now. "It was a hustle." Bolivia was the next best choice. He and his wife, Anna Cooper Heath, flew to Lima with their baby boy, and then waited for five hours while mechanics put boosters on the plane's engines. "These were planes that the U.S. had dumped after World War II," Heath recalls. "They weren't supposed to go above ten thousand feet. But La Paz, where we were headed, was at twelve thousand feet." As they flew into the Andes, Cooper Heath says, they looked down and saw the remnants of "all the planes where the boosters didn't work."

From La Paz, they travelled five hundred miles into the interior of eastern Bolivia, to a small frontier town called Montero. It was the part of Bolivia where the Amazon Basin meets the Chaco—vast stretches of jungle and lush prairie. The area was inhabited by the Camba, a mestizo people descended from the indigenous Indian populations and Spanish settlers. The Camba spoke a language that was a mixture of the local Indian languages and seventeenth-century Andalusian Spanish. "It was an empty spot on the map," Heath says. "There was a railroad coming. There was a highway coming. There was a national government . . . coming."

They lived in a tiny house just outside of town. "There was no pavement, no sidewalks," Cooper Heath recalls.

"If there was meat in town, they'd throw out the hide in front, so you'd know where it was, and you would bring banana leaves in your hand, so it was your dish. There were adobe houses with stucco and tile roofs, and the town plaza, with three palm trees. You heard the rumble of oxcarts. The padres had a jeep. Some of the women would serve a big pot of rice and some sauce. That was the restaurant. The guy who did the coffee was German. The year we came to Bolivia, a total of eighty-five foreigners came into the country. It wasn't exactly a hot spot."

In Montero, the Heaths engaged in old-fashioned ethnography—"vacuuming up everything," Dwight says, "learning everything." They convinced the Camba that they weren't missionaries by openly smoking cigarettes. They took thousands of photographs. They walked around the town and talked to whomever they could, and then Dwight went home and spent the night typing up his notes. They had a Coleman lantern, which became a prized social commodity. Heath taught some of the locals how to build a split-rail fence. They sometimes shared a beer in the evenings with a Bolivian Air Force officer who had been exiled to Montero from La Paz. "He kept on saying, 'Watch me, I will be somebody,'" Dwight says. (His name was René Barrientos; eight years later he became the President of Bolivia, and the Heaths were invited to his inauguration.) After a year and a half, the Heaths packed up their photographs and notes and returned to New Haven. There Dwight Heath sat down to write his dissertation—only to discover that he had nearly missed what was perhaps the most fascinating fact about the community he had been studying.

Today, the Heaths are in their late seventies. Dwight has neatly combed

gray hair and thick tortoiseshell glasses, a reserved New Englander through and through. Anna is more outgoing. They live not far from the Brown University campus, in Providence, in a house filled with hundreds of African statues and sculptures, with books and papers piled high on tables, and they sat, in facing armchairs, and told the story of what happened half a century ago, finishing each other's sentences.

"It was August or September of 1957," Heath said. "We had just gotten back. She's tanned. I'm tanned. I mean, *really* tanned, which you didn't see a lot of in New Haven in those days."

"I'm an architecture nut," Anna said. "And I said I wanted to see the inside of this building near the campus. It was always closed. But Dwight says, 'You never know,' so he walked over and pulls on the door and it opens." Anna looked over at her husband.

"So we go in," Dwight went on, "and there was a couple of little white-haired guys there. And they said, 'You're tanned. Where have you been?' And I said Bolivia. And one of them said, 'Well, can you tell me how they drink?'" The building was Yale's Center of Alcohol Studies. One of the white-haired men was E. M. Jellinek, perhaps the world's leading expert on alcoholism at the time; the other was Mark Keller, the editor of the well-regarded *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*. Keller stood up and grabbed Heath by the lapels: "I don't know anyone who has ever been to Bolivia. Tell me about it!" He invited Heath to write up his alcohol-related observations for his journal.

After the Heaths went home that day, Anna said to Dwight, "Do you realize that every weekend we were in Bolivia we went out drinking?" The code he used for alcohol in his notebooks was 30A, and when he went over his notes he found 30A references everywhere. Still, nothing about the al-

cohol question struck him as particularly noteworthy. People drank every weekend in New Haven, too. His focus was on land reform. But who was he to say no to the *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*? So he sat down and wrote up what he knew. Only after his article, "Drinking Patterns of the Bolivian Camba," was published, in Sep-



*Culture and customs help shape the way alcohol affects us.*

tember of 1958, and the queries and reprint requests began flooding in from around the world, did he realize what he had found. "This is so often true in anthropology," Anna said. "It is not anthropologists who recognize the value of what they've done. It's everyone else. The anthropologist is just reporting."

**T**he abuse of alcohol has, historically, been thought of as a moral failing. Muslims and Mormons and many kinds of fundamentalist Christians do not drink, because they consider alcohol an invitation to weakness and sin. Around the middle of the last century, alcoholism began to be widely considered a disease: it was recognized

that some proportion of the population was genetically susceptible to the effects of drinking. Policymakers, meanwhile, have become increasingly interested in using economic and legal tools to control alcohol-related behavior: that's why the drinking age has been raised from eighteen to twenty-one, why drunk-driving laws have been toughened, and why alcohol is taxed heavily. Today, our approach to the social burden of alcohol is best described as a mixture of all three: we moralize, medicalize, and legalize.

In the nineteen-fifties, however, the researchers at the Yale Center of Alcohol Studies found something lacking in this emerging approach, and the reason had to do with what they observed right in their own town. New Haven was a city of immigrants—Jewish, Irish, and, most of all, Italian. Recent Italian immigrants made up about a third of the population, and whenever the Yale researchers went into the Italian neighborhoods they found an astonishing thirst for alcohol. The overwhelming majority of Italian-American men in New Haven drank. A group led by the director of the Yale alcohol-treatment clinic, Giorgio Lolli, once

interviewed a sixty-one-year-old father of four who consumed more than three thousand calories a day of food and beverages—of which a third was wine. "He usually has an 8-oz. glass of wine immediately following his breakfast every morning," Lolli and his colleagues wrote. "He always takes wine with his noonday lunch—as much as 24 oz." But he didn't display the pathologies that typically accompany that kind of alcohol consumption. The man was successfully employed, and had been drunk only twice in his life. He was, Lolli concluded, "a healthy, happy individual who has made a satisfactory adjustment to life."

By the late fifties, Lolli's clinic had

admitted twelve hundred alcoholics. Plenty of them were Irish. But just forty were Italians (all of whom were second- or third-generation immigrants). New Haven was a natural experiment. Here were two groups who practiced the same religion, who were subject to the same laws and constraints, and who, it seemed reasonable to suppose, should have the same assortment within their community of those genetically predisposed to alcoholism. Yet the heavy-drinking Italians had nothing like the problems that afflicted their Irish counterparts.

"That drinking must precede alcoholism is obvious," Mark Keller once wrote. "Equally obvious, but not always sufficiently considered, is the fact that drinking is not necessarily followed by alcoholism." This was the puzzle of New Haven, and why Keller demanded of Dwight Heath, that day on the Yale campus, Tell me *how* the Camba drink. The crucial ingredient, in Keller's eyes, had to be cultural.

The Heaths had been invited to a party soon after arriving in Montero, and every weekend and holiday thereaf-

ter. It was their Coleman lantern. "Whatever the occasion, it didn't matter," Anna recalled. "As long as the party was at night, we were first on the list."

The parties would have been more aptly described as drinking parties. The host would buy the first bottle and issue the invitations. A dozen or so people would show up on Saturday night, and the party would proceed—often until everyone went back to work on Monday morning. The composition of the group was informal: sometimes people passing by would be invited. But the structure of the party was heavily ritualized. The group would sit in a circle. Someone might play the drums or a guitar. A bottle of rum, from one of the sugar refineries in the area, and a small drinking glass were placed on a table. The host stood, filled the glass with rum, and then walked toward someone in the circle. He stood before the "toastee," nodded, and raised the glass. The toastee smiled and nodded in return. The host then drank half the glass and handed it to the toastee, who would finish it. The toastee eventually stood, refilled the

glass, and repeated the ritual with someone else in the circle. When people got too tired or too drunk, they curled up on the ground and passed out, rejoining the party when they awoke. The Camba did not drink alone. They did not drink on work nights. And they drank only within the structure of this elaborate ritual.

"The alcohol they drank was awful," Anna recalled. "Literally, your eyes poured tears. The first time I had it, I thought, I wonder what will happen if I just vomit in the middle of the floor. Not even the Camba said they liked it. They say it tastes bad. It burns. The next day they are sweating this stuff. You can smell it." But the Heaths gamely persevered. "The anthropology graduate student in the nineteen-fifties felt that he had to adapt," Dwight Heath said. "You don't want to offend anyone, you don't want to decline anything. I gritted my teeth and accepted those drinks."

"We didn't get drunk that much," Anna went on, "because we didn't get toasted as much as the other folks around. We were strangers. But one night there was this really big party—sixty to eighty people. They'd drink. Then pass out. Then wake up and party for a while. And I found, in their drinking patterns, that I could turn my drink over to Dwight. The husband is obliged to drink for his wife. And Dwight is holding the Coleman lantern with his arm wrapped around it, and I said, 'Dwight, you are burning your arm.' She mimed her husband peeling his forearm off the hot surface of the lantern. "And he said—very deliberately—"So I am."

When the Heaths came back to New Haven, they had a bottle of the Camba's rum analyzed and learned that it was a hundred and eighty proof. It was *laboratory* alcohol—the concentration that scientists use to fix tissue. No one had ever heard of anyone drinking it. This was the first of the astonishing findings of the Heaths' research—and, predictably, no one believed it at first.

"One of the world's leading physiologists of alcohol was at the Yale center," Heath recalled. "His name was Leon Greenberg. He said to me, 'Hey, you spin a good yarn. But you couldn't really have drunk that stuff.' And he



*"We could easily sell this place—it shows nicely."*

needed me just enough that he knew he would get a response. So I said, 'You want me to drink it? I have a bottle.' So one Saturday I drank some under controlled conditions. He was taking blood samples every twenty minutes, and, sure enough, I did drink it, the way I said I'd drunk it."

Greenberg had an ambulance ready to take Heath home. But Heath decided to walk. Anna was waiting up for him in the third-floor walkup they rented, in an old fraternity house. "I was hanging out the window waiting for him, and there's the ambulance driving along the street, very slowly, and next to it is Dwight. He waves, and he looks fine. Then he walks up the three flights of stairs and says, 'Ahh, I'm drunk,' and falls flat on his face. He was out for three hours."

The bigger surprise was what happened when the Camba drank. The Camba had weekly benders with laboratory-proof alcohol, and, Dwight Heath said, "There was no social pathology—none. No arguments, no disputes, no sexual aggression, no verbal aggression. There was pleasant conversation or silence." On the Brown University campus, a few blocks away, beer—which is to Camba rum approximately what a peashooter is to a bazooka—was known to reduce the student population to a raging hormonal frenzy on Friday nights. "The drinking didn't interfere with work," Heath went on. "It didn't bring in the police. And there was no alcoholism, either."

What Heath found among the Camba is hard to believe. We regard alcohol's behavioral effects as inevitable. Alcohol disinhibits, we assume, as reliably as caffeine enlivens. It gradually unlocks the set of psychological constraints that keep our behavior in check, and makes us do things that we would not ordinarily do. It's a drug, after all.

But, after Heath's work on the Camba, anthropologists began to take note of all the puzzling ways in which alcohol wasn't reliable in its effects. In the classic 1969 work "Drunken Comportment," for example, the anthropologists Craig MacAndrew and Robert B. Edgerton describe an encounter that Edgerton had while study-

ing a tribe in central Kenya. One of the tribesmen, he was told, was "very dangerous" and "totally beyond control" after he had been drinking, and one day Edgerton ran across the man:

I heard a commotion, and saw people running past me. One young man stopped and urged me to flee because this dangerous drunk was coming down the path attacking all whom he met. As I was about to take this advice and leave, the drunk burst wildly into the clearing where I was sitting. I stood up, ready to run, but much to my surprise, the man calmed down, and as he walked slowly past me, he greeted me in polite, even deferential terms, before he turned and dashed away. I later learned that in the course of his "drunken rage" that day he had beaten two men, pushed down a small boy, and eviscerated a goat with a large knife.

The authors include a similar case from Ralph Beals's work among the Mixe Indians of Oaxaca, Mexico:

The Mixe indulge in frequent fist fights, especially while drunk. Although I probably saw several hundred, I saw no weapons used, although nearly all men carried machetes and many carried rifles. Most fights start with a drunken quarrel. When the pitch of voices reaches a certain point, everyone expects a fight. The men hold out their weapons to the onlookers, and then begin to fight with their fists, swinging wildly until one falls down [at which point] the victor helps his opponent to his feet and usually they embrace each other.

The angry Kenyan tribesman was disinhibited toward his own people but inhibited toward Edgerton. Alcohol turned the Mixe into aggressive street fighters, but they retained the presence of mind to "hold out their weapons to the onlookers." Something that truly disinhibits ought to be indiscriminate in its effects. That's not the picture of alcohol that these anthropologists have given us. (MacAndrew and Edgerton, in one of their book's many wry asides, point out that we are all acquainted with people who can hold their liquor. "In the absence of anything observably untoward in such a one's drunken comportment," they ask, "are we seriously to presume that he is devoid of inhibitions?")

Psychologists have encountered the same kinds of perplexities when they have set out to investigate the effects of drunkenness. One common belief is that alcohol causes "self-inflation." It makes us see ourselves through rose-tinted glasses. Oddly, though, it doesn't make us view everything about ourselves

through rose-tinted glasses. When the psychologists Claude Steele and Mahzarin Banaji gave a group of people a personality questionnaire while they were sober and then again when they were drunk, they found that the only personality aspects that were inflated by drinking were those where there was a gap between real and ideal states. If you are good-looking and the world agrees that you are good-looking, drinking doesn't make you think you're even better-looking. Drinking only makes you feel you're better-looking if you think you're good-looking and the world doesn't agree.

Alcohol is also commonly believed to reduce anxiety. That's what a disinhibiting agent should do: relax us and make the world go away. Yet this effect also turns out to be selective. Put a stressed-out drinker in front of an exciting football game and he'll forget his troubles. But put him in a quiet bar somewhere, all by himself, and he'll grow *more* anxious.

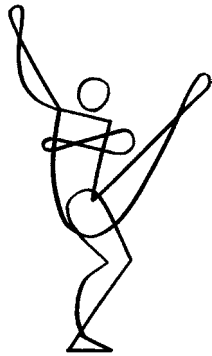
Steele and his colleague Robert Joseph's explanation is that we've misread the effects of alcohol on the brain. Its principal effect is to narrow our emotional and mental field of vision. It causes, they write, "a state of shortsightedness in which superficially understood, immediate aspects of experience have a disproportionate influence on behavior and emotion."

Alcohol makes the thing in the foreground even more salient and the thing in the background disappear. That's why drinking makes you think you are attractive when the world thinks otherwise: the alcohol removes the little constraining voice from the outside world that normally keeps our self-assessments in check. Drinking relaxes the man watching football because the game is front and center, and alcohol makes every secondary consideration fade away. But in a quiet bar his problems are front and center—and every potentially comforting or mitigating thought recedes. Drunkenness is not disinhibition. Drunkenness is myopia.

Myopia theory changes how we understand drunkenness. Disinhibition suggests that the drinker is increasingly insensitive to his environment—that

he is in the grip of an autonomous physiological process. Myopia theory, on the contrary, says that the drinker is, in some respects, increasingly sensitive to his environment: he is at the mercy of whatever is in front of him.

A group of Canadian psychologists led by Tara MacDonald recently went into a series of bars and made the patrons read a short vignette. They had to imagine that they had met an attractive person at a bar, walked him or her home, and ended up in bed—only to discover that neither of them had a condom. The subjects were then asked to respond on a scale of one (very unlikely) to nine (very likely) to the proposition: "If I were in this situation, I would have sex." You'd think that the



subjects who had been drinking heavily would be more likely to say that they would have sex—and that's exactly what happened. The drunk people came in at 5.36, on average, on the nine-point scale. The sober people came in at 3.91. The drinkers couldn't sort through the long-term consequences of unprotected sex. But then MacDonald went back to the bars and stamped the hands of some of the patrons with the phrase "AIDS kills." Drinkers with the hand stamp were slightly *less* likely than the sober people to want to have sex in that situation: they couldn't sort through the kinds of rationalizations necessary to set aside the risk of AIDS. Where norms and standards are clear and consistent, the drinker can become more rule-bound than his sober counterpart.

In other words, the frat boys drinking in a bar on a Friday night don't have to be loud and rowdy. They are responding to the signals sent by their immediate environment—by the pulsing music, by the crush of people, by the dimmed light, by the countless movies and television shows and general cultural expectations that say that young men in a bar with pulsing music on a Friday night have permission to be loud and rowdy. "Persons learn about drunkenness what their societies import to them, and comporting themselves in consonance with these understandings, they become living confirmations of their society's teachings," MacAndrew

and Edgerton conclude. "Since societies, like individuals, get the sorts of drunken comportment that they allow, they deserve what they get."

This is what connects the examples of Montero and New Haven. On the face of it, the towns are at opposite ends of the spectrum. The Camba got drunk every weekend on laboratory-grade alcohol. The Italians drank wine, in civil amounts, every day. The Italian example is healthy and laudable. The Camba's fiestas were excessive and surely took a long-term physical toll. But both communities understood the importance of rules and structure. Camba society, Dwight Heath says, was marked by a singular lack of "communal expression." They were itinerant farmworkers. Kinship ties were weak. Their daily labor tended to be solitary and the hours long. There were few neighborhood or civic groups. Those weekly drinking parties were not chaotic revels; they were the heart of Camba community life. They had a function, and the elaborate rituals—one bottle at a time, the toasting, the sitting in a circle—served to give the Camba's drinking a clear structure.

In the late nineteen-forties, Phyllis Williams and Robert Straus, two sociologists at Yale, selected ten first- and second-generation Italian-Americans from New Haven to keep diaries detailing their drinking behavior, and their entries show how well that community understood this lesson as well. Here is one of their subjects, Philomena Sappio, a forty-year-old hairdresser from an island in the Bay of Naples, describing what she drank one week in October of 1948:

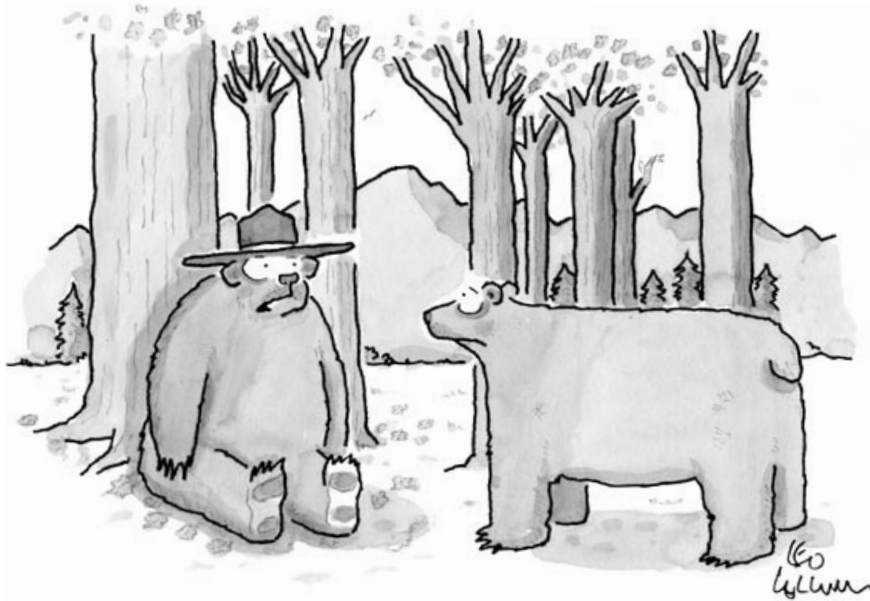
Fri.—Today for dinner 4 oz. of wine [noon]. In the evening, I had fish with 8 oz. of wine [6 P.M.].

Sat.—Today I did not feel like drinking at all. Neither beer nor any other alcohol. I drank coffee and water.

Sun.—For dinner I made lasagna at noon, and had 8 oz. of wine. In the evening, I had company and took one glass of liqueur [1 oz. strega] with my company. For supper—I did not have supper because I wasn't hungry.

Mon.—At dinner I drank coffee, at supper 6 oz. of wine [5 P.M.].

Tues.—At dinner, 4 oz. wine [noon]. One of my friends and her husband took me and my daughter out this evening in a restaurant for supper. We had a splendid supper. I drank 1 oz. of vermouth [5:30 P.M.] and 12 oz. of wine [6 P.M.].



*"I don't know anything about forest fires. I ate a ranger."*

Wed.—For dinner, 4 oz. of wine [noon] and for supper 6 oz. of wine [6 P.M.].

Thurs.—At noon, coffee and at supper, 6 oz. of wine [6 P.M.].

Fri.—Today at noon I drank orange juice; at supper in the evening [6 P.M.] 8 oz. of wine.

Sappio drinks almost every day, unless she isn't feeling well. She almost always drinks wine. She drinks only at mealtimes. She rarely has more than a glass—except on a special occasion, as when she and her daughter are out with friends at a restaurant.

Here is another of Williams and Straus's subjects—Carmino Trotta, aged sixty, born in a village outside Salerno, married to a girl from his village, father of three, proprietor of a small grocery store, resident of an exclusively Italian neighborhood:

Fri.—I do not generally eat anything for breakfast if I have a heavy supper the night before. I leave out eggnog and only take coffee with whisky because I like to have a little in the morning with coffee or with eggnog or a few crackers.

Mon.—When I drink whisky before going to bed I always put it in a glass of water. . . .

Wed.—Today is my day off from business, so I [drank] some beer because it was very hot. I never drink beer when I am working because I don't like the smell of beer on my breath for my customers.

Thurs.—Every time that I buy a bottle of whisky I always divide same. One half at home and one half in my shop.

Sappio and Trotta do not drink for the same purpose as the Camba: alco-

hol has no larger social or emotional reward. It's food, consumed according to the same quotidian rhythms as pasta or cheese. But the content of the rules matters less than the fact of the rule, the existence of a drinking regimen that both encourages and constrains alcohol's use. "I went to visit one of my friends this evening," Sappio writes. "We saw television and she offered me 6 oz. of wine to drink, and it was good [9 P.M.]" She did not say that her friend put the bottle on the table or offered her a second glass. Evidently, she brought out one glass of wine for each of them, and they drank together, because one glass is what you had, in the Italian neighborhoods of New Haven, at 9 P.M. while watching television.

Why can't we all drink like the Italians of New Haven? The flood of immigrants who came to the United States in the nineteenth century brought with them a wealth of cultural models, some of which were clearly superior to the patterns of their new host—and, in a perfect world, the rest of us would have adopted the best ways of the newcomers. It hasn't worked out that way, though. Americans did not learn to drink like Italians. On the contrary, when researchers followed up on Italian-Americans, they found that by the third and fourth generations they were, in-

creasingly, drinking like everyone else.

There is something about the cultural dimension of social problems that eludes us. When confronted with the rowdy youth in the bar, we are happy to raise his drinking age, to tax his beer, to punish him if he drives under the influence, and to push him into treatment if his habit becomes an addiction. But we are reluctant to provide him with a positive and constructive example of how to drink. The consequences of that failure are considerable, because, in the end, culture is a more powerful tool in dealing with drinking than medicine, economics, or the law. For all we know, Philomena Sappio could have had within her genome a grave susceptibility to alcohol. Because she lived in the protective world of New Haven's immigrant Italian community, however, it would never have become a problem. Today, she would be at the mercy of her own inherent weaknesses. Nowhere in the multitude of messages and signals sent by popular culture and social institutions about drinking is there any consensus about what drinking is supposed to mean.

"Mind if I vent for a while?" a woman asks her husband, in one popular—and depressingly typical—beer ad. He is sitting on the couch. She has just come home from work. He replies, "Mind? I'd prefer it!" And he jumps up, goes to the refrigerator, and retrieves two cans of Coors Light—a brand that comes with a special vent intended to make pouring the beer easier. "Let's vent!" he cries out. She looks at him oddly: "What are you talking about?" "I'm talking about venting!" he replies, as she turns away in disgust. "What are *you* talking about?" The voice-over intones, "The vented wide-mouthed can from Coors Light. It lets in air for a smooth, refreshing pour." Even the Camba, for all their excesses, would never have been so foolish as to pretend that you could have a conversation about drinking and talk only about the can. ♦

#### BLOCK THAT METAPHOR!

*From the Sarasota (Fla.) Herald-Tribune.*

"He had his back against the wall and SunTrust was playing hardball," said John Patterson, Canino's longtime Sarasota lawyer. "When someone really gets their back against the wall and a white knight appears, the tendency is not to kick the tires as much as you should."