Interview

In a basement booth at Murphy’s Pub on Green Street, I met up with Willie, the team captain for the Illini Paintballers. The basement is fairly empty except for two groups of people off in the distance. One group is three women dressed in 1950s style clothing and sharing a basket of chicken wings, that by the way smelled delicious. The women were sharing laughs, and talking about something that neither Willie nor I could understand. The other group of people was standing in the corner, two men and two women, watching something on ESPN, and catching up over lunch. Willie and I sat down, and started talking about everything from how he got started, to the injuries sustained, to the “third place” finish at last year’s national competition.

Josh Hartnett: Alright Willie, let’s knock this thing out right now, and we can get some lunch or something. I think it should only take like 10 to 15 minutes, so not too bad ya know?

Willie: (laughs) well ok, I hope I can help you out here bud.

JH: Ok, well here we go. Can you tell me how you and the other guys in the paintball club got started? Like how old you guys were, and where you first played?

W: Well, I’d have to say that I got my start in paintball in the woods back home, like just messing around with friends and shit. That’s the way everyone I know got their start. Sometimes when we go back home we still mess around back there just for the fun ya know? We don’t use our nice guns though. We all bought these really shitty pump guns, and its so much fun because you only shoot like 50 balls all day, and it’s just good times with people you haven’t seen in a while.

JH: Yeah, I think that’s how some of my friends who played got started too. They made a couple fields behind the high school, but like always got caught by the cops and shit. Kinda blows. (Laughs) Ok well now I know how you guys got started, I read online about last year’s nationals. Can you tell me about that experience?

W: (laughs) Well, the website says fourth, but everyone on the team is sticking with the story that we took third. It was kinda of bullshit with how we got screwed in overtime. I never thought I would be the guy who bitches about refs, but seriously, almost four months later, and everyone on the team is still pretty upset about it all. (Laughing) But I guess we’ll just have to show them this year. We’ve got a few really good freshmen, but I don’t know how much time they’ll see just because they don’t have the experience that some of the other guys have.

JH: Yeah that makes sense. But can you describe like the atmosphere and stuff?
W: Oh yeah sure. Well paintball as a collegiate sport started just a couple years ago. I’m pretty sure the guy who started it all, Nick Rails, went to U of I. (Laughing) so I guess you could call us the Godfathers of the sport. But anyways, nationals are the biggest event of the year for collegiate paintball. It’s even on TV and shit. But, basically you just have win a qualifying tournament, like the one in Disney, or win your conference and you’ll be in. Its teams from all over the nation, like last year we beat Tennessee in the semis, and lost to UC Irvine in the quarters, or maybe the other way around? (Laughs)

JH: Wow that sounds pretty intense. I think I saw a couple games last year, but not colleges. I’m pretty sure they were pros. Does anyone on the team think they have what it takes to go pro?

W: Well, none of the older guys do, but I’m pretty sure when the young guys see what nationals is all about, they’ll have “the dream”. But no one the team can even measure up to those guys who play professionally. That’s their lives, I mean; we’re just kids in college. It’s pretty much a drinking club, with a little paintball on the weekends. (Laughs)

JH: Yeah, I hear that. So can you tell me how the paintball club got started, and when? Like, are there any originals still on the team, or is it older than all of you?

W: Holy shit, this thing was here way before me. I was just walking around on quad day, and found a paintball club and signed up, and after a while the guys started to accept me, and now look where that got me. I’m the guy giving the dirty looks to the freshmen. (Laughs) But seriously, I think the paintball club started in 1998 or 1999? But I’m not too sure.

JH: And when did nationals start?

W: Oh that started around the same year as our paintball club. In the early years, there were only like 10 or 12 teams, and now almost every school in the nation is getting a team. It’s pretty exciting. I’m pretty sure from like 1999 until 2003 we won nationals. So that was really cool, but in the past couple years we’ve taken like second, fifth, second, first, and of course “fourth”. (Laughs) The funny story is about the fifth place finish. Our team captain flew us out to a wedding the night before nationals, and we got in like ten minutes before our first game. We were all hung over, and needless to say didn’t feel like getting hit with paintballs early in the morning. So that’s the fifth place story. We try not to let that happen ever again ya know?

JH: Yeah that’s a pretty crazy story. So where do you guys get the money for all of this? I mean, my friends said that it’s really expensive to play, and I mean, you’re still college students so you guys can’t have that much money, right?

W: Well, pretty much all of the money comes from the school actually. They usually pay for gas money and a couple entries into tournaments throughout the year. It helps if we win conference, or a qualifying tournament, so they don’t have pay our way into nationals. We have a guy on the team that is really good with money so he handles it all. Sometimes we alter some things too so we end up with a little extra for paint and shit. Kinda shady, but hey we’re college kids. Gotta do what ya gotta do. (Laughs)
JH: Really? You guys try to cheat the school? Why?

W: Well, not cheat the school, just get extra money somehow. Money is hard to come by here, and if they’re giving it out, we’re taking it. There’s actually some guys on the team that would love to just rob the school blind, but our money guy is pretty good with not taking more than we need. It’s usually just around fifty bucks a tourney or something like that.

JH: Ok (laughing) whatever you say man. Can you describe what a paintball game is actually like? Like, I’ve only ever seen it on TV or Youtube. Like, do you guys have positions? Or is it just like run to a spot and shoot at the other team?

W: Well, it’s anything but run to a spot and shoot. It’s basically like, if your small and fast you run to the middle, if you’re middle, you run to the sides or half way from your side and the midline, and if you’re a big fat guy you just stand in the back and shoot cover fire so your guys don’t get lit up by some asshole on the other team.

JH: So are there like plays? No, right?

W: (laughs) Actually there are plays. It all depends on the set up of the course, and like where the bunkers are shit. Pretty intense. The other captain is actually really into having meetings and shit about going over the plays and the layout of the field. I’m not really like that because we all grew up playing, and we’re not gonna be able to shoot any better if you know what the other team’s side looks like. I would rather just use the team meeting time to drink! (Laughs)

JH: That sounds fun. So can you talk about teams in your conference, and about the tournaments leading to nationals? Like, I read that it goes by like where your school is located or something.

W: Oh yeah. Yeah we’re in the Midwest Conference. There are actually a lot of teams in it, but a lot of rookie teams, or just garbage teams. And like, this weekend we’re going out to Purdue to play in a qualifying tourney. I bet we lose though. (laughs) Last year we played here, and the refs were in their back pockets the entire time. It was bullshit. You would see paint explode on some guy’s jersey, and they wouldn’t get called out. I hate Purdue.

JH: Wow, didn’t even know anyone could cheat in paintball, but you learn something new every day, right? So do you guys have uniforms, or just wear something that you don’t mind getting muddy?

W: (laughs) Actually we do have pretty sweet jerseys. The more clothes you wear the more bounce you’ll get. Like paint will just bounce off you, so it’s pretty tight. (laughs)

JH: Never thought about it that way. That’s actually pretty smart, but you guys probably get pretty hot?

W: Oh yeah! Especially for nationals, because they’re in the middle of summer, and it’s always like 110 degrees, with like 100% humidity. (laughs)
JH: (laughs) Yeah but you guy probably wouldn’t have it any other way, ya know?

W: Kinda. (laughs)

JH: Ok, getting down to the end here Willie. So I was reading up on paintball online, and I found a bunch of sites about injuries, and how paintball is a very dangerous sport. What do you have to say about that?

W: (laughs) Well I’d have to say that yeah there are injuries, but they mostly occur when a guy slides to get behind a bunker or something. Like, I know a bunch of guys on the team that have messed up their knees pretty bad trying to move up a bunker, or just get to one at the start of the game. All those eye injuries you read about are mostly kids playing in their yards without masks on. That’s when kids get eye injuries and shit like that. But overall, I think I read somewhere about like golf and bowling having more injuries per year than paintball. But take that for what it’s worth coming from a paintball player. (Laughs)

JH: Where did you read about that? I mean, sounds pretty crazy, but that could be useful ya know?

W: (laughs) Probably from some forum somewhere. That’s where I get all of my info. I told you to take it for what it’s worth! (laughs)

JH: Well thanks for your time Willie. Anything else you want to say to the Rhet 105 class?

W: (laughs) Well, I’m glad to help you out. I just want to say that if anyone in the class is interested in paintball, it’s always “the more the merrier”. We play every Saturday, and have meetings in the basement of Murphy’s at 7 on Thursdays. It’s just a big family of guys, so don’t be afraid to some say hi to us.

JH: Thanks man.

W: Anytime