

COMMENTARY

For the ladies

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In the United States, like in Florida (a state once populated with that classic male icon, the cowboy), what it means to be a Real American Man (RAM) has grown more obscure in recent decades.

As a result, buying gifts for this rapidly mutating species — the RAM — has become much less simple.

It's always been true that men could pretty much be what they wanted to be in this country, unless they were unlucky enough to be gay or black. So most of us chose simply to ride tall in the saddle or walk tall on the street or stand tall at the head of the table, before we skillfully cut a tall roast down to size.

We brought the roast home first, of course, and let the ladies do the rest. There was a generation of men for whom Barcaloungers were powerful, life-affirming gifts.

But culture moves like a great wave, driven by an irresistible force (the past) that propels it into the future even as the content and context both change.

Which raises a timely question for the ladies: What does your man want (*besides* that) during the holidays? What will please him, flatter him, surprise him, and show him he still matters to you as a Real American Man, albeit an updated version?

In the eyes of most men, there are only two kinds of gifts: good gifts, and bad gifts.

Good gifts suggest novelty or ingenuity along with affection, and a sense that you

know what makes him tick. Bad gifts are everything else.

A good gift is almost always an unapologetic nod to power or speed, physical or mental prowess, adventure, humor, appetite, or what I call the Big Illusion in Men (BIM). The BIM is our highly suspect sense that we're sophisticated, urbane, and a lot more self-sufficient than reality suggests. The BIM puts the Swag in swagger, and the Puff in puffery. It's the M — A — N in man.

So let's start with that, for the HOLIDAYS 2007: Why not give him the M — A — N in man and let him sit tall in a real saddle, for once in his life.

From www.greatamericandays.com, enroll your RAM in Rodeo School, and let him ride high — for about two seconds, in most cases. This gift has the added advantage of teaching humility (no extra charge). You can choose the Saddle Bronc, Bareback or Bull Riding schools, or you can enroll your RAM in a Clown and Bull Fighting school. Instructors are all professional riders who are not yet dead (which speaks to their toughness, if not their rodeo skills, as manly icons).

"With bucking stock that fits your age, experience, athletic ability and goals — there's NO LIMIT on how many head you can get on!" according to the gushing promotional literature. Or how many head you can get off, suddenly and upside down.

WHERE: Zolfo Springs. COST: \$380 for three days, or \$260 for one day. WHAT TO BRING: Proof of health insurance, along with boots.

Or try this, from www.cloud9living.com: Put your man behind the wheel of a NEXTEL-cup style stock car at the USA International Speedway. Note: your RAM has to fit

through a standard-sized car window to get in the car, since the doors are welded shut, so if he currently comes equipped with a Real American Paunch (RAP), you can put him on a diet, first. Driving suit and helmet provided. WHERE: Lakeland. COST: \$365.

Or how about the ultimate in the power and speed category, from www.experience-days.com: Treat your RAM like a DOG (DOG = Dumb Old Guy or Dude Of Greatness, take your pick).

Sign him up for a real dogfight. He will fly a light attack fighter plane in air-to-air combat after a "thorough ground briefing and training introduction to tactical fighter maneuvers," they claim. Fully prepared and suited up, your RAM will climb into the cockpit with an experienced instructor. According to the promoters, "With your hands on the controls you will engage in six "g-pulling" dogfights. Proven training techniques will put you at ease at the controls...You will be flying in a dogfight with another plane, the patented electronic tracking system simulating the thrill of an actual 'guns hit!'"

For the price, your RAM should get to use real ammo, but at least he gets to come home with a video of his dogfights, and a certificate.

WHERE: Tampa/ St. Petersburg. COST: \$1,195. WHAT TO BRING: I recommend a parachute.

For a different kind of thrill, how about letting your man go one-on-one with The Black Widow, who is neither a widow nor black, but a real ball buster.

From www.excitations.com comes this: "EXCLUSIVE: PLAY POOL WITH THE BLACK WIDOW: Spend the evening improving your cue skills with pool-playing legend Jeanette Lee. Nicknamed 'the Black Widow,' Lee is world famous for her cool moves and tenacious ability to devour her opponents."

Your man will meet the Black Widow in a fancy pool club and watch her demonstrate kisses, combinations and trick shots, before going a few practice rounds and a game or two with her, they say. Then he'll watch her play others in his group while he enjoys a buffet and beer or wine.

WHERE: New York, Boston or Philadelphia. COST: \$645 and up (transportation not included).

Here are a few other ideas for Real American Men in 2007 that you probably can't find just anywhere:

- From www.personalization.com, a real issue of Life Magazine from the week of his birth (or the week of your marriage to him): from 1940 to the present, except 1973 to 1978 (for which another magazine will be substituted). COST: \$35.95.

- From www.uncommongoods.com, cufflinks or pens made from the old wooden seats at Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox (or from other stadiums). COST: \$140 to \$230.

- From www.baronbob.com, a 15-inch, hand-carved Bell X-1 Rocket model, personally signed by the right stuff himself, Chuck Yeager. On Oct. 14, 1947, at 10:30 a.m., Yeager took the X-1 to Mach 1.06, or about 700 miles per hour, 43,000 feet above the California desert, the plaque will tell you, ushering in the space age. COST: \$199.95.

- Also from www.baronbob.com, The Blues Brothers Talking Keychain, with such classic RAM lines as, "We're on a mission from God!" and "We're putting the band back together," and "It wasn't my fault. I swear to God!" COST: \$7.95. Includes batteries.

- Finally, the ultimate gift, from your very own Sweet-Strong Self (SSS): LOVE (love). Show your RAM, or anyone else, that getting it means giving it. COST: Heart and Soul, High or Low, Good or Bad, Happy or Sad. And Happy Holidays. ■

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