

When I read that Mary Connelly had been named the new executive producer of "The Late, Late Show with Craig Kilborn," my heart leapt. Mary Connelly! Coming back to the fold!

As all true David Letterman fans know, Mary Connelly was the staffer on NBC's "Late Night" who in 1991 beat two of the NFL's finest in a game of throwing the football across Dave's office into a wastebasket. Now she's in L.A., taking over for Billy Kimball as executive producer on the post-Dave show starring Kilborn, the former sportscaster and college basketball player who once led the Big Sky Conference in turnovers and was known by his teammates as "Vanilla Thunder."

In one of her early conversations with the host, Connelly was asked the trivia question Kilborn often likes to pose to his visitors: Name the six white NBA players since 1980 who had at least one season averaging more than 25 points a game.

"I got three out of six and Craig was impressed," Connelly told TV Barn in a phone interview. (For those of you playing along at home, the answers to Craig's quiz are at the end of this issue.)

Like many TV productions, the Letterman show has its ways of relieving stress behind the scenes. Mostly they are games of catch, though at times they escalate into free-wheeling tests of pitching velocity. Letterman in particular is known for chucking the ball, hard. One day, a staffer's fastball got away from him, and sailed through one of the windows facing Sixth Avenue. The ball presumably landed nine stories below, though as Letterman later recounted, everyone was too terrified to look. Shortly thereafter, Dave had the win-

dows covered over with a thick sheet of bulletproof plexiglass.

It was into this culture that Mary Connelly arrived in 1985 as a member of the "Late Night" production staff. Almost immediately she was pressed into on-air duty, as an audience member in a sketch. Two years later, she began a series of appearances as "Connie Plescoe," a "friend of the show" who stood by the famed blue exit doors, looking very pregnant. The joke was that Dave would always ask her to do various tasks, like getting up on a ladder to change a studio light or carrying off a huge TV set. Once, Connie showed up holding a baby -- only she was still pregnant and this wasn't her baby.

At some point during 1990, Dave and Mary began tossing the pigskin around his office. Taking turns at the corner trashcan, Connelly consistently hit her mark with frightening accuracy. Letterman began talking about it on the show, and in short order a camera, and Connelly, were dispatched to his office so that all of America could see her throwing prowess.

A couple of months later, Letterman bet \$5 he could beat Connelly to a throw-off. By the following spring, "Mary Connelly's Quarterback Challenge" had become New York's fastest-growing sports sensation. Giants quarterback Phil Simms tried, and failed, to go basket-for-basket with Connelly. The second, and final, victim was Bengals QB Boomer Esiason.

Perhaps it was a coincidence, but Connelly's career took off after the quarterback challenges. She was promoted from research coordinator to talent coordinator that spring, then segment producer the following year. She remained in