

Neither Have I

It has been my experience that one stumbles across life's most profound lessons in the most unexpected places -- places like the neighborhood baseball diamond.

Our sons' first game of the season was scheduled for an evening in early May. Since this particular league included grades six through eight, our older son was a third-year veteran on the team, while his younger brother, a sixth-grader, was among the new recruits. The usual crowd of parents had gathered as I took my seat on a weather-beaten plank, third row from the top. Sandwiched between a cotton candy-faced youngster and somebody's mother, I checked the scoreboard. Fourth inning already.

Because the boys had anticipated my late arrival, they instructed me to watch the first base and catcher positions. As my attention moved between them, I glanced at the pitcher's mound. Jason Voldner?

Jason was undoubtedly the most well-liked and good-natured boy on the team, but athletically, his position had been limited to the alternating positions of right field or bench -- the latter, unfortunately, more frequently. Having spent an uncountable number of hours as a spectator (on an equally uncountable number of varying bleachers), it is my belief that every ball field has its own version of Jason Voldner.

The Jasons of the world show up at a tender young age for their first Saturday morning T-ball practice, oiled glove in hand. By the end of this long awaited "chance to play ball," the heavy-hearted Jasons return home remembering the boy who hit farther, the boy who ran faster and the boy who actually knew what he was supposed to do with the glove.

Ability is not only recognized but utilized, allowing for the exceptional players to become even more so, while the Jasons wait their turn to play the seventh inning. Right field. Their allotted play time is not only limited, it's conditional: only if the team is already winning. If not, the Jasons have simply been waiting to go home. And yet here was Jason Voldner pitching what I would say was the game of his life.

Turning to comment to anyone willing to listen, I now realized that the "somebody's mother" sitting beside me belonged to Jason. "Such talent," I offered. "I've never seen your son pitch before." In a voice of quiet resolve she responded, "Neither have I." And then she told me this story.

Four weeks ago, she had chauffeured a car full of boys, her son included, to this same baseball diamond for their first spring practice. Just before dusk she had sat on her porch swing, dodging the sudden downpour and waiting for the next carpool mother to drop Jason off after practice. As the van pulled up, Jason emerged from behind the sliding door. "His face was a combination of dirt smudges and rain streaks and would have masked from anyone but me that he was upset," she said.

"My immediate concern was for an injury," Jason's mother continued. But there was none. Probing questions led her no closer to the elusive pain. By bedtime, she knew no more than she did back on the porch. This would change shortly.

“Sometime in the hours that followed, I was awakened by choking sobs. Jason’s. At his bedside, broken words were telling his story. ‘Waiting. Eighth grade. Sick of right field. Eighth grade.’”

As Jason’s mother calmed her son, he further explained that Matthew, a sixth-grader, was going to play second base “because his dad is coaching”; John, a sixth-grader, was assigned to shortstop “because he’s Matthew’s friend; and Brian, yet another sixth-grader, was the new catcher “because his brother is on the team.”

I found myself bristling here and wondered where her story was going. Brian was my younger son.

“Not fair. Not fair. Not fair.” Listening to Jason, his mother’s heart ached for him. There should be a word that takes empathy to another level; a word for the exclusive use of parents.

“While my son was waiting for me to agree with him,” said his mother, “I was making the difficult decision not to. One has to be careful when having a direct and lasting effect on another person’s negative emotions. Agreement may appear to be the most caring and loyal means of help, but in reality, it can work to the contrary as you reinforce the negative feelings.

“So I first explained to Jason that until we were ready to assist the coach with his responsibilities, we would trust his judgments.”

“Secondly, I reminded him of how seldom we passed the vacant lot on the corner of our block without finding the three sixth-graders in question involved in a random, unscheduled game of ball. Playing infield is not about being in the sixth grade or the eighth; it’s about working hard and capability, not preferential treatment. All through your life, you are going to come into contact with individuals possessing a natural talent for what they are pursuing -- on the ball field, in the classroom, in the workplace. Does this mean you are unable to achieve what they have? Certainly not. You simply have to choose to work harder. Resentment, blame and excuses only poison potential.”

Finally, Jason’s mother tucked him back into bed. As she smoothed the cover over him, she said to her son, “You’re disappointed that the coach doesn’t believe in you, Jason, but before you can expect others to believe in you, you have to believe in yourself. The coach is basing his placements on the performance he has seen thus far. If you truly believe you deserve a position other than right field, then prove it.” With those words she kissed him goodnight.

Jason’s mother laughed softly. “We spoke more in those few minutes than we have pretty much in the weeks since. Our contact recently has been through notes that Jason leaves me on the kitchen table: ‘Gone to practice. Gone to prove it.’” She paused. “And he did.”

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