OVERCOMING

Nobody has a perfect upbringing, but I grew up without a male role model.

My father -- despite being a brave WW2 veteran and working for the Chicago Fire Department for 25 years -- was, sadly, an alcoholic. I was the only boy in my family, with two sisters. Yet my Dad never tossed a football with me, or took me to a Cubs or White Sox game, or even took me fishing. I had to pathetically teach myself how to ride a bicycle. Simple home or car repairs, likewise, were unknown skills to me, something I was never taught. Other than being put to work doing certain mundane chores, I was largely ignored by both of my parents.

In elementary school, I was often one of the last to be chosen on a team. That hurt deeply. My throwing skills were also lackluster. I was ashamed and embarrassed, always trying to hide my deficiency -- for children of alcoholic families must never, ever reveal their secret.

I was, however, good at one thing: running. In fact, I was one of the fastest runners in school. At St. Bride's, we played an all-boys game at recess -- when the weather permitted -- called Tackle, which the nuns discouraged but which we managed to play on the sly anyway. It entailed running back and forth from a chain-link fence to a sidewalk border on a 120-foot stretch of cement -- our playing area behind the school, which doubled as a parking lot on Sundays for the church services held across the street. It began with one or two boys volunteering to be 'IT.' To start the game, they would run, grab, and tackle to the ground the slowest runners first. These new unfortunates were then added to those who would also tackle the runners. After a while, there would be dozens of tacklers, but only a few runners left -- the fastest and most cunning. I was usually one of those. I vividly recall being the last one or two who 'survived,' and then facing a mob of perhaps twenty or thirty eager boy tacklers. They would countdown backward from ten to force any remaining runners to leave their end zone and attempt to run the 'tackle gauntlet' to safety on the opposite side of the cement. I would focus my will power and map a strategy, then run, spin, dodge, deflect, leap, reverse, and basically do anything while in motion to evade my determined opponents. Often, I was overwhelmed by the mob and slammed to the ground and gleefully (for them) piled upon -- with skinned knees, scraped elbows, or torn pants my later proof of defeat. But sometimes, I made it across the cement stretch unscathed -- in victorious triumph -- just as the end-of-recess bell rang!

Sadly, I never watched baseball, basketball, or football on television like the other guys. I never knew the names of the players, or the statistics, or even the basic rules of the various sports. The one exception was Chicago Blackhawks hockey. I marveled at the speed and skill of such stars as Bobby Hull and Stan Mikita, especially if the Blackhawks were competing to win that year's Stanley Cup championship. Although I owned a pair of ice skates (as well as some used roller skates) and could move awkwardly around the frozen winter ponds near Rainbow Beach, I was never coordinated enough to join in actual competitive ice hockey games with my friends.

However, it was the Cub Scouts -- and especially the Boy Scouts -- that really helped me grow in initial athletic confidence. At summer camp in Michigan, I earned my first merit badges in swimming, archery, and canoeing. I was especially proud one year to successfully swim the epic "Mile Swim." Here is how it was set up: There was a tethered raft in the middle of a lake exactly a half-mile from shore. A rowboat with two experienced older Scout swimmers led the way, but the swim challenger was forbidden to touch the rowboat while swimming a few yards behind it. The rowers would encourage the newcomer on, all the way to the raft and around it, and then back to shore -- without the potential inductee resting or stopping unduly in the deep waters. It was really, really hard. But I never gave up, and was so happy when I actually did it!

I also remember hiking twenty-five miles for the very first time with my Troop 716 to Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, an exhausting, all-day effort which truly tested our mettle. We were warned that our aching, swollen feet had to stay in our boots during our elevated-leg 'rest periods,' because if we ever removed our shoes, we would be unable to put them back on!

In high school, I never lettered in any sport, but I regret even now that I wasn't able to try out for the Track & Field team. (I practically had no time anyway to attend any practices or meets, because I worked afterschool and on weekends -- to save up money for college -- as a grocery stock clerk in my Junior and Senior years.) I did well, however, in many running events in my regular P.E. classes, especially the 50-yard and 100-yard dashes, and in relay races.

For my physical education requirements in college, I took up trampoline, swimming, and lifesaving, and enjoyed co-ed volleyball and water polo. (I actually tried skydiving too, and also became a certified scuba diver.) Other guys on campus, meanwhile, assumed that I -- as an outgoing, healthy, six-foot tall, 175-pound, nineteen-year old -- would automatically join in softball or football games on weekends or after classes. But I never did, because I simply didn't know how to play. It was always awkward and painful for me when I declined their offers, without further explanation, sometimes watching as a kind of estranged 'outsider' from the sidelines.

Later, as a teacher of grades 4-8 for thirty years, I continued to hide my team sports deficiency. But I always took extra care with any athletic 'misfits' -- the overweight, the undersized, the meek -- who needed a kind word of support and encouragement, during those years when the regular classroom teachers also had to teach P.E. due to budget cuts. I knew exactly how those students were feeling. Healing some of their pain helped me heal some of my own.

As an adult, I soon began to tally up individual accomplishments in the areas of physical exercise. I rode my bicycle for fifty miles in one day with friends on the Katy Trail in Missouri. I climbed the Great Pyramid of Cheops in Egypt in 1977. I climbed the 10,463' extinct volcano Mt. Lassen in northern California with my wife. I have dived at the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, the Galapagos Islands, and the Gulf of Oman. I hiked the last 200 miles of the Camino de Santiago across northern Spain with a 25-pound backpack in 2005. And last year -- at age 68 -- I bicycled 200 miles on the Danube River Trail in Austria.

I have been to all fifty states and 114 countries so far -- insatiably walking, exploring, and climbing whether in cities or National Parks. And every day, I walk an hour and bicycle an hour to maintain my fitness, and do a half-hour of hand weight exercises. Nowadays, I can truly appreciate watching the Olympics every four years as well, and marvel at such dedication and such striving for perfection, as displayed by those remarkable athletes competing from around the world to be the best in their sport.

Thus, from such a paltry, once doubtful athletic upbringing, I feel that I have successfully overcome my team sports deficit and have moved forward on the road to proud physical confidence. I feel that if I can do this, then other young people, under similar parental circumstances, can too. And let us never forget those others -- especially those with serious bodily handicaps, either through birth or tragic accident -- who never gave up. They are the real heroes, and they remain an inspiration to me, and hopefully are for you too...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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