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Father/Son: "How 'Bout those Sox?"

It wasn't until last year, when he was 97, that I told my dad to his face that I loved him.

It was an awkward declaration, and I don't remember his response. He might have said he loved me too. It really didn't matter what he said: I knew he loved me. And I have no doubt he knew that I loved him too.

Instead of saying "I love you," we would say to each other, "How 'bout those Red Sox?" For my dad and me, sports were the medium of our sharing.

I think I learned everything I feel and believe about sports from my dad. Not by his instruction, but by his example. He never coached my teams – he couldn't take the time from work, and even if he could, I'm not sure he would have. Not his role. He was my dad, not my coach. He let my coaches coach me.

He didn't cajole or berate me though he knew I could be a better athlete if I worked harder at it. He didn't shoot hoops with me in the driveway. He was my dad, not my pal. This was the 1950s. He came to all my games in high school and as many as possible when I was in college here at Middlebury, five hours away from our home in Maine.

What we did was go to games together. My dad loved sports, thought they were unmediated *good*, and he transmitted that love to me. He thought athletes should be proud and hold themselves to a high standard, on and off the field.

One of my earliest sports memories was my dad taking me to Pettingill Park in Auburn to watch Chick Leahey play for the Auburn Asas under the lights against the Augusta Millionaires, semi-pro baseball. Chick had played in the Yankee system and was the baseball coach at Bates College and he became one of my heroes and mentors.

When Bates had a pair of national level track athletes, my dad and I went to the big indoor track meets in Boston to watch them compete in the Boston Garden.

We stayed at the old Madison Hotel next to the Garden and I collected autographs of Olympic stars in the lobby and on the elevator. I knew them all.

On Saturdays in the winter as a kid, I watched the indoor track meets in the Bates "Cage" from the balcony over the circular track, ten laps to a mile. All that activity - the dashes and the relays and the thirty-five pound hammer throw and the pole vault, all indoors in this contained space: the gun going off signaling the start of a race, guys running like crazy. Pandemonium. Total fun.

My dad was down in the "infield" as an official. Even in his retirement, he declined to go to Florida in order to be in Lewiston to officiate at track meets. He said, "who would pick second place in the 60 yard dash," the hardest job in this era before electronic timing and photo-finishes.

We went to innumerable Bates College athletic events, hundreds, every sport. Sometimes we went together, sometimes separately. Either way, the fortunes of these Bobcat teams and their players were invariably the subject of our conversations later on at home.

He was a very good football player. He's in the Waltham High School's Sports Hall of Fame. The child of immigrants, speaking Swedish in the home, he learned early that sports were a path to acceptance. As a student at Bates, he was on the team that tied Yale, 0-0, in 1932, and was football captain in his senior year. He loved the rough and tumble play of the game.

I played football in high school the same position as my dad, center. When he played, he had to snap the ball to backs in movement in this era before motion penalties, and long-snap to the punter. Try as he might, he could never teach me the long snap, and I moved to guard on fourth downs, to his chagrin.

My dad wrote his senior thesis at Bates on "Character and Athletic Competition." I wrote my dissertation in grad school on "the Sporting Hero in American Literature," and described an archetype riven by fears of his mortality.

Later on, with me here at Middlebury and my dad retired from Bates, we met in Boston for a Sox game every summer for about ten summers. My dad had a well-connected Bates friend who annually gave him ten tickets to his company's sky box at Fenway. My dad and Lewiston friends, Bob and Chick certainly, and Leigh, drove down from Maine, and I gathered my Middlebury buddies, Russ and Steve and Gary, and we rode down from Vermont, and we all watched a Sox game like rich folks in the luxury box. Wonderful nights at Fenway.

In our mutual adulthood, he and I settled into a relaxed fandom, watching games together when we could on the TV in the den of the house in Lewiston, Maine, where I grew up and he lived for 65 years.

My dad, my sports source, died last month, February 27th. He lived 98 years and a few months. The 98 years were good ones; the "few months" were hard.

It's spring - the days are longer, the sap's running. Baseball is in the air.

Hey Dad, how 'bout those Sox?

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