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# Making the Majors

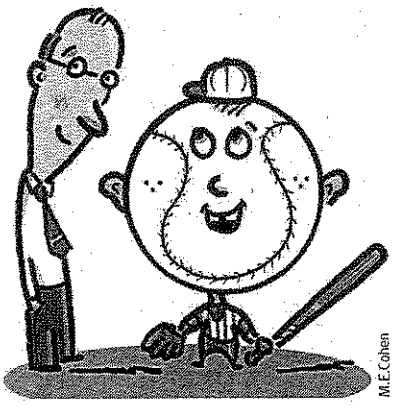
By Cameron Stracher

As a boy, I was never much of an athlete. Although I managed to run varsity track in college, sports that required hand-eye coordination eluded me. I married a woman who never met a ball she could hit. Neither of us cared much for televised athletics, except the occasional Yankee game or Olympic skating event, and gym clothes did not sully our bathroom floor. Let's just say we were not a sporty couple.

So when our son was able to recite the starting lineups for nearly every baseball team in the Major Leagues we felt oddly disquieted, as if he had informed us he was converting to an Eastern religion or changing his name. When he played baseball, football, and basketball with a fanaticism bordering on obsession we shook our heads and chalked it up to youthful exuberance. His collection of caps and pendants seemed charming and boyish, and his desire to lift weights and develop a "six-pack" hopelessly futile (he was skinny and tall, not unlike his parents).

But nothing could have prepared us for the phone call from the Little League coach telling us that our fifth-grader had been "drafted" onto his "major league" team along with the best players in the sixth and seventh grade. Our son? Yes, we had to admit, he had certainly looked good at the tryouts. And he was a starting pitcher for his AAA team last season. But we still thought of him as our genetic legacy, with our preferences, flaws, and foibles. Was it possible he had leapfrogged our DNA, acquiring his own traits like some refutation of Darwinian evolution? Or was he just blessed with hidden recessive characteristics, long dormant? Whatever the reason, the kid could hit the curve.

The clues, of course, had been there all along. And it was not as if we had ignored them. When he expressed interest in professional baseball, I took him to a Yankees game. When he wanted to



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play tennis, I bought him a racket and took him out on the court. I was his first Little League coach, and played basketball and wiffleball with him on the driveway. His mother and sister came to every game, even when a cold rain fell. Although he could outscore me by the time he was ten, I understood the value in validating my son's choices, something my own parents had denied me. While this boy's tastes were as strange as kumquats, I promised myself I would never discount them. Instead, I played harder, threw farther, and tried to keep up.

A funny thing happened on the way, as it often does when you come along for the ride. I found myself enjoying watching baseball, having a catch in the yard, discussing the virtues of the suicide squeeze. My son's enthusiasm was infectious, as was his love of sport. We bought a jump rope, and went jogging together. We learned to throw the changeup. When it snowed, I took him skiing (he went snowboarding), and in the summer we swam laps in a neighbor's pool. And I thought maybe I could do this: I could become a sportsman.

So by the time the phone rang, in some respects I was ready for it. I had been nervous after the Little League tryouts, and tried not to share it with my son, who—to his credit—seemed immune to the pressure. I told myself the game was all that mattered. But I was lying. I wanted this for my son, because I knew he wanted it for himself. It was not the first time in my life I had wanted something for him, but it was the first time our interests were aligned, and the first time mine followed his rather than the other way around. It was, I realized, the beginning of adulthood—the letting go and the coming along. There would be other moments like this, I knew, holding my breath for my son, as my father must have held his breath for me. Waiting. Worrying. Hoping. Staying awake on the couch until I heard the sound of his keys in the door.

His coach gave me some information, and I jotted it down on a napkin. He told me his own son was in the seventh grade, and this was his last year playing ball. I saw it then: the line of fathers watching their children grow, standing on the sidelines until they couldn't stand there anymore. Little Leaguers became high schoolers and then college graduates in the blink of an eye, quicker than a two-seam fastball. A father could only miss them. We said goodbye, and I hung up the phone.

As I sat there, a deep feeling of joy overcame me. I still remembered my own sense of inadequacy out on the ball fields, the feeling that I would never be good enough to play with the other boys. It was deeply ingrained in me, long after I had accomplished much in the world and even managed to set a few records of my own. Yet our boyhood failings haunt us, shaping the men we become, the fathers we are. I never wanted that failure for my son, but I knew there was little I could do to protect against it. We let them out into the world, and they make their own way: strange, fantastic, athletic.

My son will undoubtedly experience his own losses on the field. His heart will be broken, and hopefully mended. He may feel as if he can't go on. But not tonight. He is a major leaguer.

*Mr. Stracher is publisher of the New York Law School Law Review and author of "Dinner with Dad: How I Found My Way Back to the Family Table," published this month by Random House.*