

ESSAY

It Is Still Your Shot, Sir

Jeffrey R. Van Blarcom, MD

IF you can tolerate your child possessing elitist inclinations and lifelong feelings of supremacy, IF your child can tolerate a lifetime of barbs and insults from the graduates of the nearby public university, and IF you have enough money not tied up in Japanese bearer bonds, maybe you want your child to receive undergraduate instruction at:

Stanford.

Huh? The Leland Stanford Junior University? What?

Maybe you thought I was going to say:

Duke?

Yikes! Ick. Kinda like cafeteria-grade chili. Appealing to those so inclined, but can make you unpleasant to be around. But if you can get in, you want to go, right? 'Cause you were special to start with.

Maybe. Let's be more reasonable. Maybe you want your kid to go to. . . Cal. Yeah. That would be tolerable. And less expensive. But, you counter, that would still be fat bank¹ for those of us who do not live and breed in California. Perhaps there is a way to knock it down a bit without becoming house poor or living in Bakersfield. Why yes, yes there is!

Golf scholarship!

If such good fortune were indeed to come your way, you could entertain alternate ways of disbursing little Pixie's² collegiate monetary stash, if she has such a thing. She does not need to know that it is really her money and you have worked enough to desire something nice. Your wardrobe needs an overhaul, if nothing else, and that stereo system you bought in college has got to go. If you are not wealthy enough to have money earmarked for dearest Pixie's educational odyssey, put this journal down and go drum up some business.³ If you do not have children, go find something to do with all that money you have lying around.

You could indeed spend all that money irresponsibly, but you are a cautious and thoughtful sort whose marriage is putatively stable and who wants Pixie to get through college without any financial hardship of your own. And without Pixie taking on a \$106 728 burden for tuition plus at least enough to get a big bag of rice, a jar of multivitamins, a spacious tent, and a place to pitch it. That is if she can graduate in 4 years without wanting a phone, a beer, or a friend or two. And living with a feeling that she probably could have gone to Stanford.

Why golf? Because there are no ping pong, darts, or ballroom dancing scholarships, silly, but do not call it ping pong.⁴ Golf is not without its downsides, but playing outdoors only in nice weather and only at nice facilities? Splendid. Additionally, golfers always have their equipment to blame when they perform suboptimally, their chance of obtaining a life- or career-threatening injury seems low, and they can play well into their twilight. Jack Nicklaus was born in 1940 and he can still beat you.

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Now let us acknowledge the likelihood of this particular scenario befalling you. In a word, not good. Let's not be picky about the number of words. The Cal women's golf team has 9 golfers altogether and Pixie sucks at golf. No offense. She has a great personality, I'm sure.

Since we are investigating college golf, I spoke to a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) men's golf coach the other day while you were prolonging lives at a children's hospital. I prefaced my interview with a disclaimer: My kids have no interest in golf, although they do like to swing sticks around. Let's start with how many kids we are dealing with.⁵ The golf coach's employer,⁶ an institution probably more known for its athletic endeavors than its academic endeavors, has 2 scholarship spots for male golfers every year. The men's coaching staff regularly receives solicitations from roughly 500 interested golfers and their parents, only 30 or so of whom they feel are viable candidates. Two of those will play golf for the school. For a more high-profile, high-volume comparison of dubious value, almost 1.089801%⁷ of high school basketballers are allowed to officially handle an NCAA Division I⁸ university's balls. The stats for golf are a little more complicated, but 0.4% is a pretty small number (using our 1 example of 2 of 500). But enough with the numbers; we can make them say whatever we want given enough time, which is as tedious as prostate surgery and as boring as watching golf, although I defend the right of others to participate.

Getting more to my point, I asked my golf coach interviewee about parents and their involvement in their child's athletic pursuits. He said that overbearing parents tend to negatively impact recruiting, not only because they are annoying, but because the child's athletic success, if mainly driven by the parents, is doomed to fail. As we also see in medical education, you cannot force someone to excel. One of the University of Utah's women's gymnastics coaches agreed with that notion wholeheartedly, abusing the tender sensibilities of the interviewer for asking such a misguided and ignorant question. I have been told about, and remain

vaguely aware of, my insensitivity, and I did almost cry at the end of *Downton Abbey*, so my feelings were hurt. Just like Tom Brady when he was accused of having his balls deflated. She, the gymnastics coach, needs to relax and play some golf, which in its performance is a whole lot less stressful than running full force directly at a fake horse.

Did scholarship golfers have overbearing parents who yelled at them from the rough and never let them have a Suzy Q?⁹ I do not know because no one will let me speak to any of the golfers and my stalking days are behind me, but I doubt they did. Just how *did* they identify themselves as scholarship-worthy athletes? They are "naturally gifted, in the right place with the right resources," according to golf coach guy. Note: No mention of parental desires.

As a parent, *can* you make an athlete? After the private display of affection, of course. Sure, there are many who have benefited greatly by having parents who were driven to have their child succeed in a particular sport. Stanford dropout Tiger Woods' father was famously involved in Tiger's golfing development and that turned out pretty well. Some overly supportive professional athletes' parents' efforts have gone awry in various ways, not unlike Tiger in his Escalade, which he forcibly introduced to a fire hydrant on Thanksgiving Day 2009. Not so pretty. Let's play a little game of association. I say an athlete's name, then you write in, in your smallest handwriting, their sport and the manner in which they exacted retribution on their overbearing parent(s). Andre Agassi: _____. Todd Marinovich: _____. Dominique Moceanu: _____.

Here are the possible answers, presented in no particular order: football, restraining order, drugs, gymnastics, sucking as a pro, tennis, mean-spirited autobiography, marriage to Brooke Shields. A clue: "restraining order" is not a sport, although you may have some skill in that regard.

These are but isolated cases of the unnatural bedfellows of success and revenge. Most of our children will never be known for their athletic prowess even in their circle of friends, where taunting and

harassment are routine, or at least they were in trend-setting suburban Kansas in the 1980s. You, on the other hand, are not Pixie's friend; you are a responsible and loving parent, as has been mentioned, and you should not goad. If Pixie is naturally gifted, driven, and/or red-headed,¹⁰ as all those named Pixie should be, she will achieve success in golf or ballroom dancing or whatever, especially with your support. If she is without friends, consider a new name. Burkleigh? Only then should you proceed to the instruction necessary for the production of a good tee shot or pirouette. You supplied the genetic potential for her, which was not really your own, and your job now is to tolerate some poorly coordinated carpooling, endure some inconsistent officiating, provide some financing, let the coaches coach, and, most importantly, furnish some soft-spoken encouragement. Sports do have a place in society, if only to keep some of us from being compelled to do some work around the house on the weekend, and Pixie will have a job someday that does not involve putting a sphere in an orifice. Your compulsion to yell at her should be restricted to those occasions when she is staring at the pretty birds or the pretty booger she just removed from her left nostril. That is a tough angle for a rightie. Maybe she is more into art or the Easy-bake Ultimate Oven (Purple).¹² She might be able to hear you in art class or while baking.

"C'mon, you GOT this! Yes . . . YES . . .

NICE SPARKLE CAKE! THAT'S THE WAY WE DO IT, **YEAH!**" Celebratory dance.

I appreciate your enthusiasm, I really do, but the referee is probably not purposefully sabotaging your parenting splendiferousness, or at least was not at the start of the game. So shut your orifice,¹³ Pixie is not going to Stanford, or Duke, or even Iowa State on an athletic scholarship. Welllllll . . .OK . . . *probably* not? Maybe she *is* special, in a good way, as she has been led to believe. As my wife said to me while we were watching a television biography of a multi-gold-winning Olympian, Stanford graduate, and now go-to orthopedic surgeon: Some people are better than us.

FURTHER ELUCIDATION

1. This does not refer to a repository for your liposuction leftovers, rather to a large amount of money. However, that sort of fat bank does exist, for times when you desire to replace your hard-earned fat less enjoyably than French fries and enteral butter. Liquid gold indeed. Developed (at least in part) at *Stanford* by a self-actualizer whom some of you may know (a Dr Michael Longaker). That is, those of you who got past your indignation regarding my statements about private universities and continued to read.
2. Feel free to substitute “Dazzlee” or “Talledega” for “Pixie.” Our division’s psychic told me that we have 12 “Pixies” in our system. Also a handful of Cinderellas and a Snow White or two.
3. We at Saint Outside Hospital for Marginal Children have a sandwich board that we take turns wearing outside that reads: “Your child is horribly ill and needs an MRI and an GI consult.”
4. Women’s collegiate *table* (or delicate) *tennis* national champion in 2015? Lily Zhang from . . . drum roll . . . Cal-Berkley.
5. Kids who receive golf scholarships. I have 2 children of my own: Pjayhawk Royal and Pwulvreen Piston. The Ps are silent in the full name, *obviously*, but we call them PR and PP anyway.
6. My undergraduate alma mater, the University of Michigan. No, not Michigan State. Sadly, Ohio State dominates Big Ten men’s golf, but that institution mainly exists for athletics,¹¹ so we should not be at all surprised. Ohio State also won a couple of divisions of the 2015 National Collegiate Dancesport (competitive ballroom dancing) Championship, but sadly not the Nutcracker Ballroom Medley. These last 3 words should never again appear together.
7. That is the kind of NICU-like attention to detail that can be found at ScholarshipStats.com.
8. For those who also do not know college sports, here is an oversimplification: This is the “highest” level of college athletics, including institutions where Tiger Woods, Tom Brady, and Michael Jordan “went to school.”
9. Look up “Hostess Suzy Q’s Review” on YouTube if you want to dispose of 3:21 of your time frivolously while witnessing that we have indeed jumped the shark as a society, or if you simply do not know what a Suzy Q is.
10. I picked up a patient’s chart when I was first out in practice and saw that the diagnosis for the last visit written in by one of the partners was: “Typical red-headed behavior.” I base my supposition above on the history of present illness contained in that note, which will not be recounted here due to its prejudicial nature, notwithstanding my acceptance of its validity.
11. Obligatory rival disrespect.
12. Actual Hasbro FAQ (verbatim): “Why doesn’t the timer on the Easy-bake Ultimate Oven work? Answer: The timer that is on the Easy-bake Ultimate Oven is a sticker for decorative purposes only.” Oh the sticker is working all right. Maybe a little *too* well.
13. I wrote it so it is now a word. Use it today! Analface also works but you may not want to say that aloud unless you are alone.

Disavowal of impropriety: I have no ties to Cal, Stamford,¹⁴ Duke, or Iowa State. I have a Michigan tie, but I am not wearing it at the moment. Keep in mind that I have insulted my alma mater at least twice. And my special lady friend has red(ish) hair.

14. Purposely misspelled for agitational effect. See also last paragraph above.

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