

## Privileges of being a High School Athlete

Being an athlete in high school seemed to give me special privileges. Playing on the varsity soccer and basketball team provided me a certain level of support for just being a person. Even as early as seventh and eighth grade playing sports gave me the sense that I was special. I had a strong sense of self which translated to not lacking girlfriends and friends in general. This was positive for me, as having accomplishments recognized and being respected would be for anyone. The downside though was that without being conscious of it, I felt a bit superior. I was used to be better than others on the field and in the gym and naturally thought that was the case in other endeavors. High school, of course, is a time of cliques. We had the jocks (me and my friends), the rats (greasers) and the heads (pot smokers, druggies). There was also a group we called the AV boys, for their expertise with Audio-Visual. They tended to be a bit nerdy and were probably lowest in the eyes of all the groups. Most students probably did not belong to any group. The rats and heads did not have the status that the jocks did within the world outside of high school. Because sport and athletics is so esteemed in our culture the jocks were accorded high status amongst the average high school student who did not necessarily fit into a defined group. My high school experience was a highlight of my life because of this. I had fun. I had girlfriends. I had status.

The high school experience of a vast number of kids across the nation was and is a very very different one. This hit home in a very powerful way when I went back to my 20th reunion. As I was walking through the parking lot to get to the dance hall I noticed many of my classmates still in the car looking at the yearbook. They were studying up on peoples names and faces so they would be ready for the evening! It not even occurred to me to do this. I knew everyone's name and face already because I had had a positive and supported experience those four years. Even though I subconsciously sensed I was a bit superior, I was very involved and paid attention as people passed by in the halls. I was interested in the gossip of who was doing what with whom. I had been part of a circle, a community that was highly regarded by my peers and parents. I learned later that many of my classmates felt alone and judged and certainly not part of a community of teenagers. Essentially they had either partially blocked out those years or the details did not stick because they were generally unhappy and unsettled. This made me very sad and later got me to thinking about the issue of sports in our culture and the overt win/lose dynamic that is perpetuated.

An experience I had behind the library junior year was unforgettable in making me realize that my life had been built on a sports facade. A friend Richard Wells who played with me on the varsity basketball team got into an argument and then fistfight with Michael Frye. Frye was a rat (greaser) and his world, as I discovered watching him and Richard go at it, included being very good at physical fights. I found myself yelling to Richard such things as, "kick him in the balls" etc. Richard, bigger and stronger than Frye, was no slouch and knew how to fight, but it was no contest. Richard's mouth was bleeding heavily from being hit in the face. On each hit his braces were cutting up his lips. After a few minutes of watching this it dawned on me that if it was me fighting Frye I would not last a minute, and would be lucky to walk away at all. This was just a passing thought and quickly disappeared in the heat of watching Richard get pummeled. When it was over Frye looked over at me and said, "kick'em in the balls, huh"? My heart sunk and in that moment I became acutely aware that my status as a well known varsity athlete had zero bearing. It was a very different world than where we were at this moment. In a flash it became clear that there were other

things that high school kids could practice and be good at, other than sports. It sounds bizarre but this was news to me at the time.

Frye was sharp in his street wisdom. He knew he could eat me alive, not because I was not strong and fast, but because he knew what I was just learning. I was a white suburban kid who had been insulated from the world in which he was familiar. He had the status and the skill in this world. He looked at me and said I was going to fight one of his friends who was there. He told me to choose. For a second I felt a sense of relief that at least I did not have to get chewed up by him. I looked around and picked the skinniest least fierce looking guy I could find -Larry Dugan. Tall and lanky with no meat on his bones I figured I had an even chance with Larry. The fight as it turned out was about equal, though at one point I had my arms around his waist and he lifted his knee hard and smashed me in the chin. I was dazed but recovered enough to make it a stand-off. The win/lose world of sports had made me think I was better than others. If we need this sense of being better than others in life in order to feel fulfilled, we will most likely receive a series of rude awakenings along the way. Twenty-five years later I have come to a place of "not knowing". Nowadays I write and listen from this place. It can be a place of power and a place of despair. Above all it is a place of opening.