

Interlude

Are great athletes born? Or are great athletes developed? In a way this is the nature verses nurture question reframed as an attempt to understand where the best of the best come from.

Genetics most definitely play a role. Both of my parents were athletic and maintained their athletic builds. I can guarantee you it wasn't that I had the finest coaches. My first track and field coach in middle school was a very sweet woman named Miss Hersman, a morbidly obese teacher, that followed behind us on long runs in a car so small I spent the entire twenty minutes of jogging trying to figure out how she gets in and out of it so easily. I also did not have superior high school coaches. Tom Below (may he rest in peace) exposed us to a whole world of track and field that existed outside of school but neither he or his surviving wife Jackie Below were elite coaches by any stretch of the imagination. Neither was my father.

My father's ability to listen to coaches that were better than he was his saving grace. He accompanied me to the Olympic Development Camps I was invited to as a junior athlete, and did not hesitate to attend the coaching clinics that often took place around the same time. We both would return home smarter. Myself, as a smarter athlete. He, as a more educated coach. Mike Lugar, our Elyria High jumps coach was successful with our small squad of jumpers because he too was a jumper. He taught us simple common sense things that were easily executable that made us better.

Interlude

I am not remotely sorry for having to say what I am saying. However, I will apologize in advance for the feelings I will hurt in the interlude of this story. I am not where I am because I had the world's most supportive parents, or because Elyria had the best coaching staff, and the best team. I am what I am, I am who I am because I was forced to find a way "out". Out of my life, out of my family, out of Elyria. Track and Field was simply the sport that handed me that ticket.

Sophomore year is typically when the guidance counselors start passing off those career aptitude tests to your home room teacher in order to get a feel of the direction they should push you in. For most students you could choose Vocational School, the Community College, enter the workforce, or leave for a larger college or university. I don't remember what my results were- I believe they were inconclusive because I was, and still am, interested and impassioned by so many things that I cannot narrow my focus. My grade point average (GPA) was a golden ticket to almost anywhere I earned a 4.3 on a 4.0 scale. However, my standardized testing scores were lower than normal for a student with my GPA. The explanation for this was threefold: 1) the higher your GPA the less important your test scores become 2) testing happened during track season most often the morning of a track meet 3) with track season in full swing making time to study for these tests was asking way to much of me.

One day my sophomore year dad knocked on the door to my room, a rare occurrence seeing as I have taken to calling him Silent Bob. Things

Interlude

were going well for me at school if you overlooked (which I mostly did) the molestation and physical abuse I was suffering almost daily. To answer a question I know you all most be thinking: No, I did not tell my father about what was happening until much later. This was deliberate because I had been led to believe that my father's hands were "Registered weapons" because he was a fifth degree black belt, I didn't find out that that was an urban legend until much later when someone else asked me why I never told my dad. I simply thought I was protecting him, when it was I in desperate need of protection.

I let him into my room, he stood awkwardly in the door for awhile, *He's being kind of weird* I thought. But I just stared at him waiting to speak.

"You know your mom and I aren't going to pay for you to go to college."

"Ok"

"So find a way to get there, because you are going to college."

"Ok"

That was the extent of the conversation, I was neither shocked or devastated. We may have lived in a brand new two story home with four bedrooms, two and a half baths, a recreation center for a basement, a jacuzzi tub built into the deck out back, and two new cars in the

Interlude

driveway but a quick glance into my closet and it obvious to me there wasn't a lot of excess money and if there were they weren't willing to spending it on me. I didn't want for anything, but I didn't ask for much either.

I closed the door behind him and pulled out one of my notebooks. I scribbled across the top margin of the sheet, "Mission: College Scholarship." Obviously, it was going to be up to me to make the rest of my life happen. I was intent on making sure my life happened elsewhere, it seemed everyday new classmates were coming to school showing off baby bumps.

I had long been off the volleyball team. My parents had refused to pay for the summer camp that the Elyria High Volleyball team was hosting. I had a deadly underhand serve that behaved like a knuckle ball once it cleared the net because of my left handedness. To play in high school you had to be proficient in the overhand or jump serve, and I was not. My only opportunity to learn this new serve would have come at camp, but my parents didn't even take a second to think about letting me go before shooting it down.

I was an average basketball player. I had little to no ball-handling skills. When I attempted a crossover I'd leave the ball in the hands of my defender. I was good at fast breaks, jump balls, hustling, defense and the occasional jumper from either elbow but I wasn't a superstar. I'd outrun my dribble most of the time, and when I shot free throws I launched the ball so high up into the air before getting

Interlude

it to the basket it was like I was deliberately trying to hold up the game. After a particularly rare yet spectacular game Coach Mike Walsh asked if I wanted to suit up for varsity. I knew it was his way of congratulating me, previously the only compliment he directed at me was that I was extremely fast, and that was always immediately followed by his sharing with the team that he used to be called "white lightning" by his teammates because he was fast too. I always wondered, *why "white lightning" though? Lightning is white and therefore doesn't need the additional modifier right?* I smiled at Coach Walsh and said thanks but no thanks to his offer. I knew I'd just ride the bench the entire game and my personality isn't built for that kind of humiliation. My fake cousin though, the one that let me get slapped in the face by her real cousin, took him up on the offer though and she sat at the end of the bench looking like a miserable idiot for the entire game while I spent my allowance on sour punch straws from concessions devouring them from the stands with friends. I decided as part of "Mission: Scholarship" that I had to leave basketball alone. The following winter season I did not go out for the school's basketball team and instead ran indoor track as a solo unattached athlete.

I don't know about now but indoor track and field was not an officially recognized sport in Ohio. Meets were held, but for the most part teams were made up mostly of spring track runners that had nothing to do in the winter and wanted a head start on the season. If it weren't for my little sister tagging along I would have been by myself but "open" meets mean exactly that: open to anybody who wants

Interlude

to run. In addition to doing indoor I also ran for my team in the spring and for myself again in the summer participating in age group USATF meets around the area. That's when I met Devin Nolcox a sprinter from Beechwood high school, and Tiffany Amos a sprinter from Cleveland Heights High. We ended up at so many of the same meets that we began to gravitate toward each other. It's funny how this happened because I'm not a particularly open or friendly person at sporting events but we came to call ourselves TEAM M.A.N. for Madison, Amos, and Nolcox and though we never got around to having official t-shirts made we took our alliance pretty seriously. We stayed in touch via Aol Instant Messenger and emails between competitions and encouraged each other throughout the school year. They provided me with that first real sense that I could belong somewhere, be a part of something, and that my presence added value. So here goes, Tiffany and Devin I know we've lost touch and gone our different ways but thank you for being my friends then, and for being willing to form a little track family with me.

I first set my heart on attending the University of Tennessee because the girl I admired most, Marita Below, had sworn her undying allegiance to them. I now had two focus subpoints for "Mission: Scholarship" First, I had narrowed my sport down to track and field, and second I'd narrowed down the school. I knew absolutely zilch about Tennessee. The only thing I knew about them was that their colors were orange and white and that Marita owned some UT Volunteer boxers that she wore as regular shorts. I had been obsessed with Marita since the seventh grade. She was the biracial daughter of Tom and Jackie Below

Interlude

(yes, the coaches) and had the complexion of toasted coconut and nearly waist length perfect curls. I knew that there was no way in any reality that I could be her, but man did I want to be her. She was on the volleyball, basketball, and track teams. She was Miss Popularity, and in my opinion she had the world by the balls.

I was on the middle school track team, she would have been in the eighth grade, but I don't remember her. On the first day of official track practice at Northwood Junior High Miss Hersman had us choose which event was best for us. I wasn't in the least bit interested in running so I chose the long jump. The pit was just a pile of dirt that ran adjacent to the parking lot. To do your approach you'd have to start from the brick wall of the school, run across a few parking spaces, and jump off of the painted board that also occupied a parking space. One errant car could ruin long jump practice for the day. If we placed top three in any competition we were entitled to a sundae, and ice cream cone, or a slush depending on your first, second, or third finish respectively. The only catch was that we had to run there. I had a love/hate relationship with these runs and just when I would think no one was around and I could walk for a bit, Miss Hersman's car pulled alongside me.

The most important of these meet in Middle School is the City Track meet. I lost. I lost the 100 meter dash to Maria Whitely of Eastern Heights. Sore loser that I am internally I vowed to hate her forever, and to not let that happen again. My hatred of her didn't last long. We ended up being on the state championship team together and breaking

Interlude

the state's 4x100 relay record. Twice. Racing Maria that day taught me a very valuable lesson: you cannot judge a person's ability by their appearance or stature so stop worrying about them and do your job. I didn't do my job that day, I was too worried about her, so worried that I neglected to get myself ready for the race and so I lost.

During this time my mom occupied the role of "track mom" she had snacks and beverages, umbrellas, chairs, a tent if necessary and was there to support the team. She was exceptional at calming the nerves of other athletes. Key words there: OTHER ATHLETES. Two days out from a competition I become more introverted than usual. My brain stops delegating its cells for anything other than survival or visualization before the event. Before I even knew the importance of visualizing an event before doing it I was seeing myself run or jump, win, and celebrate. The night before high school meets some of the team would come by for pizza or we'd meet up at AppleBee's for dinner. The morning of a competition neither of my parents would speak to me unless absolutely necessary and I'd chirp my McDonald's Breakfast order at them from the back seat. "

Sausage McMuffin with egg and cheese meal please. Sprite with no ice." I'd eat in silence, and make a b-line to the toilets upon arrival.

Between races my mom would hand me a bag of gummy savers which I would devour. See? Neither I nor my parents were spectacular during my middle and high school years. Their claiming different is laughable.

Interlude

I can't begin to talk to you about my track and field career without first giving you an idea of where I came from. Bear with me, the story gets worse before it gets better.