

Opinion: How Being an Athletic Director's Kid Shaped My Life

My pulse is hammering like a beating drum, thundering through my entire body and arcing past the burning ache in my gut as cramps twist and fold themselves within me. Sweat beads along my brow as it makes its way down my face and to my track jersey, the sleeveless polyester shirt clinging to my chest as the heat of my exhausted body clashed with the breezy chill of the evening spring air. My arms and my legs swing back and forth in tandem with each other as my cleats scrape along the track. It's a high school track race, but not one focused on speed – rather, this was the two-mile run, a grueling 8-lap trek that only got harder the longer it dragged on. And for me, those lengthy races would often do exactly that, feeling like an eternity of running until my legs could hardly stand to carry my weight any longer, collapsing immediately after they brought me across the finish line. Until that point of success, though, a common thought would go through my head during those races: “Why am I doing this to myself, exactly?”

Then comes a loud voice from the football field within the track, reminding me of the answer to that question.

That loud voice belongs my dad, John Frizzell. He's been an athletic director at one school or another for as far back as I can remember, and through all four of my years of high school, he held that position at my high school, that being Chippewa Falls Senior High School. He had occupied that role in the school since I was in fifth grade, so by the time I was walking through the halls of the high school, every single person in the faculty I met already knew my name and life story - or at least, that's how it felt. I was greeted in passing by faculty members I'd never met before, tasked with running papers from athletics teachers and coaches to my dad's office, and frequently burdened with an unexpected and unfamiliar feeling as I went about my day: paranoia.

With my dad having connections all throughout the teaching staff, I was never entirely sure who was keeping a closer eye on me because of my relation to the athletic director and who wasn't. Being involved and actively participating in all my classes suddenly became a necessity rather than an option, as I didn't want to be portrayed as a distant, inactive student by teachers who my dad just happened to get into a chat with. This went doubly for my grades, for outside of the online grading system that students' parents had full access to that my school used, my dad could easily walk into one of my classrooms during passing period and ask about how my grades were doing, or how I was getting along during class time.

But nowhere was this paranoia stronger than the middle of my school day at lunchtime. CFHS's lunchroom had designated teachers monitoring the cafeteria during the designated lunch periods, and my dad had made it clear that he had made a habit of asking those teachers to keep an eye out for me. He had made a point of saying he wanted me to sit with other kids at lunch, and now I knew that if I didn't do that, chances are he would know before I even had a chance to tell him. It was like the school itself had eyes, and I stuck out like a sore thumb to its monitoring gaze because of my blood relation to one of the highest administrators in the school.

My dad's position as athletic director influenced my school life outside of the classrooms and beyond the gaze of teachers, however. It was made clear by my dad that he was expecting me to be a tri-season athlete during high school, meaning that I would be running the ropes in extracurricular activities during the fall, winter, and spring seasons. I was already planning on undertaking such a task,

as a similar expectation to constantly have a sport to be involved with was placed upon me in middle school as well. Now that I was in high school, though, the teams I was a part of were directly under his influence. And my teammates knew that from the second they recognized my last name.

The most notable impact it had on my sporting experience was how much it affected how people treated me. It was easiest to see in track and field because it's such an all-encompassing sport, with people of all mannerisms and mindsets in one place, practicing on the same field. The slacker kids and the obvious rulebreakers never gave me the time of day, of course, likely because they all imagined I would get them in heaps of trouble. Not that I really minded being excluded by people like that – what I was most concerned about were the people that were there for the love of the sport. I got along well the long-distance runners that I would practice with during the season, as I spent time around the same people in the fall for cross-country.

Even the kids I wasn't familiar with were nice to me, though, and while I was never sure if it was because they wanted on my dad's good side or if they were just that nice, I couldn't help but feel that the former reason had to at least be in play somewhat. This influence of my dad on how people treated me could be felt in every sport I took part in, too – the swim team always made sure I had rides to and from practice or to after-competition parties, sometimes at my dad's own request. I appreciated being valued and accepted by my peers in competition, but I was never quite able to shake the feeling that my connection to the top had some part in how I was treated amongst my teammates.

What stuck with me the most about how my dad molded how my peers saw and treated me, though, happened almost exclusively in the locker room. I wasn't exactly the most social athlete around, so while everyone might have known who I was related to, they might not have known who *I* was. The result? I found more people referring to me by my surname rather than by my first name. By the time I was a sophomore, I had come to respond just as quickly to "Frizzell!" as I would have to my actual name, both among the other athletes and among the coaching staff. It never bothered me much during my years of schooling, and it felt more like a term of endearment from the coaches as time went on, but in terms of how my classmates and fellow athletes used my new nickname, retrospect has led me to believe it was more that they couldn't be bothered to know who I was outside of who they knew I was related to. I was less of an individual to them and more of an extension of the athletic director himself. This, too, showed in how people acted around me – you have no idea how many times I was asked if I could secure a coach bus for the team to the next track meet or swimming invitational.

I never experienced the worst of what being an athletic director's kid can be like, though. You see, at my high school, cross-country, swimming, and track & field were sports you just signed on for and competed in; There were no tryouts, and nobody ever got cut for lack of skill. My sister, Molly, is currently a junior in high school, and she plays volleyball, which has tryouts and roster cuts, and her experience with being the athletic director's kid has been much more negative as a result. When players get in trouble and are suspended, people pin the blame on her for "being a rat." When she gets picked for a higher-level team and someone else doesn't, she's accused of being prioritized and favored. Her relationship to a position of power with oversight of all the sporting teams puts her in a spot where she can easily be blamed for outcomes or situations that had nothing to do with her, and it's difficult for anyone who hasn't experienced something like it to understand quite what it's like to be put in that unfair position, especially in someone's teenage years. It's like working at your father's company and

being accused of being favorited when you get a promotion or bearing the blame when someone gets fired. You're an easy out for people who don't want to own up to responsibility or accept wrongdoing.

The experience of being an athletic director's child – or the kid of any school administrator, for that matter – can be daunting, and the experience is rarely the same for everyone. The specifics depend on your own attitude and what activities you're involved in, but there is one factor that everyone who's experienced something like it can attest to: it's a lot of extra pressure sitting on your shoulders that you never asked for. Between being labeled as "the AD's kid" and nothing more among peers and the teachers knowing everything about you before you set foot in their classroom, it's a position of some privilege and much fun – that is, if you aren't made to be a scapegoat for other peoples' problems.

The best advice I can give to anyone going through a similar situation in school? Know that your experiences aren't abnormal and that you aren't alone in how you may feel. Whether your status elevates you to the top of your circles, or you perpetually feel like you're living in your parent's shadow, there others who feel the same way, so take that to heart and keep doing your best. Later you'll come to better understand why your administrative parent behaves how they do, and chances are you'll grow to appreciate the work they take on to tend to you and keep you going. Trust yourself and your feelings and you'll make it through just fine.

And to the parents of such kids, be you athletic directors or otherwise? Approach your kids' state of being with an open mind. You've said for years that they're special and unlike the other kids, and now that sentiment is truer than ever. When your position in their school has the potential to shape their very identity during their schooling years, it's important to be in touch with how they feel as a result of your influence on their school identity, direct or indirect, and to be supportive of them. A teenager's mind is already difficult for adults to read, and in a state where you can seem like a shadow looming over them every second of every day, that task becomes even harder. Being a good listener and being empathetic of how they feel will do wonders for understanding them, as well as fostering a good relationship between you and your child overall.

Unless you experienced the same state of being with your parents in school, don't pretend you know what they're feeling and that you know exactly what's best for them. Rather, be considerate and take their thoughts and feelings into account when making executive decisions as a parent. Kids too often feel like they're playing by your rules as they grow up, and to know that you're listening to them and striving to support them through thick and thin will do more for them than you know. You won't just have a better relationship with your child, but they'll grow to be a better person as a result, and seeing them blossom into a functioning, capable adult is the best a parent can hope for.

So, in the meantime, keep cheering them on from the sidelines, keep looking out for them during the school day, and keep smiling to yourself in your office at the thought of them. Your job is a tedious one, but if you're anything like my dad, you're in it for the love of the position and a deep passion for sports. And for someone like that, I can't think of a better sight than your kid crossing the finish line, panting heavily for a second or two, and looking up to flash you a thumbs up and a smile. Because in that moment, you've both succeeded.