

Father's Day message: Beware of curveballs

Written by Mark Dukes

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Like many of you, reflections of Father's Day center on sports, the days you spent on the diamond or court or field when Dad was either coaching or watching.

Dads teach you lessons, whether they mean to or not. That's what happened when I was a young baseball player.

I was probably 10 or 12 at the time, playing in the popular Cedar Hills Booster Club league at Cherry Hill Park. One summer day, our team was practicing on Diamond #1, the big field on what was then a three-diamond complex.

I was taking batting practice. A big, strong right-hander named Larry Paxton was pitching to us. Dad was standing behind Larry, analyzing our at-bats.

On one pitch, as I learned later, Dad leaned into Larry and said something along the lines of, "Throw him a curveball and see what he can do." Larry was a year older than us and capable of throwing a breaking ball. I hadn't seen many at that time.

The pitch came to me and it appeared the ball was headed right for my head. Instead of turning or backing away, I ducked down. The ball, of course, curved and smacked me right in the nose. Blood spurted and my nose was smashed. Dad loaded me in the car and we went to the hospital for repairs.

Two things resulted from that curveball. One, it ended my summer of playing in the Cedar Hills and City baseball leagues. Two, I learned how to read a curveball ... the hard way!

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As I became a parent, Dad loved to watch my son play baseball. One of the greatest days we shared together was a Father's Day when Matt was maybe 10 or 12.

Playing at Norway, Matt whacked a walk-off grand slam to win the game for the Cedar Rapids Reds. The only thing that would've made the moment better for my Dad was if Matt had hit a curveball with the same result.

Dad had his regular seat along the third-base line during home games as Matt competed at the high school level. Matt's modest career at Jefferson ended at the state tournament in 1998, a year the J-Hawks came close to winning the state championship. That was Dad's last day at the diamond.

Sports give us a lot of lifetime memories, good and bad. What you learn in later life is that the moments coaching or watching your kid don't last forever. Those moments are quickly gone. Many of us yearn for our kid to become a great ballplayer. But in the end, what really matters is that the experience contributes to their life going forward.

Dad died two years after Matt's graduation, in 2000. He wasn't able to see Matt become a journeyman sheet metal worker, and the father of two boys and a girl.

It's pretty clear what Dad would want for his great-grand kids, though: Don't think you're always going to get a fastball. The curveballs will come, so be prepared!