

Predicting a winner

Written by By Tom Hartsock Sun Correspondent
Friday, 11 September 2015 06:38



In continuing thoughts about what makes a winning team, or individual, events of the past week quickly come to mind. Yes, Virginia, (to paraphrase an almost forgotten column) there are great athletes in this world, even in a small town like Gallup.

Some of them come from the pricey homes on the hill, and some come from the depths of deprivation and want. You can't tell which, when they are all young and of nearly equal size and stature. The differences between them and the 'average' child normally don't show up until puberty, though some would claim that those who are coached, even reasonably well, from an early age are obvious to pick out before then.

In January, I learned of a young boy, 10, who excels in baseball to the point that he has been picked to play on an 11-12 year old traveling team next season. He has exceptional physical skills. His coach is his dad, who was also a pretty decent ballplayer. The dad opted for a better education though, choosing Ohio State academics with a National Merit Scholarship in hand. But he never let go of the sport he loved.

His only son is my namesake and when they visited Gallup a year ago, I got to watch him put this youngster through a pretty rigorous workout every day. Actually the boy demanded it, especially after he saw the artificially-turfed fields in Ford Canyon.

The young boy's athleticism went beyond baseball and into other areas, quite easily it seemed. Flat-footed, he had a vertical leap of more than two feet, and though he wasn't extremely fast he was able to maneuver very well through obstacle courses that his dad set for him. He could climb a doorway as easily as walking on flat ground and could nimbly lift himself into a tree and climb it to the top.

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In baseball, he could throw faster than most pitchers I watched in the Pee-Wee Reese Regional Tournament and his dad told me that in summer ball this year, against his own age or older, he had never had more than two strikes in any at-bat and was hitting at a clip that put him on base three of four times when he wasn't being walked. He only had two home runs all year – playing almost 40 games – but that is only a very small part of the game and really doesn't figure into this story.

But here is the rest of the story, as Paul Harvey used to say. Few professional athletes of the highest caliber were ever quite this good when they were young. Oh, some were, competing in the Little League World Series perhaps or winning races in track or playing some other sport. But very few kids will ever compete at the top pro levels in any sport, and all you have to do is look at the statistics to see the reality.

High school varsity athletes that want to play in college will soon find that only 10 percent will be chosen for that task in any sports. Of those, only about five percent will ever get paid a decent salary for playing as a pro. And the top money will only go to perhaps two percent of those top-level professionals. Do you get the message yet?

The dad in my story is a smart man and loves his son, and yes, he would love to see him play Major League Baseball some day. But he is also aware of not just the above statistics, but also of the realities that face every young player along the way.

Hormones, peer pressure, accidents, illnesses, and sometimes a complete divergence from a way of life that parents want their kids to follow. At some point, it isn't up to what dad or mom wants, it is about what the maturing person wants. And that really is the rest of the story.

I hope all the dreams you have for your children come true, but don't bet the farm on the outcome. There will come a time when it is their decision. Let them grow, let them make choices, but keep on loving them in wins and in losses.

Hope to see you in the bleachers this coming week, somewhere, sometime! Keep your hair combed just in case my camera follows you around.