

THE LUCKIEST PEOPLE AROUND

By Stephanie Splater

I wish my dad had written a book before he passed away. It would have been a book that those of you who read this magazine would have wanted to read, and it would have been a book you'd want to pass along to young new coaches who may need reminders about why they are some of the luckiest people around. To my dad, coaching was something so special, so rewarding, (at times so maddening), that it became a drive, not just for Ws in the win column, but to make a difference in the lives of those he coached. He wouldn't have said it that way, he was too humble a person to have ever used those words, but I saw firsthand the extreme joy he experienced when he spoke with a former athlete and talked with them about their careers, their families, or a particularly memorable football game or track meet. He

mentioned to me on numerous occasions how lucky he was to be in his profession. He called it

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luck, I'd call it hard work. He invested his life into the betterment of all those he coached, whether it be as a person or as an athlete, and I believe that's why he made such an impact on so many. As I venture into my second year as a Head Track Coach, I can only hope to implement bits and pieces of what he taught me and hope that in the years to come, I become a

leader he would have been proud of.

So a year after his passing, I wanted to take time to reflect on the life of a man, my father Pat Pfeifer, who personified the meaning of Coach and why he would have wanted you to know how fortunate you are to have this opportunity.

A few years ago, I informed my dad that I was “burnt out” from coaching. He said to me, with the honesty and openness I've now come to admire and emulate, “Wow. You're thirty and you're burned out? I'm sixty and I'm still out here.” He'd been tested in his career, not just on the playing field, but in the other areas head coaches deal with as well. When a local news station featured a tabloid-style story about coaches expecting too much out of their athletes, he had been crushed to find out they used footage from a chalkboard his team had used during halftime at Albi Stadium. He'd also been pushed to his personal limits during a few incidents of coaches on his staffs who didn't turn out to be as high of character as he'd believed them to be. And when an especially smart-mouthed 16 year old sprinter informed him that she knew better than he did as to how their relay practice should be run that day, he walked off the track so as to not get angry in front of the other athletes. He let his daughter know, later, that until she was in charge of her own team, he was still the one who'd be writing the workouts. We laughed about it years later, but at the time I knew he meant business (and have worked hard to control my smart-mouth since).

But all of the challenges and the threats of burnout could never outweigh Dad's commitment to coaching. In the 1980s, he was instrumental in developing a Coaching Standards program, the foundations of which remains in existence today. In the early 1990s, when he became President of the Washington State Coaches Association, he took great pride in representing Washington and the coaches he'd come to admire and respect and the games he loved to not only coach, but watch as well. He was a staunch supporter of becoming more involved in the Coaches Association and encouraged all of his staffs to take advantage of all the benefits of being a member. I remember one pre-season track meeting where he handed out the Association registration to everyone and spent over 30 minutes explaining why we all needed to become members. That is something I will continue with my staff because I have seen the immense benefit the WSCA can provide. The sharing of knowledge and common-thread of ideas and philosophies



that has developed among coaches across the state is something to be proud of and something I know my dad would have wanted me to continue to advocate.

If you knew my dad, you would have known how special December 12, 2009 was. That day, many of his friends, mostly coaching colleagues spanning four decades and three sports, joined him at his home to present his induction into the Track and Field Hall of Fame, the Washington State Coaches Association Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Golden Helmet from the Washington State Football Coaches Association. To be honored by his peers in this way was especially memorable because it was the best of his last days with us. He passed away a week later, completely at peace with his family by his side and knowing that his second family of coaches had cared enough to make these presentations, presentations that were not just about awards, but about a lifelong commitment to coaching and teaching. He coached 96 different sports seasons in his career- the 96th ending with Dad in the press box of a football playoff game, with his headset on, calling plays and offering insight to the athletes on the field, a month before the cancer overtook him. He loved and cherished every minute of those seasons. The hard times are what made him stronger as a coach and a person, and the good times were what made him proud to have had such a luxury as to do what you love each day.

A friend of mine who attended Dad's memorial service, but hadn't known him personally, approached me after with tears in her eyes. "I wish I would have known him," she told me. It sunk in at that moment, that I was one of the lucky ones. He'd been my dad, my coach, my mentor, and my friend and we should all remember how fortunate we are to be touched in our lives by coaches who care so much.

So if you ever get to the point where you feel you're not quite the coach you could be, or you're challenged by the day-to-day rigors of this profession, remember there are coaches before you who have paved the way for your success. We make a difference in more ways than we know with athletes. My dad was able to hear that first-hand before he passed away. How much we become involved in our professional organizations, how much we learn from others in our sports and around our state, will determine the successes we will become in the future.

We should all be so lucky as to have someone at our memorial service say they wish they would have known us.

Biographical information: *Stephanie Splater is following in her father's footsteps as the Head Track & Field Coach at Lewis & Clark High School in Spokane. Her father, Pat Pfeifer, coached football at Lewis & Clark, Ferris, and Central Valley and Track & Field at Ferris and Lewis & Clark over four decades. ■*

Do you have some great pictures?

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NOTE the WSCA email address Jparrish21@comcast.net Drop us a line!

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