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Losing is not a lost art

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I received an unsolicited email last week from my daughter's supervisor at Bloomberg News in New York City. Molly, a Pittsburgh Steeler fan once removed, had lost a Super Bowl bet.

The photo showed her smiling gamely beneath an SUV-size, Green Bay cheesehead hat, the wearing of which explains the steep decline in the Upper Midwest's birth rate.

Had the Steelers won, the Packer flacker was to have worn nothing but a dishrag-size Terrible Towel during his shift. Or something like that.

I was proud of Molly for not weaseling out of paying up, but I was amused that she'd made the bet in the first place.

Had she forgotten Kirby Puckett?

When Molly was in first grade, I carpoled her and a classmate several mornings a week. The boy was two years older, too smart for his own good at that age and too small for the britches he was trying to wear. He insisted one morning that Kirby Puckett was a pitcher for the Minnesota Twins, then playing in the 1991 World Series. I said Puckett played center field. "Wanna bet?" he asked.

Molly's eyes widened. Daddy's authority on this important matter was being challenged.

"Never bet unless you're absolutely sure of your facts," I said. "And maybe not even then."

"Ten dollars," he said. "C'mon, are you chicken?"

"Ten dollars is a lot of money," I said. "I don't really want to do this."

"I know I'm right," the kid said.

"OK," I said. "It's a bet. Watch the game tonight. Let's see where he plays."

To his credit, the kid paid me the next morning.

I considered forgiving the debt. But I took payment, because I thought that it might teach both kids about the penalties of betting on things they couldn't control. It was risk management for grade schoolers. Maybe a day in a cheesehead hat would have worked better.

One way to think about losing is to get kids familiar with it early. The risk in doing so is that familiarity will breed familiarity, not distaste. The object, of course, is to breed handling skills and judgment.

I sometimes draw comfort from my semi-self-delusional thought that for every loss there is a gain of equal weight, as if each of us is a self-correcting scale that is always returned to balance. I found this notion in high school in Emerson's 1841 essay, *Compensation*. I like to think that it might be true.

I also have thought from time to time that for every gain, we lose something; for every step forward, we leave something behind.

Gain as wisdom is often purchased in the coin of loss (and the loss of coin, too). I guess that's what I was trying to show two kids 20 years ago. (It really wasn't about plucking ten bucks from an eight-year-old. I'm serious. It really wasn't. Go ahead and think what you want.)

Some people don't learn much from losing. I have, for example, repeated behaviors that produced predictable losses. I have blamed both others and the stars. It's usually been more useful to look in

a mirror.

Losing brings more benefits than loss. Losing is an opportunity to gain knowledge and get stronger before the next test. A loss, on the other hand, degrades into not much more than history with a history.

I've always learned more from going through the losing than cleaning up the loss.

Losing is one of those inconvenient constants in life that everyone shares. And for that reason alone, it's good to learn as much as you can from it in the elementary grades to minimize the number of extra-credit losses you need to produce in later years.

Having children is placing one of life's big bets, if only because parents can't know the facts of these lives before they're lived. Many of us try to figure these odds and even rig the deck beforehand, but the cards of genetics and the dice of circumstance often fall in unexpected ways.

The Kirby-Puckett kid, incidentally, didn't learn his money's worth. He continued to make bets, mostly on drugs in later years.

Molly has had her fill of paternal pieties. She thinks they cause acne in Justin Bieber's fans.

And aren't Melissa and I lucky to have won the bet on the kid wearing the cheese hat in a big-show Manhattan office with a boss who emails Daddy?

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