

Life is a Frisbee, thrown

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Humans are the only species I can think of that show appreciation for the achievement of others. It can be expressed as a private word of praise, public acknowledgement, round of applause or people chanting your name.

Some children these days, though not all, are brought up in a cocoon of positive reinforcement. They are praised for participating. Effort does get more reward, and genuine achievement earns genuine commendation. But most children are not good at everything despite *pro forma* reinforcement. Speaking truth to children is increasingly avoided, even frowned on.

Sports stratify kids, ranking those who are good from those who aren't. When kids pick up sides, they follow the pecking order from top to bottom that they all know. Judgment is not cushioned. The best are always picked first; the worst always last. The kid who can't catch plays right field where he develops an interest in geology from kicking pebbles out of boredom.

Kids in the reinforcement cocoon get a phony judgment from adults who are being supportive and a brutally honest judgment from their peers. Kids know the truth about themselves and each other when it comes to sports and most other things.

High-school athletics can boost a teenager's self-confidence if he is good and performs well, or saddle him with self-doubt if he fails in his one important moment.

Most of us know someone whose feels that later life never exceeded the time he knocked in the winning run, made the game-saving tackle or hit the tie-breaking basket at the buzzer. And it's entirely possible that later life never was better. In that case, the memory of the moment can be a curse.

For those, like me, who never did any of these things, nothing existed in the past to be stuck in. I didn't appreciate that absence at the time. It seems that lack of talent can have an upside.

As we get older, the tendency is to lay aside athletic performance as our standard and judge each other, instead, on the number of bathrooms in our house or the size of the pile of money we leave to heirs.

Money often rewards smarts, but I've seen it just as often reward a single-minded focus. If you stick with it, selling a good hot dog can lead to

selling a million good hot dogs as long as you don't believe that success at selling a good dog guarantees success in picking stocks or inventing an app for nine-year-olds.

Making money in business is often a matter of doing one thing well, over and over again, and then more and more of it. Getting a break helps. Not that I have any first-hand experience, I should add.

A childhood friend has chosen one way to be as free as he can be by being homeless and without obligations. Americans talk a lot about freedom, but being free of America in America is not easy.

He does this reasonably well on a tiny Social Security check. He lives where it's warm. He sleeps at a shelter. He reads in the library. He depends, in part, on food deposited behind restaurants at the end of the day. He rides his few possessions around town on an old bicycle. For the most part, he lives beneath the social safety net that is said to catch those who fall.

He's a local personality and lists his occupation as, "Frisbee thrower."

He's very good, I'm told, but not in the same league as Brodie Smith.

I've known him since kindergarten. He lived less than a block away. I slept over in his bedroom in the fourth grade. He signed my autograph book that year. I gave him a treasured souvenir of the Empire State Building. We shot hoops; we threw snowballs at each other.

His athletic ability made him a leader. In high school, he was good at baseball and basketball. He was a clutch performer, time after time. He had a keen sense for game tactics.

He heard the crowd cheer. He was appreciated and liked. He had presence, dignity, respect.

But he was not good enough for sports at the Big Ten university from which he graduated. Maybe he felt unanchored when the clapping stopped.

At the end of the 60s, he, like others, wandered onto a different path.

Somewhere, he moved away from convention and defined himself against it.

He now rubs local authority the wrong way. Rich people who do this are coddled eccentrics, even celebrated; people without money are bums. Neither is right.

Friends of his from high school visit every so often. His brother has offered a room and help. But he chooses to be where he is and stay as he is.

It takes effort and discipline to survive on a pittance. There's no rainy-day fund. You're exposed and unprotected. No one has your back. Anyone can hurt you. You have to learn a lot of angles and be able to work them, just like tactics in sports. You have to keep your spirits up. You have to hope that

nothing big goes wrong. And you know that nothing is going to change for the better.

In one way, he's running his life more than most of us do. In another, he's a beach ball afloat on a fickle ocean.

It's hard for me to accept that this is not a problem to be solved. No "solution" is to be found, because he doesn't define himself and his life path as a problem. He doesn't seek help from old friends, but he doesn't turn it down when it's offered.

For someone like me who has a genetic tendency to help people across the street who have never expressed any desire to get there, this is unsettling.

My wife says that I am farked out. Some of his old friends have lost patience with his behavior; others stick around at the edges.

One put up \$1,000 recently to get him out of jail. He was arrested for throwing Frisbees at traffic and demonstrating his swing with a baseball bat while campaigning for President. How can you demonstrate a swing without a bat?

There's no happy ending to this story. It's likely to end badly and sadly.

But I respect the courage it took to choose this way, and the daily courage he musters to adapt to what he finds on that path.

Living outside the cocoon is dangerous. It's unappreciated. No one cheers.

It's hard to know whether to clap or cry. Or both.

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