

KEEPER



**What I Learned Playing
High School Water Polo**

BRANDON DOUGLAS

***“Creativity is a combination of diligence
and a childlike spirit.”***

Robert Greene

©2019 Copyright

All Rights Reserved

BrandonDouglas.com

Table of Contents

[Foreword](#)

[I Discover Polo](#)

[Son of an Athlete & an Actor](#)

[Den of the Lobos](#)

[The Future's So Bright](#)

[Arrested Development](#)

[Tempted](#)

[Becoming the Keeper](#)

[Goin' to Pick a Fight](#)

[Dealing with Loss](#)

[Getting Stronger](#)

[I Join the Black Student Union](#)

[Know Your Rights... \(and Your Role\)](#)

[New Teammate](#)

[Lobos Never Say Die](#)

[How to Take Down a Bully](#)

[The Wonder Years](#)

[Life, the Universe, and Everything](#)

[Water Polo's Final Lesson](#)

Foreword

“So, what do you do?”

Quite honestly, not my favorite question in the world. By all means, I ask people about their professions, but only after warming up a bit in other areas. It’s never my lead that’s for sure.

I view it as an attempt to categorize me right off the bat. If I answer digital marketing is my occupation, the older generation (and even my Gen X people) don’t know how to quantify that. It would be easier to answer I’m an accountant, real estate agent... something they fully comprehend. So I get to explain what I do in the internet marketing world, much of the time to squinty eyes.

I honestly view my profession as a tool. I am *more* than setting up traffic generation and conversion strategies. My heart isn’t into all of the conventions, latest hype, and all the tech-science fools geek out on, but I do like engaging with people and promoting products actually giving value to this world. Hence I do enjoy it.

Laboring on this book, I have never felt more alive and fulfilled while on my laptop, far more than fussing over landing page designs. The long hours seemed like minutes as I have struggled to find the clarity required to reach a broad audience unfamiliar with the sport of water polo, to lay the foundation and explore how polo could be a metaphor for my life. I have relished this type of explaining far more than describing to a partner online buying habits based upon demographic marketing principles.

It is also not my intent for you to catch *all* of my water polo lingo, colloquialisms, and many other references I draw from the era and my diverse background. I do

throw a lot at you... it's like drinking from a firehose. Please just hang with me, especially if you are a female reader because I can't define every nuance of the sport, all the people involved, or high school life in Southern California in the late 80s — this would fill several volumes.

I have certainly had time to reflect on the events I am about to share. Now with a more developed life view, I grasp how extraordinary those days were. Indeed, a story worth telling with a potentially different takeaway for every reader.

I have reconciled I was not your stereotypical water polo athlete and embrace my non-athletic side as well. After writing it all out, I better appreciate the influence my parents and high school experience had in shaping my perspective on life. I try and pass on my unique view to my kids and have found a desire to also share it with you, the reader.

With all that said, today I don't like questions designed to lump me in with a group of individuals or any other type of groupthink; because water polo and my past taught me I can stand tall being my unique self.

Even if some people don't quite get me.

- Brandon

I Discover Polo

“You may ask yourself, well... how did I get here?”

Talking Heads

I have a special attachment to water polo. I had success with it, made lifelong friendships playing it, but I recently discovered it helped lay the foundation for *everything* I stand for today.

My discovery came during a difficult time when I was unable to sleep. The details of my water polo days kept coming back to me, making me smile. I was even having vivid dreams about them. It's like they wouldn't leave me alone! I became convinced there was something there for me to uncover, dots that needed connecting. I decided to write it all down...

U2 had just released *The Joshua Tree*, *The Princess Bride* was in theaters, I knew every lyric to the *Licensed to Ill* Album by the Beastie Boys and I remember screaming down the pool two body lengths ahead of my defender at the start of my first water polo game at Los Amigos High School.

The year was 1987.

I wasn't thinking, just swimming my tail off and that yellow ball landed perfectly in front of me. A great pass I didn't even have to turn my head for. I gained control.

Now it was only me and the goalkeeper. He looked nervous, all alone with no help in sight. A feeling I would soon understand, but for this go-round, I was the one pulling the trigger.

I remember my initial water polo training from practice: "Always, Always, *ALWAYS* pick up the ball from underneath the water!". Attempting to grab the ball from the top is like bobbing for apples for a young polo player.

I was on the left side of the pool with the ball up, ready to be fired. I sized up the keeper was playing square in the middle of the goal and pretty close in. I shot low and to the wide-open corner closest to me (we call that a "strong-side" shot).

Clapping, incoherent shouts, and "Nice goal Douglas!" from my surprised teammate resonated in my ears, except it didn't end there.

My buddy Jason made another goalie save I anticipated and again I was off to the races in front of my defender. He led me with another pinpoint pass. I distinctly remember thinking, "*Nice pass, dude!*". I was all by myself and looking for my other teammates to pass the ball to, but they were well behind me covered by their defenders.

Their goalie was too far back and in the middle of the cage (again), giving me another inviting strong-side shot. I hammered it home for my second goal within the first few minutes of the game.

Rinse and repeat.

My poor defender was having a tough time keeping up with me and his coach called a timeout as they were down two quick goals. I remember the rush of being welcomed back to our bench showered with high fives. We huddled up but didn't hear a thing our coach said. We were far more interested in the girls cheering in the stands.

After the whistle, we lined back up to resume the water polo game. Right out of the gates my opponent was attempting to grab hold of me to keep me in check, instructions undoubtedly given to him during the time out.

I was able to outwrestle him and was off to the races with Jason getting me the ball once again. Now their goalie had switched up to heavily guarding against my strong-side shot. He did this by coming out of the cage at me a bit more in order to cut down my shooting angle. Again, more adjustments made by the opposing coach.

My preference was to pass and share the wealth with my bros, but finding myself alone with yet another straight shot on goal with no help defenders, this was my shot to take. (We call this a "one-on-nobody".) I sent my third attempt across the cage to the opposite side of the goal's upper corner, out of the reach of the lunging keeper.

High fives, smiles, more shouts from the home crowd.

I am able to look back at this moment with affection, and a certain amount of insight given I now have a lifetime of water polo experience. I enjoyed a successful collegiate playing career, spent plenty of time coaching and conducting goalie clinics. I have even done time as a referee for the sport. (I didn't particularly care for that.)

From my perspective, three major things jump out at me that prepared me for this moment:

First, the instinct to transition off a turnover. My dad's passionate basketball training drilled this into me long before I touched a polo ball.

I'll just call him "The Coach".

The Coach was completely enamored with running the fast break and insisted we were properly drilled in the art. From fourth grade on I was taught to anticipate a turnover or rebound, and sprint down "filling a lane" to one of the sides of the court. Hours upon hours of basketball practice, drills and demanding whistles prepared me with high court awareness that translated nicely over to water polo.

Ha! Most kids had the incentive to score as many points as they could in these basketball leagues; this would determine how many scoops of Thrifty Ice Cream they got after the game. Not me.

The Coach's reward system was based solely on rebounds, assists, and blocked shots. It didn't matter if I scored 30 points; he wanted me relentlessly defending, hitting the glass and making that extra pass.

In fact, the Coach would give me a complete box of Sees Chocolates if I ever got a foul on defense by being too aggressive boxing out and protecting our own glass. My home-piece I nicknamed "Much" would also earn such a box.

This definitely fostered a team-first attitude. Sure I liked scoring points, but we were living in Southern California during the Magic Johnson Showtime Lakers era, so passing was cool. My pop's intensity for basketball helped to fuel me with the determination unquestionably needed to play water polo at a high level.

The second reason I was comfortable with water polo out of the gates, was because I was a surfer. Polo is not a swim meet. It gets ugly. Battling a strong current in the ocean or paddling like mad to get over a wave starting to curl, helped me in getting clear of my defender.

Looking for the ball over my shoulder was like I was out at Huntington Beach River Jetties tracking down an oncoming wave: elbows high, heavy kick, arched back, with my arms pumping and face out of the water. Almost the exact stroke used to paddle a board in surfing is used in polo, and I had plenty of practice those three summers leading into my freshman year.

However, my first endeavors at surfing were abysmal. I would wait for the already broken wave to propel me forward, then strain to stand up in the whitewash as it was dying out.

I was comparable to a Utah tourist with a rented foam board and a farmer tan attempting to surf for the first time. Not a pretty sight.

During my early days out surfing, I was encouraged by some old dude to, "*PADDLE HARD LITTLE MAN!*"

I needed to charge after it and not wait idly for the wave to do the work. I attempted to paddle into the wave before it would break, but was too clumsy in my footwork and the wave would break on me. It sent me crashing and my two-ton, 80s board flying into the air landing on top of my head. Twice in a row.

Hottest thing on the beach, let me tell ya.

Hurt back then, but I am grateful now for those rough lessons in the surf. I never did give up on riding those waves.

Lastly, my love for wrestling prepared me for polo. I had hours and hours of improvised WWF Wrestling on the family trampoline under my belt. This kicked in when the kid was grabbing hold of me anxious to slow me down. I distinctly remember being confused at first thinking:

"You could never get away with this blatant holding in basketball. If you wanted to keep a guy in place, you did it by boxing him out with your butt... Oh, it is so on!!"

My favorite wrestler was Dino Bravo, known for his epoch smackdowns with the Junkyard Dog. Even today my longtime friends call me "Brav", taken from Dino Bravo and shortened a bit.

[My man Dino Bravo would get involved with smuggling cigarettes into Canada after his wrestling days, and was allegedly killed in a hit by the Canadian mob. So kids DO NOT attempt the "Sidewalk Slam" on your trampoline, or aim to profit from duty-free cigarette sales.]

Another pro wrestler, Sal “Chavo” Guerrero, lived down the street from our Fountain Valley home and I went to school with his kids. A complete legend in the neighborhood. Watching him mow the grass one day, and turn on the TV Saturday morning to witness him slap his chest and throw Roddy Piper into the turnbuckle was awe-inspiring. Wrestling was huge with the neighborhood kids and being the only family around with a trampoline, our backyard was often the wrestling venue.

Imitating the antics of my favorite wrestlers was second nature and I was able to use the skill set right away in the pool. Making water polo even more endearing.

Almost seems impossible one sport could put to use all of these abilities I had already developed years beforehand. My Dino Bravo moves, grappling with the waves, and filling the lane for The Coach all came together to give me a powerful introduction to the world of water polo. I used to believe it came effortlessly to me, but my observation is that was not the case. I came *equipped* for the game.

I couldn't sleep that night back in '87. My mind was wide awake reliving the events of the day, thinking over and over:

“Dude, this sport rules”.

Son of an Athlete & an Actor

“That’s a beautiful name. It’s Scotch-Romanian. That’s an odd combination. So were my parents.”

Fletch

A less favorable nickname of mine growing up was "The Embellisher". I have had tons of nicknames, and I love giving them out even more.

My favorite embellishment was telling two dudes from Wyoming that Nicole Eggert went to my high school. Okay, Nicole Eggert didn't go to my high school... but her *sister* did!

Today I make sure I have plenty of people corroborating my tales because truth really is a matter of perspective and mine can surely be a bit off at times. In my defense, I did inherit this penchant for flowery storytelling from one of my parents, but I won't tell you which one because she might be reading this book.

But honestly, I did score three one-on-nobody goals in my first home water polo game at Los Amigos during the first quarter of play.

However, my fairytale was short-lived. They neutralized me the rest of the game by switching a talented freshman to guard me. (It was clear I had the miss-match.) He shared the same skills of good speed and high instincts for polo, making it quite the battle royale from then on. We held on for a hard-fought 10-9 victory. Celebrating with my teammates was a thrill I hadn't quite experienced before in competition. This sport demanded so much exertion that it brought a different type of emotion out of us. We bonded as teammates in a way few sports can.

The second, more talented, defender I later came to know quite well because he was my collegiate teammate. We reminisce with much affection about our first game against each other, as well as other showdowns we battled within the Garden Grove School District. Man, I love reliving a story.

I do have somewhat of a short-term memory as to who I have told so you may be forced to hear it over and over, a characteristic some might find taxing. I could very well be called "The Absent-Minded Reminiscer".

Fortunately, I have not been as obsessed and trapped back in time as some might be, like good ol' Uncle Rico (Jon Griese's classic portrayal of Napoleon Dynamite's eccentric, jock uncle, haunted by the regrets of a blown football championship back in '82).

Although admittedly, I do have some Uncle Rico to me.

I bring up even in casual conversations I played polo and am quick to recall '87 as a formative year for me. I even played in a water polo tournament a few years back with a group of college guys and we would scream "1987!" coming out of time outs. They loved my war stories and thought it crazy that was the year I started playing. (Most of them weren't close to being born yet.)

However, I have a confession to make: I wasn't wired like the typical jock...

I was actually quite a bit odd.

The result of love bringing together a rebounding machine with sharp elbows and a pro stage actor. They turned out one strange duck for a firstborn son.

Kids are typically forced to do certain chores like practicing the piano, cleaning their rooms, etc, but early in my developing years, I was forced onto the stage.

My mom sacrificed time away from the beloved theater when we were all too young to leave at home. She got back on stage once we were old enough and traumatized her young children as she was thrown down a flight of stairs and killed portraying Victor's mother in *Frankenstein*. My little sister started to cry in the audience and I'm amazed my mom was able to stay in character.

My mom taught me the art of staying in character is vital to any performance, especially in comedy. Take the classic SNL "More Cowbell" skit for example. Everybody loses it, except for the stone-faced, deadpan Walken. He is the real reason the skit is a legend. ("I've got a fever!")

I had no desire to follow my mom to the stage at first but got the bug after my first taste. My brother Drew calls this era of my life the time of "Drama Brav".

Drew hated Drama Brav.

Claimed he was obnoxious and forced the family to listen to the soundtrack to the musical theater production of *Cats* over and over on long family trips bellowing out melodramatically as the "The Rum Tum Tugger".

I certainly didn't view myself as an athlete, even when I got some early clues in the middle of fourth grade.

I went to school with this kid who today is the epitome of a Huntington Beach local surfer. Over the years if I'm talking with dudes out in the lineup I know are longtime HB guys, I'll throw his name out there and the response is always an excited, "You know that clown!!??".

Funny guy, but back in the fourth grade he was the stocky kid you wanted to stay clear of whilst playing the classic 70's school ground game: *Smear the... well, Smear the Guy with the Ball*.

Dude loved the game, and I can't say I was too aggressive in being the guy with the ball he was trying to run down while screaming, "STICK 'EM!!".

He was challenging our entire class to arm wrestling matches while we were stuck inside on a rainy day, and I cowered to the back of the room. He breezed through everybody, but the frenzy eventually died down and there were no longer kids circled around him cheering as he was puttin' fools down.

My man wasn't done yet. Saw me standing idly around and said it was my turn. I thought I might as well get it over with. Yet I was determined to give at least a decent showing in case any of the cute girls I went to elementary school with were still watching. I was long and gangly, not viewed as much of a threat.

I slammed his hand down as fast as he had plowed down others in our class. "I hope nobody saw that!" The kid was in complete shock. "Let's go again!" — same result. At this point, I was just as surprised and kind of confused. I pretty much wrote it off... he was probably tired from arm wrestling all afternoon.

Another early indicator I was a future athlete came when it was time for kid pitch on the baseball field. I was a feared little league pitcher for years. I still remember The Coach's visits to the mound: "How's your hammer feeling?", or "You losing your hammer?".

At times my sensitivities as an actor conflicted with the hardened attitude my dad was trying to instill within me on the mound. I remember one instance I was forced to pitch against my long-time friend "Bear". He was hesitant to step up to the plate to face me while I was mowing down batter after batter.

Bear was an athlete, but baseball was not his thing.

Conflicted, my first offering was a cream puff, barely anything on it right over the plate. Swing and a miss. My second, another softy right down the middle. Again, he swung right through it with his long arms.

Bear, you're not helping me out here.

The Coach picked up on what was going on:

"Brandon!! Brandon!!!@#\$", I heard bellowed out of the dugout.

"Pitch to him!! Pitch to him!!" I touched the brim of my ball cap, a signal to him I understood.

I bore down and put on my best bulldog face to go after him... and I just couldn't. All I saw was my Star Wars buddy who would take turns with me being Han Solo, (while the other served a stint as Chewbacca), manning the Falcon together in the backyard downing imaginary enemy tie-fighters.

I served up one last meatball and Bear *finally* belted it into right field. No Thrifty's Ice Cream for me that day.

Whenever I see a skinny starting pitcher and people wonder how he can be throwing the ball so fast without the bulging biceps, I get why. Still today I will get comments in the weight room from the perplexed bulky dudes: "You are putting up some weight!". Translation: "You're slim but strong." I tell them I'm a swimmer and they say that makes sense.

The Coach started me off in organized basketball around fourth grade and he ended up coaching all of my teams until I was a sophomore at Los Amigos, along with baseball through Jr. High. My dad also had a flair for the dramatic, which frequently came out in his coaching efforts to motivate us. My favorite was when my sophomore team was giving a bit of an uninspired effort during the first half of an away game. The Coach burst into the visitor's locker room and flung a chair across the room. You should have seen us jump.

But before high school, I still viewed myself *more* of a drama dude. In fact, I started to get the big roles in the Orange County Children's Theater productions. My favorite was portraying Mr. Beaver in our rendition of *The Lion, the Witch, and The Wardrobe*.

Probably because I was in love with Mrs. Beaver.

We were good together with amazing on-stage chemistry, always improving and feeding off of each other. We also sang a duet together.

By the end of each production, we had stolen the show. There was a line of little kids outside waiting to meet The Beavers and to get our autographs; we stayed in character complete with cockney accents.

(My brother Drew is cringing right now reading this part of the book.)

My first kiss was not during a stolen moment alone with a girl, or on a dance floor while "Lady in Red" was playing. It came at a rehearsal on stage in front of an entire community center room full of teenagers, giggling pre-teens, my parents, and my grandparents... with Mrs. Beaver.

When I first read through the script and saw the words jump off the page, "Mr. Beaver *kisses* Mrs. Beaver", I thought it would be something we would work around.

The directors made sure the production was "children's theater" friendly. It was common to sanitize the original scripts from any adult language or questionable content. I honestly didn't give it a second thought.

There was no room for that type of smut.

I was safe up until we got a few rehearsals in, and the director made it quite clear — she wanted the kiss in the play and it was time to rehearse. I was squirming

trying to figure a way out of this tight spot I found myself in, while the entire cast put the real pressure on with their catcalls. Mrs. Beaver stood there poised, beautiful, and a year older than me. A real professional.

I gave into peer pressure, *but kept screwing it up!* The director helped guide me into the kiss *she* was envisioning with my face turning more and more beet red. Not only did I have to kiss this person I had a serious crush on, I was terrible at it!

I can still hear my folks and grandparents belly laughing all the way back to the car.

(Years later in college, I remember Drew confessing his jealousy and infatuation with Mrs. Beaver as a young man one night after watching *Spaceballs*. A small victory and vindication for Drama Brav.)

Yes, the Orange County Children's Theater was good to me, and it was there I met Jason and two other teammates. They were in the summer of '87 play *The Great Cross Country Race*. I had been in seven straight plays through junior high and took the summer off from the tireless rehearsals to surf and goof around with Much who lived around the corner from me. Come production time, however, I was back for the fun times hanging out with the cast backstage and with Mrs. Beaver who helped with the makeup.

I hit it off with these guys immediately and we had a blast ending out the summer. I found out all of my new pals were going into their sophomore years at Los Amigos. Jason and the boys asked me if I was going to play any sports at school. I only had basketball in mind, but they encouraged me to join them on the polo team. I responded, "They have a Marco Polo team???"

"Dude... just show up to the pool deck. Practice starts next week." I was game.

My first lesson was discovering the art of the "egg-beater". Water Polo 101. Eggbeatering is the technique we used to maintain and lift ourselves high out of

the water (No, you can't touch the bottom). It consisted of pumping our legs up and down like riding a bike, but with our ankles jutting out and at the same time moving them in circles simulating an egg-beater motion. Jason was patient with me and forced my legs to do it correctly while holding his breath under the water, grabbing my feet.

It was nice befriending these guys who were both highly athletic and talented artistically, a rare combination for sure. They were more my speed than a bunch of typical jocks, (although we wouldn't be singing musical theater in the shower).

We sure did run into that *machismo* dynamic in the locker room. My drama bro almost had his head taken off by some angry football player. He was able to duck away as the swing missed high and the attacker most likely broke his hand on the locker he hulk smashed. Big dude, but we stood by our guy.

Having polo skills got me in with these up and coming guys at "Los" (the school's nickname). They were tough athletes, funny, outgoing, and good-looking dudes. I mean, Jason could have blended in seamlessly as an extra on the *Beverly Hills 90210* campus. Freshman girls in my classes were always wanting to know the inside details of what it was like playing on a team with them.

My freshman year was one to remember. I was like a puppy dog following Jason and the fellas around campus and incredibly grateful water polo and acting united us all together.

Yes, quite the beginning to my water polo career. I had no idea at the time how much of an impact this sport would have on me. The Coach took Drew and I all over California going to college basketball games; it was my plan to play for one of our local universities on the hardwood. I always loved dad's stories about his playing days in high school and college as an undersized rebounder/enforcer.

However, I would find my college success in the pool.

I was the [state MVP](#) for Golden West College Water Polo my sophomore year which got me highly recruited from all the universities in California fielding teams. My favorite was being heavily recruited by my beloved UCLA, and local favorite UC Irvine was even willing to provide housing.

USA Water Polo had me on their radar as well. My Golden West coach said they ranked me as the #5 collegiate goalie back in '92 given my dominance at the Jr. College level, and from all the buzz I was getting from the top universities.

And don't worry, I didn't write this book with narcissistic intent to *wow* everyone with how great my athletic career was. Nevertheless, it is important to establish and give you a bird's eye perspective as you continue reading, at one time I could really play. Especially for a drama dude.

[End Scene]

Den of the Lobos

*“I never could sit still, I never was too hip, I never caught the ride,
I’m on the outside.”*

Oingo Boingo

I treasure my Los Amigos High School experience. Our school mascot was the *lobo* or the wolf. Yes, loosely translated, we were the friendly wolves. Although, at times, we were not that friendly; in fact, we could be downright cantankerous. Allow me to paint you a picture of what life was like for me.

The school was located close to my house in Fountain Valley. However, our school boundaries only took a sliver from the entire city and ranged farther into Santa Ana (lower income communities). Los Amigos was sandwiched by two behemoth schools, the NBA equivalent of the Lakers and the Celtics. CIF Championship banners lined the rafters of these schools and they would steal all of our top talents. This put a bit of a chip on our shoulders. High schools would define themselves by the success of their sports teams back then, so squashing your opponent was the main objective in order to boost school spirit.

We were often the guys getting squashed.

Tough shaping our identity by our win column and Los was built with the intent only to be a small school. Yet, we fielded plenty of sports teams all spread a bit too thin by our smaller enrollment and limited budget; you can't blame us if we wanted to keep up with the Joneses. However, we identified as a community win or lose (even with plenty of losses).

We had heart and did the best with the talent available. The Coach got the most out of his high school teams and it seemed he had a special gift to reach the often misunderstood, gritty Lobo.

My parents established a culture in our home to accept people from all backgrounds. Money was not a criterion for who we invited into our social circles, even though we were known for having more money than the average Lobo. We enjoyed people for who they were, not for how much they were *like* us. With this mindset, there were more options for friendships. Besides, life was more fun and interesting with these friends from the Santa Ana side of town.

With this being said, I still had to figure out how to handle myself in rougher crowds than I was used to in my neighborhood. Starting in Junior High, I stood up to a kid I felt was physically bullying a friend of mine. I got a lucky shot in, and it ended the skirmish. Unfortunately, word spread throughout the school. This kid took exception to what was being said and followed me home, ready for round two.

I didn't have any real fire against this guy. I went into Drama Brav improv mode as we biked together and was able to diffuse the situation with laughter. He told me he couldn't believe we were actually friends as we parted ways. By high school, this kid and I were tight.

Even if being a small school had its challenges, there were plenty of benefits. We were able to defy many of the high school cliques we see in many John Hughes movies (*Pretty in Pink, Some Kind of Wonderful*). My wife went to a big, snobby school, in a suburb of Chicago, similar to the ones depicted in his films. It's difficult for her to picture my high school experience, especially one where someone could be involved with so many different activities. At her school, you stuck to and identified with, what you excelled at. She loved sports and was athletic, however, she was even cut from the school badminton team. I'm dead serious! She would have loved to have played high school basketball and Los

would have taken her in a heartbeat, (and she would have been a star vocalist like she was at her school).

Hence Los Amigos permitted me to refine my eclectic blend of thespian, band geek, honor orchestra, aqua jock, baseball/basketball stats nerd all into one Facebook would find difficult to label. Mix in summers spent at band camp and that would throw off their algorithm entirely!

I never would have had the opportunity to develop such a wide array of talents at a bigger high school. I would have been forced to refine and limit my focus. At Los, we were desperate for talent, in all areas. I was often asked to accompany the choir on piano or to play stand-up bass for the orchestra. These classes were not even on my schedule! In contrast, at other nearby schools if you were a bando... you primarily stuck with the bandos.

This being said, we weren't a small school like the ones you find in the country. Around 1,800 kids is still a pretty good size, but still small enough we could actually get to *know* one another. I'm sure it is easy to get lost in a school with 3,000 plus kids all segmented out by common interests, social status, and racial lines.

I went to Los Amigos during a time of transition, a unique period, within a unique place. Those spaces in any community can be the most difficult, and the most beautiful — like when people break out their telescopes to capture rare alignments in the stars, or a blood moon traveling from coast to coast; Los was in the midst of an eclipse I got to witness first hand.

The student body was changing over from a Caucasian majority and was experiencing a more diversified group of ethnic groups. My English teacher broke down our school's racial diversity at 31% Hispanic, 30% Asian American, 28% Caucasian, 11% African American/Pacific Islander. This data was gathered my senior year, a pretty even mix across the board.

Today, according to the California Department of Education, Los Amigos is 81% Hispanic, 16% Vietnamese, 3% Caucasian and lists no other ethnic class over 1%. I support this school whatever the racial breakdown.

I value the diverse friendships Los enabled me to make, as well as gain valuable cultural experience. I discovered how to navigate, gained some real street smarts. I recognize this is a skill most don't have. I developed social awareness of how I was viewed by others: white, tall, athletic, coming from a nice neighborhood, etc. I recognized many might prop me up for this, while others might be quick to tear me down. If I was perceived in a different social category, I couldn't let it go to my head, nor would I internalize a put-down. Good social navigating skills can extend into many areas; I learned when to put on the charm, and when I should avoid a situation entirely.

Being amongst a diverse student body fed my curiosity for different cultures. Even when people were rude, I would wonder what made them tick. Why would they say that to me? Did I do something to bring this comment on? Los primed me to explore different viewpoints, helping to shape my own. As I came into friendships, the breaking down of mistrust, stigmas, etc. made them all the more *fulfilling*. All parties could say: "Wow, I really like this person, regardless of how I had been treated in the past by someone who looked just like them".

I was developing a less myopic, white-centric perspective. Yes, admittedly at the time a white world was all I knew. Most of my closest friends from the theater and community went to predominantly Caucasian schools. Los was a major paradigm shift for me, which challenged me to adjust the way I interacted with people from different backgrounds, cultures, financial situations, etc.

We first experienced more diversity in elementary school. Primarily the influx of Vietnamese kids threw us off, but by high school, we all knew what Phở and Sriracha Sauce was all about. Vietnamese cuisine has only recently come into vogue, but my friends initiated me to delights such as homemade Bánh Mì

sandwiches during the early 80s. (Many a friendship has been formed over food.) Additionally, my first crushes were Vietnamese and Korean girls.

In elementary school, I remember traumatized Vietnamese kids, barely enrolled, hiding up in trees during recess. Too much culture shock all at once and unfortunately we had no knowledge of how to help them. Language stood as our initial barrier. At a young age, I developed empathy seeing the obvious distress they were dealing with.

The Vietnamese and Korean kids learned English lightning quick and were all highly motivated in school. Most of the violin section in the honor orchestras were filled with second-generation Asian students. Living amongst a high density of Vietnamese families in Fountain Valley and throughout our Garden Grove District became the norm. The family donut shops run by these guys kept me and my granddad plenty happy, well, happy until diabetes stymied his diet to what he gripped “a half cup of nothin’!”.

Unfortunately, we did have our issues with the Vietnamese gangs.

Much was in a car smashed in with baseball bats after a high-speed chase heading out of Santa Ana. Another time we'd been threatened with guns pulled out on us. I even witnessed a knife fight that drew some serious blood coming from the hands of a Vietnamese gang member.

Comic book nerds were only supposed to read about Snake Eyes taking on that type of action!!

By no means was this the norm amongst the Vietnamese nor did we bring these interactions upon ourselves. The gang members were easily provoked, even if they *perceived* the tall white boy was laughing at them — it was on. Overall, gang violence in the 80s was serious and we would often hear gunshots at night coming from Santa Ana. I'm sure the gang-culture of the Santa Ana/Garden Grove area forced the more indignant Vietnamese kids together. They were newcomers and

probably felt a fierce need to protect their turf and stand up for their identity as they were often ridiculed.

I was especially in with the Latino kids. Many became some of my closest friends. Certainly Hispanics got involved with gangs as well, but for the most part, the population actually attending school was not overridden with hardcore gangbangers. Again, I loved the cooking coming out of the houses of my Hispanic friends, especially at Christmas time which was tamale season! At Los, you could be accepted by a majority of Latino kids being a white boy (or girl) no problem. Nonetheless, I had a funny run-in early on when I was first learning the ropes that cracks up my Latino pals today:

I was a freshman and looking to make new friends, like everyone else. There was a group of freshman Hispanic kids ("cholos", in the Lobo vernacular) playing hoops after school I stuck around to play with. Took me out of my comfort zone even to ask in to play and I was sure if I could impress them on the court, we'd all be fast friends.

I was boxing out, slamming down their shots, setting screens, running down loose balls and playing the aggressive brand of ball The Coach taught me to play. Yet, these guys took exception to all of my hustling skills and I soon found myself surrounded, even by the dudes on *my* team who were the recipients of my pristine bounce passes!

"You think you're bad?"

"You think you're pretty good ese??!" "Big man huh??" "Let's see if you can..."

WHAM!!

A huge, dark hand had come from behind and slapped the lead speaker in the back of the head. Two monster Polynesian dudes had clued into my plight from the weight room and came to my rescue.

"That's right!!" Bellowed my new friends at my assailants running off in a hurry.

They turned to me, "Hey man, we couldn't let you get beat up. *BUT DON'T BE SO STUPID!* Don't be hoopin', on those Mexican boys like that man. They don't like being shown up."

Sage words.

The Mexican dudes and I eventually became friends and one recalled our encounter senior year:

"Hey bro, remember when we were going to jump you freshman year!? Oh, that was hilarious, the look on your face. You were lucky those big boys came and saved your butt because we were going to *jack you up!*"

Yes, yes... I remember.

I learned when to tone it down during the rest of my days at Los Amigos. My rescue cemented an amazing love and admiration I gained for Polynesian people from all of the different islands. I seriously looked into relocating to New Zealand a while back and it is still on my mind. They have the biggest hearts. I have been to quite a few *Kalua* feasts where they cook a pig underground covered with palm tree leaves. Man, playing music with my Poly friends both instrumentally and vocally is just like heaven. They put their whole soul into it.

You also don't mess.

I had a special relationship with the African American population at Los. I forged close friendships with my basketball teammates, cheered on my buddies on the football team and we played a lot of music together.

One of my best friends from my Los Amigos class was a hilarious, highly-energetic black kid we all called "T-Bone". We played hoops together, but he and his older brother were also talented musicians that played trumpet and trombone respectively. Our friendship started back in Jr. High when we hit it off the first day in third period marching band.

T-Bone and I were complete turkeys in the band.

We would take turns in Jr. High putting trumpet valve oil into the coffee of our ornery band teacher in attempts to entertain the predominantly female flute and clarinet sections. We'd do this behind his back, strategically angled towards the girls while our director was busy leading the warm-up in those slow, lethargic, whole notes, in the B flat major scale. The girls would spit into their instruments with laughter and our teacher would spin around to find either one of us giving him the "who me" shrug and look of confusion.

The Coach took a special liking to T-Bone and his brother given they could both ball and were musical. He was a coach to both of them at different times. He recognized they hiked all the way from pretty deep inside Santa Ana to make it to practice, then having to truck it back home late at night through some sketchy neighborhoods. He took it upon himself to pick them up and drop them off every night of the season. Spanning three years with me riding shotgun.

My boys would hang out at our house after school all the time and work out with me on our home gym equipment. (Fitness equipment and building saunas was our family business.) The Coach would brighten up when he would come home from a long day and see us all training hard on the weights in the garage. T-Bone used to say my dad was cool because he did his hair like Laker Coach Pat Riley.

T soon learned the secret... he could persuade my dad to make a Sizzler run for steak and all you can eat shrimp relatively easy. Man, I loved that guy.

Plowing down plate after plate became our favorite pastime and T-Bone would constantly question me at school, "Think I should hit up Coach to take us all out to Sizzler again!?" I mean, we didn't even try to mix it up with Tommy Burgers or anything else. That was our thing.

Tommy's would have been my first pick. Originating in East LA, it is best described as a Mexican chili hamburger ideally consumed with those hot yellow peppers most people can't handle. The Coach said we could get another burger if we ate the first one with at least five chili peppers. Once my mouth acclimated to the intense heat my appetite was forcing upon it, my love affair with applying a variety of hot sauces to most of my meals began.

There was a strong surfing culture at Los. The school was located a few blocks from the southeast side of Huntington Beach about five miles away from the surf. We were known as a water polo school, which is true to this day. We would recruit from the surfer population, as there was a shared skill set required for both sports. Surfers were tough. However, many preferred to spend their energy at the beach. It took a special kind of surfer willing to invest his time into the intense, regimented water polo training.

My little brother Drew and I would see surfers make the trek to the beach on their bikes all the time. At a young age, we attempted to bike the five miles taking the Santa Ana River Trail straight out to our surf spot River Jetties. We carried our thick-railed boards tucked under our arms. Being a forty-five-minute ride, our arms would be completely dead once we got there. Yet Drew, (I called him "Glue"), and I endured the pain.

None of our other friends would even attempt the trek. Glue was three years younger than me, but he didn't act it, nor did he look it: sandy blonde, sea-tossed hair, and "yup" was his answer to most anything. He was my strong but silent right-hand man, my trusted Sundance Kid.

I didn't fully realize we were essentially training for water polo and specifically developing a hammer of a right arm by holding those heavy surfboards. We'd surf all day and have to find the strength to bike back, barely able to hold on to our boards.

Yup, sounds like polo.

My dress mainly reflected my affinity for this beach culture. I wore surf t-shirts, Vans, and shorts all year long. My devil may care hairstyle seemed to wear itself however the chlorine was shaping it on a given day. My eyes were always puffed up and bloodshot, irritated by the mix of salt water and chlorine to the point people would constantly ask me if I was stoned. (I was a straight arrow.) Many of my high school photos reflect this, even in formal dance pictures!

By way of comparison, there was some real style on the Lobo campus. Kids explored so many of the fads of the 80s, looks I could never pull off. What was worn was heavily influenced by the type of music listened to. The Punk Rock style was way cool. Their dress was more basic than the spiked out Billy Idol-look, although I did see the occasional mohawk. Both the Punks and the Metal dudes would wear band shirts, along with jean or leather jackets adorned with patches that claimed their favorite groups.

I was especially close with the Goth crowd, dressed all in black with heavy eyeliner. We had talented goth bands come out of Los and I was drawn to the music they introduced me to: Siouxsie and the Banshees, Love & Rockets, and Bauhaus especially rocked. Many Lobos had savvy tastes in their attire, many of which could very well hold up today. Anyone who could express something artistically in their dress had my admiration. Totally not my strength. There were many who gravitated towards the cool mod-look, decked out in Depeche Mode gear. During my time, I never did see a single "preppy" dude. He would have gotten beat up.

The place definitely inspired and fed my quirky and eclectic nature. After a bit, the different styles and students blended into one unique Los Amigos culture and experience — it was just my life at Los and it changed me forever.

The Future's So Bright

“Things are going great, and they’re only getting better.”

Timbuk3

Boingo's “We Close Our Eyes” was getting heavy radio play throughout The Southland; I was introduced to the iconic LA band Fishbone, Gibson went yard, and I was glued to the television for an entire two week period waiting for any Olympic Water Polo coverage from Seoul.

The year was 1988.

It was my sophomore year, one of the greatest of my life. Everything was coming together for me. I was finding success in so many areas: socially, athletically, musically, physically.

I will never forget that ‘88 summer. I grew from around 5'10" to 6'2".

Over a few months, I had sprouted up. Because of this fast growth, I had to be careful to stretch and strengthen my back. Something I still do today. During this spurt, a deposit formed on my knee from all the calcium my body was generating which stuck out weird. I named it “Freddy”.

What was creepy about this was the calcium mass hadn’t hardened yet. I could draw a face figure on him and squeeze the lump to animate Freddy’s mouth in order to entertain my classmates: “Hi, I’m Freddy!”... “What the *hell* is that!!”

I had growing pains all summer long keeping me up at night and when I could sleep, I slept 12-14 hours at a time. My legs especially always hurt; it felt like I was being stretched out like taffy.

This was the year I broke-out as a water polo player. I became dominant. Coaching had everything to do with it.

“Fish” was our new varsity polo coach. He was a legit player from the Los Amigos Water Polo glory years; there was a real buzz having him back on the pool deck and his leadership boosted our spirits. His was the only team in school history, and in all Lobo sports, to have gone to a CIF State Finals. Unfortunately, they lost, but he went on to play at Golden West, a beast of a water polo school.

As you know, I went on to play there too. My college coach, “Ham”, would rave about how much he loved him and his brother. Ham liked to mess with me, “We *used* to have gunfighters coming out of that Los Amigos school; now, all we get are giraffes like this Douglas kid!”. Great guy Ham.

Fish was long and lean like me and he wore a sweet 80s ‘stache. He was an innovative genius with a polo ball and I was mesmerized whenever he got in the pool with us. The defense had no idea what he would do next.

I mirrored Fish’s play and he recognized that I had a talent for passing, like him. He clued me into so many polo secrets; a major lesson was to focus on my legwork. He taught me how to “step out” and move forward towards the ball while positioned on my back. I was able to do this even with someone grabbing hold of me, lifting out of the water and exposing to the referee I was being held, earning many ejections.

I played predominantly at two-meters, or “inside” closest to the goal. In the past, we would describe playing two-meters like it is the equivalent to a center in basketball. Except for that analogy doesn't work as well today because the role of the center in the basketball game has dramatically changed.

Still, it does work if you picture a team playing with Shaquille O'Neal as their center: you throw the ball inside, and The Daddy goes to work, or the defense

collapses in on him and he passes out to an open 3-point gunner; again, the ball goes into Shaq, and he quickly passes to a slashing Kobe Bryant-type player headed for the rim before the defense can react.

The same type of "inside-out" game is played in water polo. Due to this dynamic, much of my in-depth basketball training translated over to passing out of two-meters. Additionally, I could whip the ball pretty good from the outside scoring at a high percentage. Yup, whipped it good.

Fish invited me to play with the varsity team over the summer. I chose to do this rather than head back to the stage or get pounded at the beach, moving away from mainly identifying as an actor or a surfer.

At first, I was overwhelmed by playing with the big boys but the talented varsity goalie (who was the team captain) took me under his wing and encouraged me. His help and acceptance went a long way to boost my confidence both in the pool and socially. He drove us around in his award-winning yellow VW bus to games and Big Gulp runs all summer long. A bunch of fools with our heads out the windows, screaming at beach babes and always checking the surf. Driving down Pacific Coast Highway with the taste of salt in the air in a surf mobile like that helped me forget about my early days kookin' it up at River Jetties. I wore a permanent grin. Yup, gotta wear shades...

I proved over the summer I could hang with the big boys, even though I struggled to carry much weight; but length and strength go a long way in water polo. Fish was ready to move me up permanently but the new JV coach pushed hard for me to remain on his team. It was agreed I would see time on both. I was honestly fine with spending time on the JV squad, and this proved to be the right call because I needed time to mature mentally.

Another benefit to staying down a level was the bulk of my future team was formed. The key players stuck together until I graduated. Retaining talent was

always a challenge, a major issue we had to deal with. Team chemistry was the result of this rare longevity.

We took a big hit as a program when we lost our JV team captain Jason. He was our MVP goalkeeper, a tough two-meter player, and the most gifted swimmer — a complete sprinter. (For you swimmers he swam a :23 in the 50 free as a sophomore.) He hated moving and we would still see him through the years, but never again in the pool.

However, we did add a major piece in a bruiser we called “Killer”. He transferred late last season and we formed a nice one-two punch over the summer on the varsity team. We established a great rapport in and out of the water.

My JV coach proved to be a great recruiter. He helped our team grow by bringing in a solid freshman class we leaned heavily on. They turned out to be quick in picking up this demanding sport. All played with a defensive mindset, had natural talent and developed a love for the game. They matured lightening fast, and became threats to score as I was getting them open looks with my passing. However, the bulk of the scoring duties was put on me at the beginning of the year until they could get up to speed.

I too was always in recruiting mode, I convinced one of my goofy band pals “Smid” to join up. Guy cracked me up. He was my partner in crime at band camp and became a great defender. It was nice to have a fellow Boingo fan on the squad and Smiddy had every album they ever made.

We were always on the lookout for recruits, but the ones who actually stuck around were special. You cannot play water polo and have a poor work ethic. You just can't. Most don't make it past the first week of practice and those that remained usually had a few screws loose. The sport allowed you to gain character, all while you got your teeth kicked in.

Like last year, this crazy demanding sport brought me into tight friendships. We hung out with each other at lunch and after school all season long. Our favorite hang-out was Fountain Valley's legendary Nick's Pizza d'Oro. They had an all-you-can-eat pasta bar our team could plow through, and the Italian owner Nick loved to feed us.

In water polo, it is important to eat. *A ton*. We could lose weight extremely easily from all the intense swimming and it helped to have some pounds on us while wrestling in the water. Round Table pizza was around the corner from Los and was another regular carb-pounding joint for us. My JV coach instructed us, "Don't eat until you are *full*. Eat until you are completely *exhausted*".

We all admired my JV coach. He had graduated last year, good-looking dude and smooth. Whenever we were out traveling his senior year, he was always the one sent out of the Lobo bus to hit on any girls spotted in the parking lot (while Jason and I had our heads glued to the window taking notes). Outgoing and extremely smart, he would work tirelessly coaching me the rest of my high school career alongside Fish.

My '88 JV team got a rare win that brought us even closer together. We outdueled one of our bigger neighbors also located in Fountain Valley by a score of 10-9. They usually killed us. This gave us a taste of what potential we had and my two-meter play keyed the victory. Pretty apparent I was a varsity player playing down a weight class.

We coasted through everybody in our Garden Grove League until we hit those guys from last year who completely waxed us:

Kennedy High School. (Dun, Dun, Duuuun!)

After last year's game, Jason lamented, "Those guys made us look like A-holes". We lost by probably 10 goals to them at home and we had such an awesome JV

team last year. They were just a lot better than us, and all of the schools in the Garden Grove League.

1987 was their introduction to our league, and they body slammed everyone — in like, every sport. Previously, they were in the same league as the biggest schools in Orange County, a highly competitive league and apparently they fell off a bit from the elite level.

They dropped a weight class into the smaller schools division, and in doing so became a juggernaut. Especially in team sports. A talented player in individual sports could beat them, like in tennis or wrestling; but in basketball, baseball and *especially* water polo they completely dominated, the games weren't even close.

Kennedy was located in the more posh city of La Palma. Bigger school, bigger enrollment, more money translated into attracting a tornado of talent to their sports programs.

As it turned out, the real problem was they proved to be *obnoxious* winners. I'm sure they took their punishments in their last league, but they came off to every school as being brash and their crowds were flat-out snots. Everybody in our league viewed them this way. *Nobody* liked playing them.

My JV team played Kennedy at their home pool and almost beat them. I exerted myself more than ever, a complete physical battle. This caught them off guard and pushed them back on their heels. They didn't like this.

Not. One. Bit. (Joker voice)

After the game, the Kennedy team decided to surround my guys in their home locker room all pumped up and ready to brawl asking, "Where is #11?".

Well... I wasn't there, but off to see our family chiropractor after those punks had wailed on my back. The Coach disciplined us to never, *never* hit someone in the back, but they were pulling out all the stops in trying to slow me down.

You could say I got Kennedy's attention. My take on them was they were spoiled, entitled, yet gifted and well-coached athletes from the Uptown. All the teen ingredients of a classic John Hughes movie.

My name was now the first announced during the morning sports recaps mentioning our team play. Water polo gave me an immediate *in*, huge given my school required some maneuvering. Even if I wasn't built like a stocky football player, people respected I packed a wicked left hook. Honestly, before polo, I figured my love for comic books would earn me wedgies in the hall. But I now had an alter ego, I could remain the goofy Drama Brav, clothed in an athlete's image on campus. It was cool. Thank you polo.

The best part of this year was I was allowed to remain a dipstick. No job, carefree... given the space to stay young just a bit longer and develop in the protection of this cocoon.

We were getting our Lobo swagger back on the pool deck. Fish kept telling us this was the start of a new era, a return to past glory. I fully believed this and woke up each day with bright optimism for what the future held.

Arrested Development

“I see a face of fear, it’s runnin’ scared in the valley below.”

“Bullet the Blue Sky” (off *The Joshua Tree*)

I wasn't nearly as prepared for this next portion of my life as I was for my introduction to water polo.

Up until polo, I spent my free time playing with Transformers, obsessed with WWF Wrestling, and devising money-making schemes with Much to fund my Dragon's Lair obsession at the local arcade.

[Note: This was 2 years into my teens, embarrassed Drew to death he had an older brother still collecting G.I. Joe years removed from elementary school. I mean, my mom told us at the same time there was no Santa Claus! I was crushed... but Glue told mom he had figured as much.]

Obviously, I was young at heart. Regardless of my over-obsession with Snake Eyes, I started to gain attention from the opposite sex. Possibly something to do with my freak growth spurt and success in the pool. Also, hanging out and being accepted by the polo team upperclassmen I’m sure helped.

Girls started to pass me notes in between classes, all intricately folded up, origami-like with my name written in bubbly cursive writing. These notes expressed frustration over teachers and their class assignments, annoying little brothers and lamentations over a bunch of other crap. (These flirtations went straight over my head.)

I would reply with some half-thought-out advice and would have been better in conversation with the annoying little brother. To say I was naïve would be putting it lightly.

Girls seemed to occupy most of my many daydreams, but I liked making them laugh *NOT* talking to them extensively on a relational level. I had zero ability to say something halfway coherent in a serious tone and preferred to remain aloof. Regrettably, something I took with me even into my early years of marriage.

This bout of "shyness" sounds crazy coming from the guy who as a freshman could entertain an entire busload of teenagers rapping out "Paul Revere" by the Beastie Boys whilst T-Bone held down a steady beatbox.

Finally, the Google explained to me the definition of an ambivert: someone who is both an introvert and extrovert.

Ah, that makes so much sense! In a crowd or performance situation, I was a total extrovert.

Drama Brav was quite the showman. For example, back at the Orange County Children's Theater, I played the leading role in *John Willy and the Beeple*. The tech crew started the play without telling our director who had everyone holding hands in a circle singing Kumbaya in preparation for the performance.

Except I was already on stage. The stage design crew created a giant rocket ship that would have been my mode of transportation to land on and eventually save Planet Beeple.

They had me hide out early inside the rocket, even while the audience was being seated. I would then lower my rocket's door, exit E.T.-style (complete with dry ice), and come out for a few lines before I was introduced to my Beeple sidekick.

This performance I did the regular schtick, gave the lead-in line to cue my counterpart... but nothing. Did it again. No alien bee creature to greet me.

Hmmmmm

I looked up to the obviously shocked crowd, realized what had happened and grinned. I then deadpanned about the lack of life on the planet.

In total, I gave a five-minute monologue influenced by early Steve Martin standup comedy and it was by far the best performance in my entire time doing the play. Once my counterpart flew onto the stage, wide-eyed, and winded, I had some fun with him before starting into our dialogue.

I had them all laughing because, again, this was *children's* community theater. They realized something was wrong so they were on my side. The fact I was pulling it off diffused the situation and made it that much more enjoyable.

It was like the improvised lines in movies that end up being the best because natural chemistry between actors can't be scripted. For example, take this classic improv by Ford:

Princess Leia: *"I Love You..."* Han Solo: *"I Know."*

Nevertheless, having to sit down one on one with a girl and confess my true feelings, talk openly about my emotions, or even discuss our (gulp) relationship — the introvert in me would fail miserably on or off script.

And I did fail, an unbelievable Launchpad McQuack crash and burn fail.

The incident began with a piercing scream throughout the Douglas household, "BRANDON, THE PHONE IS FOR YOU!!". My younger sister handed it over and teased, "It's a *giiir!*".

Red Alert! This wasn't my first rodeo, but I admittedly was not very good at this. I took a deep breath and muttered a hello. A noticeably nervous, but upbeat feminine voice greeted me and informed me who she was.

My eyes widened, and my heart went from a normal resting beat per minute for a swimmer, to the flight or fight zone of 190.

This girl was a complete doll, a grade older than me and I had a serious crush on her since the seventh grade. I never had the guts to say two words to her one on one, but *always* went out of my way to entertain her.

I would catch her laughing at my antics and Ghostbuster one-liners and noticed her showing up at all those polo and basketball games. When I was sneaking peeks into the stands after a big play, it was her reaction I was looking for.

But I messed it all up.

She asked me to go to the prom with her.

I think my mind went to the zoo... honestly, flipped out.

With my brain not working, I immediately started to come up with *bad* reasons why I couldn't go. On campus, I admired girls from a distance and had never been on anything closely resembling a date. This situation was almost too much for me, something so fortuitous somehow you mess it up. Self-sabotage, fear of success... label it anything you like.

She was upbeat, witty and patient in her attempts to calm my nerves and convince me we would have a fun time.

Yet I told her I had no money. She said she worked and would pay for the entire night... except she wouldn't pay for her own corsage. That was on me and it better be nice! (I had to ask her what a corsage was.)

"I don't even have my license!"

"Don't worry, I'll drive or I can rent us a limo..."

Her voice was intimidating to me. I always loved to look at her, but we never shared a full conversation in all our years together, and my insecurities kept telling me she was way too pretty for me.

"I don't know..." I whined.

"Oh, *come on Brandon...*" she said with a hint of playful exasperation to her voice.

I then heard a third person in a lower voice mimicking her, "Yeah, *come on Brandon!*".

I knew immediately. "Will you excuse me for a moment?"

I darted upstairs and found my brother in a state of hysterical laughter sprawled all over my parent's bed with the phone in his hand. Once Glue entered into that state there was no coming out of it. He was dying, listening in to my ineptitude in conversation and current predicament.

"Hang it up! Hang up you nerfherder!" I pounded on his arm, but this didn't stop his laughing.

Embarrassed and overwhelmed by my little brother's antics, I was thrown off even more. I continued to grasp at straws telling her my parents didn't want me to start dating until I was sixteen.

"Well, when is your birthday?"

"March 31st."

"You dork, it's the end of April!"

Oh freak, that's right. I just turned... I still can't go.

"Why don't you go with T-Bone?", I suggested.

"T-BONE!!!!@#\$!"

Again, Glue imitated her shocked voice from upstairs, "T-BONE!!!!@#\$"

"Please excuse me once more."

I attempted to disarm him of the phone but by that point, I was both physically and emotionally drained. (Glue wouldn't be coming down off this for days.)

Ahhhrrrg! Why did I have to mention T?? The first name to pop into my head I guess? Dumb, dumb.

Everybody knew T-Bone on campus, he was well-loved and always had us laughing. A squirrely, squirrely dude who would have been drugged up with an ADHD diagnosis in today's climate. It was obvious she didn't view him with much personal interest and I guess I viewed myself more in the squirrely, ADHD category with him.

I didn't see myself as the leading man she deserved.

Eventually, I made it back on the phone. I think I deflated her enough by then because she began to acquiesce. I'm surprised how patient she was with me. Probably because I'm sure I didn't give off a repulsed vibe in any way. I was giving an immature, overwhelmed and flat-out scared response at the prospect of a one-on-one night out with my crush of four years all dolled up.

WWF Wrestling hadn't prepared me for this.

I apologized, and almost immediately regretted it upon hanging up.

I got lit into by common friends the next day and had absolutely no excuse for hurting her. These friends probably picked up on my none too discreet glances in her direction over the years (and most likely encouraged her to call). I responded to their questions:

"Yeah, I like her."

"Then *what* is the problem??!!"

(Pause)

"I dunno."

This exasperated them even more, I certainly was a frustrating dude. I truly would have loved to have gone. She *almost* had me convinced. We spent the rest of our time at Los Amigos avoiding each other.

I couldn't believe she was interested in me. In hindsight, I guess I can see it now. Even though I was younger and had a lot of maturing to do, we did have a ton in common. I was coming into my own, and our pairing would have made sense to the inevitable microscope our classmates would put me under as the "younger" man.

Besides, I made her laugh.

I wish it had been my mom eavesdropping on the other line. She would have had me immediately out the door getting sized up for a tux and would have flat-out refused her paying the bill. I could have used some help. I think you can sense the regret I carry about it today.

From the conversation, I got to learn a bit more about her personality. I had no idea she could be so funny and assertive... strengths that were very attractive to me.

I told my moment of shame to Jason and the boys. They all looked like they were ready to jump me. It's not like I was proud of it...

One bellowed, "What is wrong with you!!". A perplexed Jason questioned, "You told her to go with T-Bone??".

However, it was summed up best by my bro shaking his head:

"Worst story *ever* told".

Tempted

“I asked of my reflection, tell me, what is there to do?”

Squeeze

Today being a father to a cute, fun, quirky, and shy teenage girl, I am abhorred by my lack of assertiveness and actions.

One positive note is... I do learn from my mistakes.

Much and I went to see a movie that came out a few weeks later at the end of the school year starring Robin Williams, called *Dead Poets Society*. His portrayal of John Keating was the role that defined Williams' career in my mind.

I identified with the outgoing nature of the extroverted Neil character. He had the talent and passion of an actor but was being forced to become a doctor, (and everybody said I looked like him). Part of me was also drawn to Neil's introverted roommate Todd, played by Ethan Hawke. The absolute trepidation in moving outside of his comfort zone I could relate with. Keating was brilliant in helping him move past his insecurities and instilled in him the fire to pursue whatever would bring true meaning to his life.

Much was an extremely chill and reserved dude, (yet, you didn't tick him off!). He definitely leaned more towards the quiet Ethan Hawke character. We walked out of that Fountain Valley Family Four Cinema changed men.

Carpe Diem. “Seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary.”

I left the theater inspired to make something of my life and talents. It impressed upon my young mind how much I needed to grow and take risk, the perfect

moment for the film to come out. I resolved to no longer be the scared dude on the phone clawing for a way out of a situation that frightened me.

Keating also left his impression on young Much as he is an influential English teacher today, a complete legend on campus; he is always quick with a war story involving his tall, water polo-playing friend. (Many students believe he makes them up.)

I moved forward with a new passion to push the boundaries in developing my game, dedicating long personal hours in a variety of ways:

I swam laps at my gym, lifted weights in the garage and would lay on my back and throw my polo ball up in the air during tv commercials (which annoyed my sisters for years). I also switched up from spending hours of pitching in the backyard, to throwing my polo ball against the family sauna to improve my ball speed and accuracy.

I identified with water polo in such a way, I even signed my name with a #11. Corny, but I was mimicking the seniors I looked up to my freshman year doing it, (like my JV coach). Polo numbers typically only go up to 13, so I chose #11 because it was half of my basketball number #22, (my dad's number he would wear in high school and college). Much and Glue would sport #22 on the court as well.

My dad was now taking Drew and me to college polo games, fueling my desire to play at a higher level. I was enjoying the end of my sophomore year swimming on the varsity swim team. I enjoyed the competition, but the main drive was to get faster for next year's polo season. No longer involved with the JV in any way, called up to the majors for the rest of my time in high school. I was excelling in keeping up with the heavyweights.

Once swim season was over, Fish and my JV coach pulled me into a closed-door meeting. Talked with me about leadership, commitment, and how they saw all of that in me, eye of the tiger type stuff.

Then they pulled it on me. Told me they wanted me to change positions and be the next varsity goalie.

WHAT!?!?

I don't remember if I played goal even once my first two years and they were asking me to switch going into my junior year??!!

Inconceivable!!

Our monster of a goalkeeper and co-league MVP had graduated. Fish flattered me explaining he wanted our top all-around athlete in the goal. He had success in the past employing this philosophy (which tells you how much weight the goalkeeper position carries). Los Amigos as a program always relied on strong goal play to fuel their success through the years.

Except, the main reason I loved water polo so much was because playing field was incredibly natural for me: I matched up against all the big schools we ever played against at two-meters, I was a dedicated defender and a fast swimmer.

It kinda made sense. I can see clearly now there was no other option. We were dealing with small varsity numbers, not a variety of talent to pick from. Killer was our *only* truly seasoned veteran.

He was a senior, a stocky 5'11" of all muscle. In their thinking, they could have him do most of the heavy lifting at two-meters, while I would anchor our defense if I could develop into a serviceable goalkeeper.

I used to give credit to Fish for being the mastermind in my polo career, I thought he saw greater upside for me as a goalkeeper; but after talking with him later in life, I realized that was not so much the case. He honestly loved me as a two-meter player, especially since he helped to pattern my style after his own play. My court awareness in getting my teammates involved was a difficult skill to teach.

The program was in a tough spot. It actually pained everyone to ask me to sacrifice something I obviously loved for a position foreign and unattractive to me.

But they needed someone to take one for the team.

Fish told me to think it over, and boy I did... the longer I did the more upset I got. It felt as if I was being forced to change.

I lamented this with my good friend Dave who played for the colossal Fountain Valley High School across town (closer to Tommy's). He gave me a solution:

"Come and play with me".

His quick response flat out surprised me. Now looking back, perhaps this had been on Dave's mind for a while. In fact, I remember the Fountain Valley coach made it a point to talk with me after my JV team had beaten them. It was only our third game, so I did some pretty heavy lifting. That was the best game I played last season.

Yes, it had most likely been in their heads to recruit me. Not uncommon for the bigger schools in the area to poach in the smaller ponds for top talent.

Dave told me not to worry, he would take care of the goal... and dude was a phenomenal goalie.

He also was a surfing buddy, a former Orange County Children's Theater standout, and we had made it to the top of Mt. Whitney together. Our friendship would have grown even tighter as teammates.

Along with my polo bro, the one-two punch was my good friend Bear went to Fountain Valley High. Tall, athletic, good-looking, constantly smiling, and every girl on campus was in love with him. Bear was a big-time hooper, for being 6'4" he played more like 6'8" and he *always* had my back. He was the Sam Malone of FVHS and being his wingman would be awesome. (In quick contrast, Bear's description of me during our teenage years is I wore a permanent Tommy Burger chili stain around my lips.)

The girls of FVHS were complete knock-outs. Even though I couldn't coherently think or effectively communicate with any of them, I certainly was enamored. Bear could help me out there.

I had some *serious* friendships across town, too many to mention. It would have been a sort of homecoming for me, not a complete change of scenery. I knew the major contributors of their '88 CIF state championship football team. I was in with the most popular kids running the school within a population of almost 5,000, largest school west of the Mississippi at the time.

They belonged to a far tougher league making the quality of play much higher than the Garden Grove School District. They would get more recruiting visits from the top Division I water polo schools like UCLA where I wanted to play.

The place was a complete buzz and owned the heart of the city of Fountain Valley — Los was small change.

In comparison, our 1,800 students were considered a laughing stock to those who attended Fountain Valley High School, in large part due to our diversity, huge disparity in upscale demographics, and affinity for brawling.

“The Lobos????! You are a Lobo!???”

Fountain Valley High viewed us as Neal Page viewed Del Griffith in *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*. Steve Martin’s upscale character Neal was abhorred by the uncouth Del (John Candy): a destroyed bathroom, underwear left in the sink, exploded beer on a vibrating bed they had to *share* will do that.

The beautiful city of Fountain Valley was our shared bed.

I pondered switching up. Up to this time, I never had to make such a weighty decision. I could only equate staying at Los with sacrificing something I truly loved. I was a team player, but there was no question, I did not want to stop playing two-meters. I had an excellent future with it and would rather be the guy slamming the polo ball into the goalie’s face than be on the receiving end.

It got to the point I was practically leaning towards switching schools because in my head it made the most sense. Located in a far richer draw of Fountain Valley neighborhoods, this place had money. Yes, money can sure mess some people up, but in school sports programs it does an awful lot of good.

And okay, I’ll stop dancing around the issue and come out and say it: Fountain Valley was a “white” school.

At the time, water polo in Southern California was pretty much a white boy’s game. An increased amount of quality varsity players was very covetous. FVHS had that due to larger enrollment and I’m sure their racial breakdown wasn’t at 28% Caucasian. We could barely put together a team and have two quality substitutes at Los. That made it tough to play the *entire* game against schools like Kennedy subbing in fresh players with the aim of swimming us to death.

Losing me would be a big hit for this small program... I did get that. It was a lot to sort out.

So I brought it up with my parents.

I told them the primary reason I wanted to change schools was because Fish asked me to switch to goalie. Both of them gave looks of shock and confusion. Neither of them understood why they would take a gifted hustle player like myself and waste such talent in the goal!

The Coach didn't completely understand polo but loved the intensity of the sport. He didn't see most goalies doing that type of grunt work he valued so much.

Laker great Kurt Rambis was no goalie!

We viewed the goalie position as kind of an oddity, a different game hidden within this supercool, physical sport.

We even began working out the logistics, starting with transportation. I understood some days I would have to ride my bike home when my mom was busy at the theater until I could drive. I seriously had all of this constantly running through my mind with both Dave and I getting more excited about the possibilities.

But still, in the back of my mind lingered all of the great memories Los had given me. I was torn. I recalled what Jason did for our team. None of us wanted to play goalie on our '87 team. At an early practice, our coach was attempting to coax one of us into volunteering. All of us froze, hoping he wouldn't call our number, to the point it got uncomfortable. In exasperation, Jason blurted out, "Hey! If none of you (excrements) want to do it, *I'LL DO IT!!!*".

Hit me like a Dino Bravo boot to the face. Slammed back to reality, I knew I could never leave.

I loved my classmates, teammates, teachers, and friendships. I couldn't desert them. My loyalty to Los began to outweigh the lure of running with the cool kids

at the cool school. It was diverse, different, quirky. Sure, we had to deal with the occasional knife fight, but I liked who I was there. Although I felt I was sacrificing what I believed would be my water polo career, ultimately, I was willing to do so.

I embraced being the underdog and I was discovering there certainly was some fight in this dog. Besides, I still had unfinished business with Kennedy High School.

I felt the odds were against me, but I was going to *carpe diem* even if it killed me.

Becoming the Keeper

*“When we are no longer able to change a situation,
we are challenged to change ourselves.”*

Viktor Frankl

We all immediately fell in love with leading lady Ione Skye and John Cusack's portrayal of Lloyd Dobler in *Say Anything*. The Cure's best album *Disintegration* was released (inarguable), and Batman dominated the big screen with an utterly brilliant score composed by Boingo frontman Danny Elfman.

The year was 1989.

At the Lobo pool deck, I was making a sacrifice. Out of loyalty, I remained to improve our small (but proud) polo program. (I never mentioned to *any* of them how close I was to leaving.)

My teammates openly acknowledged my decision to take part in rebuilding our team by changing positions. They respected me for it. Even with their support, I was still unsure how to take on this new role.

About this time I saw a flyer for Saturday morning pick-up water polo at my sports club. I thought this would be helpful to get a headstart before Lobo practices officially started. These guys in my eyes were old and fat. My first thought was that I was going to wipe the floor with them.

It was weird saying it for the first time, but I told them I played goal. We played a few games with different players switching out and taking turns as goalie on one end, while I stayed anchored at the other cage.

I was miserable.

They had no trouble scoring on me whatsoever. Those old guys serving mandatory goal time were more effective than I was, and my teams weren't winning. I had no feel or timing to stop the crafty shots being put past me.

Finally, I called for someone to switch me. I had to get one game in the field and totally destroyed them, which was refreshing, especially after my first failed attempts in the cage. At the end of the last game some guys said: "Hey, you've got the wrong position. You are way talented, but *NOT* as a goalie!". This only added to my frustration.

Thanks, Captain Obvious.

The same type of results followed me into summer ball. My teammates were feeling for me because they knew I could thrash most of them. Yet, here I was flailing, watching their shots go in right by my outstretched arms. I was seemingly thrown back to the start of my young career as opposed to heading into what should have been the beginning of my high school prime.

I didn't even start my first summer league game. The kid that played goal for my JV team got the nod out of respect because he was more experienced and skilled at the time. The expectation was that I would have to win the spot.

I painfully watched the start of the game on the sidelines for the first time *ever* in my career, wearing a backup goalie cap, while my teammates battled it out with only one substitute. We started three sophomores on our varsity team and one freshman made up our bench... just brutal. I longed to be out there with them.

I got in the goal for the second half and I don't remember being awful, but I sure didn't make much of a difference. Definitely did not feel like my introduction to the sport. Fish encouraged me to keep at it, never bringing into question the

decision, though I certainly was. I would have switched back in a heartbeat after those first few weeks.

Yet, I was determined to not let my guys down — to become the keeper my team needed. This was Killer's senior year! As I labored towards improving my game, I discovered vital pieces I was missing.

The first piece was mobility; I needed to cover more ground. My VW goalie buddy came to coach me and identified the remedy. "You need to develop your lunge."

This is essentially flying up and across the water to cover ground moving from side to side. I never had to do this before and training with his technique was vital. Before, I thought it was all about getting up high out of the water and simply reaching over. However, it was a bit different than that, using a slightly altered leg technique to get to those high corner shots. It was pretty cool once you got the hang of it.

Fish used to say I had the leg strength of a goalie, but the movement and mobility were different. At two-meters, I had grown accustomed to moving through the water with some hitchhiker on my back. Goalkeeping requires a broader range of movements, as well as maintaining yourself out of the water for longer periods of time. Apples and oranges... a completely different kind of strenuousness.

Once my [lunge](#) started to emerge, my results improved dramatically. Springing quickly to either side covering a good piece of territory, along with my 6'4" frame and long arms proved to be the cornerstone of my game.

This mobility allowed me to make point-blank stops. This was the key for us to see success against the big schools as I could now cover up defensive mistakes. Also, blocking [close-up shots](#) deflated the opposition and boosted my team's morale like a timely home run can energize a struggling baseball lineup. Especially a [penalty shot being blocked](#). Those were fun.

I also learned to lunge forward, springing out of the cage which startled and disrupted opponents bringing the ball too close into my space. My mom said this was her favorite thing to watch, like a spider coming out and surprising its prey.

The next piece I needed was more defensive aggressiveness. I realized this after some digging.

My dad taught me the benefits of breaking down game tape, one of his favorite pastimes. The Coach would slow down and meticulously chart the complex foot-working patterns of basketball greats like McHale and Olajuwon in the post. We would then practice them slowly, exactly how we had tracked them.

I studied segments of our '88 Olympic team courtesy of my teammate Smid's insomnia. Back then, Olympic coverage never specified when they would switch over to a given sport and the game times in Seoul were in the dead of night. We couldn't simply watch highlights on Youtube like today and I kept falling asleep on the VCR waiting to push record!

From analyzing these games I recognized my play was too timid, my back seemingly glued to the cage. I studied these games repeatedly and mirrored the bold play of the [U.S. Olympic goalie](#) who was absolutely fearless in coming out to meet the ball. At the time, one of the best in the world.

He could move *backwards* incredibly fast, almost inventing his own stroke treading out of the water and using his elbows as oars. I broke down his technique and it took me a while to incorporate, but once I did it freed me up to take more risk. Things changed dramatically.

I was utilizing more of my skills I had developed as a field player. I could now get back quickly and defend the goal after an attempted steal or after I made a hard foul to stop play. Handling myself physically with the best in the pool made me unique as a goalie. I was no longer stuck to the cage.

Few goalies felt comfortable wrestling with two-meter players, and not many could swim as I could. Most lacked upper-end swimming skills and not comfortable physically challenging a field player. I saw the Olympic goalies were lightning fast swimmers, relentless in protecting their domain, and didn't back down from anyone.

This aggressiveness also encouraged me to take up for my young team if I felt an opposing player was being overly rough with one of my guys. I came lunging out of the cage "after the ball", but ended up doing the Dino Bravo on the dude's head! The refs weren't fooled, and I spent plenty of time in the penalty box — especially for a goalie.

(Hey, The Coach always said if I didn't have four fouls on me by the end of a basketball game, I wasn't playing hard enough!)

I could see all sorts of water polo shenanigans from my new vantage point, and taking up for my team made me feel more connected with my guys. I felt like big brother showing up to help little bro out on the playground. Illustrate to the scary dudes of the water polo world that they had to go through me if they wanted to mess with my young team.

I had some phenomenal games when I was on. But if something threw me off or if I took too much risk against the wrong guys... we paid for it. The worst results came when I would lose my aggressiveness. I would stay back in the goal playing "defensively" like most everybody else playing the position. Not utilizing any of my field skills I developed my first two years was exactly what could beat me and our team would suffer. When I maintained my confidence — I was innovative and improvising like I was back on stage, giving us better team results.

Early on, it was necessary for me to test the limits. Oftentimes I got burned. Despite that, Fish encouraged me *vehemently* to take the risks and allowed me the space to make these errors. This shortened my learning curve as I was able to make adjustments, not making the same error in the future.

[Hey, Magic Johnson had a high career turnover rate at 3.87 per game. Notwithstanding, taking calculated risk was Magic's game. Only Westbrook throws the ball away more at 4.01 per game and he is in the same category of a dude that needs to be attacking!]

The final piece I needed to develop was along the lines of attacking like Magic and Westbrook: I needed to play with *more* of an offensive mindset.

I initiated offensive counter-attacks after a defensive stop like a savvy quarterback making a pinpoint pass down field. For me, it was akin to grabbing a defensive rebound on the basketball court and throwing a bullet outlet pass to a streaking teammate. The trick was to *control* the ball. A goalie in water polo can completely dominate a shooter when he can use both hands and pull the ball into him. I was getting good at this and my teammates were conditioned to be off to the races after a shot attempt.

With such a young team, it was important for me to put the pressure on after a save and get the ball quickly into Killer's hands before the defense could send an extra guy to double team him. He had been a recipient of my passes during our time together in the field and trusted me to get him the ball even in tight spots. He even called for passes the full length of the pool into two-meters. I was pleased my love for passing continued to be an asset even though I wasn't physically swimming to the offensive end.

Another big plus I brought over from the field was I could shoot. I became a threat to score even from a distance, not typical goalie behavior in any sport. But I was making it up as I went along! Fish actually encouraged me to take an early shot from distance at the beginning of games. This kept their goalie in the defensive position, guessing and hugging the cage, not wandering out (as I was prone to do). Some of my passes to Killer were so close to the goal the opposing goalie could steal them. We would gun at the goalie with the intent to keep him honest. To our surprise, I started scoring consistently.

Believe it or not, this became a part of my play and it wasn't uncommon for me to have a goal in a game during my high school days, sometimes even two. My dad would overhear instructions given to the opposition's goalie about me: "Be on the alert and don't range out on him, because he has the go-ahead to fire and isn't afraid to do so."

All my time spent on the mound was paying off.

When I realized how important it was for me to be offensive-minded, even while playing a predominantly defensive position, I got to be dangerous. That is when we started winning. (The best defense, is a ball controlled and attacking offense. This ancient axiom has served many a legendary military leader.)

People took notice. My mom heard many a parent lament, "We would be beating these guys if it wasn't for their goalie!". Coaches showed up to our games to scout out what I was doing; many told me I was fun to watch.

It dawned on me that my new position was kind of like the Queen in chess, the most powerful piece in determining the outcome of a game, given my growing contributions on both offense and defense. I had become impassioned with this new role.

In fact, it is my contention that compared to all sports with goalies, the goalkeeper in water polo carries the most weight. A soccer or hockey goalie can carry a team, but they had no say on the offensive end as I had. In water polo, an effective goalie was like a pitcher in baseball who was able to consistently help himself with the bat. Rare, but an incredible factor in determining the outcome of games. However, a polo goalie can play *every* game, unlike a pitcher.

We were making something out of this rebuilding year and Killer, (now Captain Killer), was encouraged with how things were evolving.

I learned that sometimes when a door closes in your life, it's not always a bad thing, no matter how much you don't like it in the present.

I *loved* being the keeper.

Goin' to Pick a Fight

*“O’ Flower of Scotland. When will we see, your likes again?
Who fought and died for, your wee bit hill and glen...”*

Scottish National Anthem

By the end of the summer, our team identity started to come into focus: we keyed off of Killer’s intense leadership and our defense at times was stifling. I had learned to better direct our defense and was coming into my own as a shot-blocker. We had some impressive eye-opening moments, as well as some humbling letdowns.

A funky skip shot could throw me off, especially coming off the hand of a lefty. Some games my back-peddle stroke didn’t want to work, leaving me hung out to dry in no man’s land. It was like in baseball when I didn’t have my best stuff working in a game I was pitching. I had to learn to adjust to my opponents and what my body was giving me at the time.

[A skip shot in water polo is a huge weapon for the offense. Throwing the ball intentionally into the water with enough force and backspin will skip the ball like a rock can skip across a lake. This can really mess with a goalie trying to read it, almost like a batter attempting to time a major league curveball. I learned the trick to blocking these was to always attack them with two hands.]

Still, there was enough buzz about my team Ham started showing up to our games to scout both myself and Killer (Man, he loved gunfighters). I played out of my socks whenever he showed up... thanks again to the Orange County Children's Theater for I too was a huge *ham* who loved the spotlight.

Drama Brav or not, there was one constant, this sport brought out the fighter in me I never knew existed. Maybe there was something to all of those bedtime stories my granddad told me of Scotland the Brave. My bloodline read like a Who's Who of Scottish outlaws, well, outlaws according to the British Crown.

My parents named me James after both of their very Scottish fathers but called me by my middle name. I loved the stories about the man we all shared names with. Our namesake, James Douglas' father fought alongside William Wallace (Braveheart). He did so with such magnanimous strength and grit King Edward banished the name of Douglas by royal decree for being a royal pain in the arse.

["O' Flower of Scotland" is the Scottish National Anthem and written to honor William Wallace. Scots sing it today with a ton of emotion as they remember his bravery and the love he exhibited for his country.]

James Douglas was the right-hand man to Robert the Bruce. Netflix recently released a pretty historically accurate movie called *Outlaw King*; it chronicles the genesis of their fight after all of Scotland was enraged by Wallace's death.

Actor Aaron Taylor-Johnson, who portrayed James Douglas did us proud. When he offered his sword to The Bruce saying, "I want my *name* back"... no Douglas alive could watch him deliver that line without getting choked up. (Because of this dude, every other male child in the Douglas line was named James going back to the 14th century.) I followed suit and have a James Douglas of my own, but we named my boy after my granddad, James Ralston Stewart.

Grandpa Stewart was a huge influence on my life. He fought bravely and saved lives in WWII earning the silver star and purple heart during the Battle of the Bulge, manning a Sherman Tank. Tough dude and wise, but he wasn't a grizzled old vet. You couldn't find a kinder man. The sweet Vietnamese ladies at our local donut shops would always remember him when he would come back into town.

His family immigrated from Scotland and he was the first born in America. He always asserted we were directly related to "Rob Roy" the Bandit from his mother's side. Rob Roy MacGregor was likened to Robin Hood and also has his own movie played by the brilliant Liam Neeson. The MacGregors were some of the toughest Highlanders. Historians have concluded, to wield the Scottish Claymore Swords, they would have to be at least 6'5". It was impossible to wield those long swords effectively if they were any shorter. Big mojos. They were also known for having abnormally long, hairy arms; (I have plenty of evidence to claim a direct line with that alone).

The crazed Highlander came out of me when it was time to get it on with Kennedy once again:

I got hot early blocking a first-quarter penalty shot and several one-on-nobody fast-break attempts. Nothing from outside got close to getting by me. I was pulling in their shots with two hands and screaming for my crew to "get-out" down the pool, leading them with my passes. Killer was in rare form and we closed out the quarter up 2-1.

I remember it very well.

Kennedy's old nemesis #11 and his compadres were now turning it up against them, but with me now in a far different role. Lobos continued to play well and we were looking great heading into halftime. Going into the 3rd and 4th quarters however, we just ran outta gas.

We had no numbers coming off the bench to help us swim with them, and they completely dominated us as we lost our offensive edge. This caused turnovers and they fast-broke us to death. We were faced with the same dilemma the smalltown team from *Hoosiers* had to deal with.

It was indeed, a lonely bench.

I was faced with not only one Kennedy player to stop on my own, but several. This is where it got nearly impossible for me if the opposition spread themselves out properly. They started to make the extra pass to the open player with the best shooting angle for the easy goal. I couldn't lock down on one player the way I wanted to, forcing me into an impossible dance.

Incredibly frustrating after we played them so well. The score got ugly as they ran it up with their obnoxious crowd back into it and trying to put us in our place. Some good coaching adjustments made by the Kennedy staff helped them as well. They were told to take their time and pass in place of hurrying into challenging me one on one. We would have preferred they kept doing that. They finished us off with an embarrassing final score of 18-8. I was one sad Amigo.

We made them flinch, which was nice, but it only fueled my desire to take down this Goliath. We were in the locker room bummed out changing and we could hear the Kennedy players yucking it up on the other side of us. The atmosphere quickly turned however when I heard:

"You think you're tough huh, let's see it. Right here!" I looked over and my first thought was...

What is he doing!!

Killer wasn't done with the game and was challenging every Kennedy player to a fight. He was even happy to take on more than one of them, (a modern-day William Wallace).

The jovial smiles were wiped from the Kennedy players faces as they all stood up, gathered together to size him up.

I was shaking on the inside and definitely unsure of this course of action from a leadership perspective, but there was one thing for certain... I wasn't going to let my friend face them all on his own.

I stepped up to his right side to be his wingman, ill-advised as it might have seemed, and more of our teammates gathered behind us. I was definitely not at band camp anymore.

Only five short months ago I was too scared to go to prom. Now here I was standing outnumbered three to one, helping to lead a charge against some pretty good sized dudes, the reigning champions of this physically demanding sport. *Where was my mind?!*

Like the Scots, we followed our guy severely outnumbered into battle. Now we found ourselves completely surrounded by the English. But the funniest thing happened:

Nobody, I mean, **NOBODY! WANTED A PIECE OF HIM!!**

He went through the entire team! Faced down each one getting in their face letting them know what he thought of them and their cocky school. Someone finally stepped up for the challenge, although very hesitantly and only after much coaxing, however, Fish was in there to break it up. I absolutely guarantee my man would have taken down the first domino and then gone for the rest; we were all ready to back him up. We couldn't stand these guys.

Cooler heads had prevailed, but Killer was still red hot. We only made it to the parking lot before his fuse was relit. Some haughty Kennedy cheerleader, easily identifying us by our black Lobo Polo parkas, made an exceptionally ill-advised comment driving by.

Killer ran her down, jumped on the roof of her cute little VW bug and proceeded to dent the roof! We looked on dumbfounded, mouths gaped wide like Ferris witnessing Cameron taking out the front of his old man's Ferrari G.T. California.

Now, I couldn't argue if you were to tell me threatening others with physical violence and damaging the roof of a girl's car was the wrong thing to do. Nevertheless, leadership can be an interesting animal. It comes in all shapes and sizes. Killer was exactly the team leader I needed at this time in my life, and taking a stand against a formidable foe was exactly what my adolescent heart needed to be facing.

My decision to stand beside him didn't come from a desire to take a guy's head off, it had more to do with how I felt about Killer. It's crazy to say, but I was actually very protective of him, even if he didn't feel he needed protection and was, in fact, the *instigator*.

I can honestly say I was never quite the same after this experience. I learned from his audaciousness. I'm proud I overcame my fears to stand alongside him because his lessons on fearlessness and toughness were the exact ones I needed to internalize. Today, I don't back down from bullies, no matter what size.

O' Captain, My Captain.

Dealing with Loss

*“I quickly realized that you either became a power,
or you were crushed.”*

Joe Strummer

My little ragtag team had so much heart and today I am proud to have been a part of it. There was no real pressure on our group to perform given our abysmal summer league results. Those summertime beatings served to fuel our excruciating workouts and created even more of a passion within us for the game. Beating Kennedy for a half surprised everyone, including ourselves.

We were the *Bad News Bears* of the Garden Grove League and we were done getting laughed at. The entire after-game ordeal was our way of shouting at them:

“We’ll see you punks next year!!!”

Yes, we had made a statement. We scared them in the pool and in the locker room and undoubtedly left a lasting impression on the Kennedy Cheer Squad.

Still losing stinks, especially to these dudes and the taunts from their crowd still rang in my ears.

“You suck Douglas!”

I was sensitive to this and could hear far more clearly the heckling as a goalie than when I was swimming the length of the pool the entire game. The children’s theater did not allow tomatoes brought into our performances so this was my first experience of true hostility from a crowd.

Given my sensitivity as an artist, I was susceptible to what others said. I wasn't a hardened athlete. There were those who felt they could help their team if they could get in my head. Unfortunately, they accomplished their goal. I was still Brando the Bando and I did not understand why this had to be part of the game.

This is a real problem in sports, especially in high school. I have heard students and parents yelling some downright embarrassing stuff, even in little league games. I'm appalled by it.

The problem would go away if it wasn't so effective. They call it "home court advantage" for a reason. Young athletes are especially susceptible to being intimidated by this. Yelling and exuberance are encouraged in professional sports arenas and a fan can even lose their life if they are rooting for the wrong team in hostile territory.

After this altercation with Kennedy, I began to stand my ground and dish it out a bit. Adolescent? Maybe. Perhaps some might be abhorred with me actually defending this behavior, but I learned something about human nature playing down at this level.

Sometimes, people will do *whatever* it takes to win.

They will stand by their team and identify themselves with them under all circumstances. Call it group-think, tribalism... it exists, and I can't say I am always above it.

Social media is littered with it. Someone can use the hashtag #truth, and we all can stop thinking and agree with their conclusions. You have no alternative to disagree or they are justified in calling you whatever derogatory names they want.

This was a big lesson for me in sports psychology. If I was going to play at this level, I better toughen up and stand tall. I was not going to take any more mental or physical bullying, and my grandpa showed me I could do this without becoming hardened or bitter.

My takeaway is team sports stand as a great metaphor and training ground for life. I'm not against them in any way shape or form. At the same time, people need to chill.

My entire junior year, we continued to get our butts kicked. Basketball was just as brutal, Kennedy could flat out ball. Then we got into swim season. I remember we had a kid transfer from Kennedy onto our JV team. He told us what their polo/swim coach was saying about me before our swim meet against them:

"You are going to be swimming against that Douglas kid. The guy who made you all look so bad, getting up out of the water, blocking your shots, then staring you down in the locker room."

He obviously viewed me as a threat and was using me for motivation. He wanted to make a statement, to let us all know in a swim meet they would embarrass us as they did in polo.

Unfortunately, we were plenty embarrassed, again. The Empire was sure handing it to us.

Over the years Glue loved to reference my psychotic, high school, three-ring binder I carried from class to class. Bold letters declared "Dead Kennedys" on the cover. (No coincidence, my favorite punk band.) I also cartooned my depiction of the Kennedy starters I would be facing the coming polo season, complete with skull and crossbones. I was a man obsessed. If Dr. Venkman gave me an inkblot test around this time he would have come up with some interesting conclusions:

"What do you see here?"

“Kennedy’s mascot.”

“And here?”

“A severed Kennedy player’s head.”

Yes, that would definitely have earned me another electric shock. (“Only seventy-five more to go”.)

Everything was new but it wasn’t new like my freshman and sophomore years. My time on the JV team did not carry the same weight playing varsity sports did. There was more on the line and more pressure, especially since I was the one between the ball and a potential point for the other team.

This stress was tough on a young kid with a lot of hopeful eyes on him to perform. I remember there was one time at practice I even lashed out verbally at Fish, which shocked everybody and was completely out of character. However, I was dealing with severe growing pains. These were different than the physical ones I experienced during the summer after my freshman year, but they felt just as agonizing!

Compounding my athletic stress was my dad started to have problems with his sauna/fitness partner. He cut his losses and moved on.

He worked relentlessly at building up "The Shop" for as long as I could remember and it was a big part of our identity as a family. I spent my early childhood there or out on jobs building saunas or delivering fitness equipment. We covered Orange, LA, and San Diego Counties.

There was a ton of time spent on jobs around Disneyland and we met some famous athletes throughout the years. We had front row seats down the first baseline to the '86 Angels game when they clinched the division earning a playoff

spot, tickets courtesy of Halo great, Brian Downey. Pop had gotten in with him from work and called in a favor. The fans stormed onto the field in excitement at the last out.

"You guys want to run the bases?"; "Sure, Dad!".

Glue and I trespassed onto Angel's field and slid nicely into where the second base should have been. (Some other trespasser had stolen it and was attempting to exit the stadium with it.)

Later in life, I lived close to the long-time second baseman for the Halos, the intrepid Bobby Grich. I had him sign a ball for Drew's 30th birthday saying:

"Thanks for Storming the Field!"

It was like losing a part of us. Nevertheless, The Shop had run its course. My dad had only experienced success as an entrepreneur up until this point. He hadn't gotten rich, but we weren't poor.

He stopped coaching basketball after three successful years at Los Amigos. It killed him, but he no longer had time. Part of his motivation to be an entrepreneur was to maintain a flexible schedule that would allow for coaching. I didn't know it then, but not all dads were willing to be at every practice and games like mine was. I took it for granted. He coached both the basketball and baseball teams for me and Drew for over ten years of our athletic lives.

All at once, the impromptu Sizzler trips with T-Bone came to an end. I no longer had the latest fashions in surf wear. Quiksilver, Maui and Sons, brand new customized kicks from the box-shaped Vans store... no mas.

Adult financial stress was something I had been shielded from and now it was staring me right in the face. In my heart, I wanted to stay being a kid but I even parted with my beloved Millennium Falcon for a quick buck.

It was on me to pay for my own sports program fees, equipment, summer trips, etc. I was told it was part of growing up; however, we simply didn't have the income we once did. He was at home more, but was always working, and stressing. For years, none of his business ventures bore any fruit, and he went through a few of them.

I was involved heavily with one project because I was a big body and a good worker, (unfortunately only once I stopped complaining). I finally accepted spending more time working and not at the beach. I even started to miss enough practices Fish lamented to my parents they needed me, that the team's effort and dynamic was suffering without me.

The reality was, we needed money. Sometimes, lunch was my only pay. I was introduced a bit to the life of many of my Santa Ana classmates. Privilege was a thing of the past.

I remember having more empathy for all the toil those young Vietnamese kids would put into helping with their parent's businesses. Many working at dry cleaners and food services of some sort or another. Their folks would work twenty hour days to send their kids to college. These families pulled together and worked their tails off.

I looked differently upon the many day laborers hanging out in front of the hardware stores looking for work. I saw how willing they were to absolutely bust it with the aim of bringing something home for their families. I respect that work ethic so much.

Entrepreneurship is a funny thing. It has the lure of freedom and an incredibly high earnings ceiling, but the percentages are against you. The Coach was more of a "never tell me the odds" type of guy. Yes, there were many long hours, but there were plenty of times when it paid off and we were making money. He was

more comfortable than most swimming in deeper waters, a skill I inherited from him.

It would be many years until we found our right business niche again. The lean years were tough. I learned you go out, work hard and do not compromise who you are, even in the face of adversity. Conventional thinking might judge you and say you are failing as a man and a father, but that is manipulation. Someone else's judgment or conclusions about your life should never be a reason for you to take action or question your mindset.

Or especially question *who* you are.

It was a brutal time for us at home and this was only the beginning. It was humbling for him. When things got worse, we would pick up squeegees as a family and go out and wash windows. Always hustling.

What a grueling year! The stress I was experiencing from multiple directions was all new to me. Thinking about those fools from La Palma stressed me out. Money and dating stressed me out. There were a few dates I went on I don't think I said two words to the girl. I just clammed up. I felt stretched to my limit.

On the bright side, at least Kennedy didn't freeze me in carbonite.

Getting Stronger

“No, maybe I can't win. Maybe the only thing I can do is just take everything he's got.”

Rocky Balboa

Recently going through my old polo photos, there was one of me going into my senior year that got me thinking... I really wouldn't want to tangle with that kid in the water. I didn't have bulging biceps like Killer, but was gaining his fearlessness — could see it in my eyes. My Lobo classmates at my 20th reunion said it was nice to see me, because back then they could never get me out of *that pool!*

To set the record straight, I did not come prepackaged with a driven work ethic. Believe me, I would much rather play than work... I'm more of a screw-off. (Those who knew me as a kid will attest to this.)

It took real patience on the part of my parents to help me work through this, until an embarrassingly old age. I did not get the point of work, even on the basketball court. The Coach had to whip that hustle into me like he was breaking a young stallion.

In fact, I kind of started out like the Italian Stallion. At the beginning of the movie, Rocky was a bum. Likable, one of the boys, but a bum. A low-level enforcer and lacking any real drive in life.

Apollo, on the other hand, was polished, confident, meticulous. A real champion and one who would tear you apart if you were not up for the challenge.

Rock completely understood who he was getting in the ring with. At first, this scared him, and the movie made it very clear the respect he held for Apollo. A little bit of fear can be a major motivator, but he trained in an all-new way for this unprecedented challenge for a no-name to take on the champ. During his stepped up training, he slowly lost the fear in his eyes.

Pretty close to my experience too. We revered Kennedy for pulverizing our league over the past three years (even if they could be tools), but last season, Killer helped me towards overcoming my fear of them. We saw they were beatable. Now, I wanted a piece.

I could now train in a fifth gear I never knew existed. Nothing before brought so much dedication out of me. How did I come into this new drive? Because I never viewed polo as just work. There was a lot of play.

I was happy spending hours in the weight room, doing thousands of push-ups on the pool deck, and swimming hundreds of thousands of yards in the Lobo pool. There was a drill that could be considered the ultimate CrossFit exercise today called “run-swim-runs”. I was embracing what seemed like elite military training! In fact, the Navy Seals recruit heavily from water polo programs.

A run-swim-run is a Lobo tradition going back to the polo glory days of the late seventies and early eighties. We had an interesting set-up for a pool deck. There were two pools side by side with an 18-foot area between them with a cement wall and wire fence making the perimeter on opposite sides. I can still picture myself doing them today:

Lined up on the cement wall we sprinted like mad off of Fish’s whistle. Springing into a dive we took a few power strokes to travel the width of the first pool, then we quickly pulled ourselves up and out, dashing across the middle cement section. After our second dive, we swam across the far pool, climbed out again and then slammed ourselves into the wire fence with the intent to spring off of it and head back the other direction with some momentum. The leaders separated

themselves from the pack at this point and the race was on to see who would make it back first to the cement wall.

Yup, that's what we called fun.

In all my four years I never gave a partial effort. I got faster and faster, taking pride it took a lot to beat me. I pushed my guys through example, but I can't say that was my only motivation.

Once again at my 20th reunion, I had a group of female classmates confess they would watch us do these run-swim-runs hiding behind the darkened glass windows leading to the commons area. Yeah, like we couldn't see them.

The year before, Killer and I received First Team All-Garden Grove League honors, for our leadership on an upstart varsity team that had turned some heads. My aggressive play set a new record for saves in a season for Los Amigos High School. Ham even invited me to attend a few offseason workouts. I was always looking for various talented shooters to train with. Helpful as a goalkeeper to mix it up. So when Golden West held their first spring training, I was excited to test my skills against the best around. GWC was a perennial state champion with a culture of excellence.

At first, I was taken aback by Ham's presence on the pool deck. Ham was a mountain of a man who wore a full greyed out beard. He usually dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and shorts that revealed legs big as trees. I got to know him better during my college years and learned during his playing days, he was an alternate on the U.S. 1960 Olympic team as a two-meter defender. Ham was a student of motivation, a storyteller that used metaphor to bring out a different drive in all of us. He was an amazingly wise educator, communicator, and one tough dude.

At the offseason shoot-around, I started in like the fourth string cage. I honestly don't think a guy scored, but these were the scrubs. Still, that got Ham's

attention. He sent an assistant over to watch and he moved me to another cage for bigger guns to fire at me. I still held my own.

They finally brought me to the show, switched me off with the starter to see what I had against the boys. Impressed, one player asked me to stick around and help him train.

I helped him work on his weak-side shot. This is like practicing your backhand in tennis or a left-handed hitter taking reps against a left-handed pitcher (where the pitcher has the advantage). His options were cut down even more because of my mobility and reach. It was tough for a right-hander to lob the ball over my head with the difficult arm angle from the weak-side. I could be bold in coming out of the cage to cut down his angle. He liked the way I was able to challenge him.

All throughout the next year, my family started fielding calls from some guy with an accent asking for "Brenda". Ham had given him my number.

This dude was from Holland and I referred to him as "the Dutchman". He was the team's leading scorer, a total threat from the outside, and a Division One caliber player who had mastered every pump fake, skip shot, and lob shot, utilizing every arm angle in the book.

He had his own "Kennedy" to deal with in Cuesta College and their monster of a goalie. I was like his sparring partner and we trained together for hours as I matched his drive to improve. Challenging each other developed a huge part of my game.

No one was happier than I was when he and his Golden West crew beat Cuesta at the state championships in sudden-death double overtime the next season.

The majority of Lobos who ditched school went to the beach. My version of a perfect day off was going to work-out with the Dutchman at the Golden West pool. Ham would eventually have to tell him not to set up our workouts during

high school hours because I would drop everything to be there. I relished our time together. Later, during my Golden West years, I got to play with a teammate of his from the Netherlands. He called me Brenda, too.

As I was gaining strength in my water polo game during the offseason, I got momentum going for me financially as well.

My dad talked me out of taking a job at Carl's Jr. He taught me that I could earn more and work less by using my creativity and talents.

"Give and create value, by searching for what *pain* others are dealing with."

My first lesson in entrepreneurship was done with a focus on maximizing the time I could spend at the pool and working out.

Much, Smid, and I decided to wash and detail cars. We did a good job, and a few of our car customers asked me to teach their kid's piano. (The Coach always said people do business with individuals they like and trust.) This even paid better. I could work in the evening hours and it was more consistent work. I learned from this job I was good at working with kids. (Later, Ham got me my all-time favorite job teaching young tikes swim lessons at the Golden West Pool.)

Again, just having fun.

Another job required more stealth. By my senior year, I had become a proficient player on both guitar and bass. I would go to the local Seitsinger music shop and chat up the young dudes (coming in with their moms) looking to start playing. I would casually give them advice on how to start, show the kid some licks of the bands he liked, and what instruments and amps I recommended, et al. I didn't come off as a salesman but as a friendly, young high school musician playing on the Seitsinger gear that could communicate helpful and timely advice.

My efforts were appreciated. I would leave the shop with a nice cash commission along with strong encouragement from the owner to come back and “play on his stuff” again.

During Christmas time, I happened upon my favorite money making venture of my high school career. My mom was helping direct a play my brother and I were in, but we were finished for the night. This play involved a comic bit with our trumpet and tuba along with Smid on his bass saxophone. Bored without a ride home, we got the idea to go to the Vons across the street and started playing Christmas songs out in front of the entrance. Glue on his trumpet and me on my tuba... just to be dorks.

The manager came out with this huge grin and put an empty red vines bucket in front of us he dropped a fiver into. After an hour of playing, we went back to the rehearsal, heralding our tip bucket jam-packed with bills.

I was gaining an edge in both finances and the pool, but the screw-off in me was desperate for a little comic relief.

I got the pick-me-up I needed in the form of a six foot, stocky kid named Jeff. Glue and I called him “The Joff”. Truly a breath of fresh air.

This kid was hilarious with an unmatched wit that made him the best crank caller I ever witnessed. An A-plus athlete in both hoops and baseball and I would like to say I scouted potential for him in the pool and recruited him for his skills alone; the truth is I just enjoyed his company.

I made sure to go and wake him up for practice and pushed the envelope to get him on the pool deck for that reason. Drew came into the program next year and we became a tight power trio. Polo was great for maximizing our bro time and both were great to let off steam with throwing rotten oranges at cars from the Douglas backyard, (a pastime that started with Jason and the boys).

What a unique time in life, definitely not an adult, but not a kid. Water polo was my main occupation and I gave myself with reckless abandon to my trade, with the hope that perhaps I could get us close, give us a puncher's chance at beating our main adversary. It would take some grueling training, mentally and physically, to become the goalie I was envisioning, but I was inspired by my dad's grit and determination to work my tail off. The pool stretched me to discover what I had in me to give. With the intense training, I was losing all fear from my eyes and like Rock gearing up with one focus in mind... taking down the champs.

I Join the Black Student Union

*"We may have all come on different ships,
but we're in the same boat now."*

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

I was beginning to take on the challenges life was throwing at me. As I did so, I learned a huge lesson outside of the pool on the Lobo campus.

Music helped lead me to this life lesson. I have always had a huge passion for it. In fact, my parents took me to see a Broadway musical freshman year and I was mesmerized watching the musicians in the pit, moving from instrument to instrument, more so than what was happening on the stage.

Similar to my introduction to water polo, at the end of my sophomore year, I discovered a natural ability to play the bass guitar.

I had studied music for years. Instruction in musical theory, along with piano and trumpet lessons prepared me for this moment in time — like basketball, surfing and wrestling set the stage for polo. No embellishments here, it went like this:

I picked up the bass for the first time in the band room thinking I'd play along with a kid hacking away at Slash's guitar line to "Paradise City".

I was familiar with the tune from it played everywhere at the time and didn't particularly care for it, but dudes on my polo team loved those guys. I quickly found the notes for the basic progression, my ear even picked out the catchy bass fill and I could follow him on the upbeat moving section after a bit of tinkering.

Afterward, the kid asked me when I started playing. I told him it was my first time playing a note, which he refused to believe.

My band director, Mr. Wilson, will corroborate my story. Seeing some raw talent, he started to give me personal instruction — a way solid bass player. He also played in the USC Marching Band on the tuba and helped to hone my skills there as well. The notoriously rowdy nature of the USC band came through plenty of times in the band room. T-Bone learned inquiring more about his college days was a guaranteed diversion if we weren't up for rehearsing. He was such a fun teacher and we would have many jam sessions together over my remaining years at Los. (He even wrote hall passes to get me out of my boring history class when a jammin' bro stopped by!)

Mr. Wilson introduced me to the playing of Jaco Pastorius, equipped me with a great old 70's Fender P-Bass, and supplied me with a mother of a bass amp I lugged home. Over the summer that's all I did at night.

The next level of my bass instruction started when I met my bro Gio in stage band towards the middle of my junior year.

Gio was a distinctive Los Amigos student. He dressed in leather jackets and carried what looked like a primo leather briefcase. (I learned later it was his gig bag). He didn't act like us either. He was fun and cool... but like, adult cool.

Dude was a *professional* salsa drummer while attending high school.

Literally, he played gigs and got paid like a thirty-year veteran. He showed us his fake ID he used to play shows at the salsa clubs throughout the Southland.

He didn't only do gigs on the weekends. Sometimes he came to school completely exhausted after he would take gigs in the middle of the week. My man always had a good wad of cash and a generous heart, covering me repeatedly for anything I wanted to eat. (Again, I scrambled for money and had a hellacious appetite).

School kids probably took him for a drug dealer because of his style for clothes, and always having cash on hand. But he was straight and even left a reggae band because of their drug use.

He educated me to the tight drum/bass relationship there is in all styles of music. His experience playing with pro bass players was invaluable. He called out to follow him on a fill, or switch things up rhythmically. I learned to do the same by turning towards him to establish eye contact. We were teammates, different than in sports, but the dynamic was the same. Musical chemistry is a beautiful thing.

He also taught me some intricate rhythmic patterns. I enjoyed this more syncopated playing, like in funk. Many times the rock bass lines to standard band charts stayed rooted to just eighth notes or simple time keeping rhythms based on the one and three beats. But Gio introduced me to Latin rhythms rooted on the upbeat of the two and four. (Just a tidbit for you groovehackers out there.) I started to get some real *feel* to my playing.

Gio and I would practice together during lunch hours in front of like fifty young Mexican girls. They followed him around campus and attempted to interrupt us every five minutes to flirt with him (all in Spanish). He was so cordial, kind and always laughing with them even though these girls couldn't compare to the beautiful Latin *women* he played for at the salsa clubs.

Gio would literally get dozens of the Candy Grams delivered during Valentines and other occasions. We would witness them trucking them all in during second-period stage band with him simply smiling and shaking his head behind his kit.

I invited T-Bone to come to a practice session and seeing a microphone left out by Mr. Wilson, he started rapping over a beat Gio laid down and I joined in.

After that day, the word was out. T told the entire school what happened. I was bombarded by every new and upcoming rap artist Los Amigos had to offer.

I mean, it's not like you had some average band kid playing drums who had completely zero ability to groove. Gio was a complete live performance/recording, pro musician and I followed his lead. The sound we got was not typical for a high school band room, and my African American friends were eating it up. Our lunchtime jams kept expanding.

There was this flurry of excitement, guys were coming up to me in the halls, running pages of rhymes by me, as well as humming to me potential basslines they had written. (I am sure during class, teachers were impressed with all the furious "note-taking".)

We saw some real talent come to life. Glad Gio and I worked hard to establish the rhythmic foundation that helped spur on their creativity. One even performs and records as a rap artist today!

We did performances on the Lobo campus and yes... everyone went nuts. I'm sure I stood out as the sole white boy, clad in my t-shirt, shorts and flip flops. Towards the end of our time together they asked me to start a band with them, which I was eager to do but eventually graduation and college polo moved us in different directions foiling our plans.

It got to the point Gio and I were invited to every Black Student Union (BSU) meeting. The band room became their meeting ground so we could play after the message. The club counselor was an amazing guy, who spoke with these young people about rising above racism and taking pride in their culture. I remember being in quite some awe witnessing this. I took in every word. My friends were quiet and respectful, occasionally nodding their heads. However, the mood shifted from contemplative, to complete pandemonium once they were let loose on the microphones.

The counselor was all smiles and laughter as his boys were getting good. The freestyle was completely hilarious at times. Rhymes were even thrown in about me and my goal play!

Ha... I remember the many reminders I would receive on the day of a meeting like fifty different times by dudes in the hallways: "Hey, BSU meeting today... you good to be there? Gio too, right?" ...

I wouldn't have missed it.

I highly doubt I would be having such an experience if I transferred to Fountain Valley. They had like two African American dudes at the school. And I am sure they would have had plenty of Sizzler money.

I remember I was so close with these guys they would mess with me saying stuff like: "Tell your momma a black man is coming for dinner. Tell her to hide all her jewelry, her expensive fur coats... because a black man is coming!"

And can I be candid here? I was far from being the most popular dude on campus. My African American pals completely ran the school. They were good looking kids, talented, and hilarious. Being so tight-knit with these guys going back to junior high, really did something for me. As I battled it out in the pool, I was touched by the support I received from my BSU friends even willing to travel to cheer me on.

It utterly pains me to see race divisions today; honestly, not part of my paradigm growing up. These were my brothers.

I am grateful my love for bass playing brought me and the BSU together. I had the relationship with Gio and was always the go-between to make sure he was there at meetings. This fusion of myself, my Latino friend, and these African American students was exactly what Los Amigos represented to me. This merger of races, cultures, and talent produced an inclusion which was truly special, bringing out the best in all of us.

It was similar to how innovators today can identify how merging two industries together can be beneficial. For example, a UK hospital brought in a Formula One pit crew to teach the ER doctors a thing or two about speed and efficiency; they were able to refine and systematize a new technique to resuscitate newborn babies with lightning precision and fatalities went down dramatically. [What a crazy collaboration!](#) Our differences *can* make us collectively better.

In the early spring of that year, the Rodney King beating video was released. I hadn't heard about the video yet but recognized the atmosphere was decidedly different setting up my bass rig before a meeting. Everybody was conversing intently about something and I flagged T-Bone down. Clearly upset, he told me about the video CNN had released of a black man clearly on the ground, being excessively beaten by a bunch of white LAPD cops. Race tensions in the L.A. area were escalated even higher and in only a few months there would be deadly riots. They addressed this at the meeting, and it was memorable. We were encouraged not to get caught up in the anger, to make a stronger statement through keeping our heads and not focusing on hate. This inspired us all.

Not long after, T-Bone and others from the BSU invited me to join the club. They said they had all talked it over — everybody was down. An honor to be sure, yet, at the time, I didn't know how this could be extended to me. Wasn't your ethnicity a prerequisite?

I responded, "Dude, we have just one small problem man. Right? Like the obvious one?".

There was a pause, a tilt of the head and he answered with slightly smacked lips:

"Is that *all* there is between us man?".

Most profound words uttered on campus in *ALL* of my time at Los, especially impactful given the social climate at the time.

They exhibited Lobo inclusivity at its best.

They didn't lump me in with what was going on in L.A. but saw me separate from that. I treasured being a part of their inner circle, I was concerned with how being white might affect this; but this invitation let me know where they stood. This broadened my perspective on friendships. In fact, it gave me new confidence on how I looked at myself which helped me face challenges ahead. No, I didn't start to view myself as a black person. I took my membership in the BSU to mean I was *loved* by black people.

Thank you, my brothers. All my love in return.

Know Your Rights... (and Your Role)

“You said you liked going to school with me because I made you laugh, well... you make me laugh.”

T-Bone

During my tenure at Los Amigos, I grew to realize a thing or two about racism. I realized it didn't make any sense.

We tend to be so myopic in our vision and unable to connect the dots that don't make sense to us. Perhaps certain combinations throws us off, or seeing something done in a brand new way.

“That's not how its supposed to be. You are doing it all wrong!”

We are all too quick to categorize situations, people and put everything into (please pardon the expression) a black or white box.

Sure, many might prefer the *safety* of the box, but I am grateful I was forced to come outside of myself to embrace life at Los Amigos, as well as learn to play goal on the fly.

With this said, I sure found myself in a new “box” at the Lobo pool. We lost our fearless captain to graduation and now the polo team would be looking for leadership and toughness from...

freaking Mr. Beaver?

What was I to do? I couldn't all of a sudden change my personality to be this toughened persona. I was a clown and a geek at heart! How were we supposed to win and be intimidating in this raw, physical sport when the main guy we looked to played tuba in the marching band?

Pardon my French, but I was a guy who spent his time "playing grab ass" (as Fish called it) with Joff and Glue who acted like a pair of Lab puppies at the time. We were definitely the *Three Amigos*, similar to the ones who fought bravely at the Battle of Santa Poco.

I felt pressure to be less of a comic book nerd and be the super jock who had his game face on 24-7. Perhaps I put this on myself as I struggled to find a balance. I reminded myself even Killer was light-hearted and hilarious at times, but once the ball dropped man... he was all business. I honestly wanted to do right by the tough captains before me: Jason, Killer, and my VW goalie mentor who all had a huge influence on me.

I would have to fight for my right to be goofy Brandon and not tighten up with all the pressure. I felt this more than ever upon being promoted to "Captain Beaver".

In hindsight, it was vital for me to maintain my child-like spirit. Diligence and toughness are a must to excel in water polo, but I found creativity a huge component of my game. Polo doesn't rely on set plays. It is more geared to who could out muscle, out swim and out create the other on the fly, (all Christopher Walken-type improv).

Being a goalie took a different type of mindset. Almost like a cat and mouse game between me and the shooter. Developing into this type of determined, and flexible thinker is the only reason why I can handle my constantly changing digital marketing profession or enjoy a baseball game ending 1-0 after 12 innings.

Sometimes I would use psychological "baiting" techniques to help me with all of those penalty shots. I had various one-on-nobody techniques I employed

depending on who I was facing. Thinking a step ahead of the opposition was very much like a chess match. I became comfortable at thinking on my toes and trusting my gut — something that serves me well today.

After all, I was just playing. I love all the quotes I see from the major leaguers before a big game: "Let's go out there and have fun!", "We get paid to play a kid's game", et al. This mindset fosters confidence on the field at its finest. You always need a healthy locker room to see success and having a clown on your team able to bring it out of the fellas goes a long way. I cringe seeing a team visibly at each other's throats.

Research even shows children are able to adapt and take in good healthy lessons much quicker when they are enforced during moments of play. I attribute my ability to succeed in a tough situation to that same child-like spirit. I needed this to take on the steep learning curve I had to face after changing positions late into my high school playing days.

Plato even quipped, "You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation!"

[It takes adults far longer to integrate a new habit, between 18-254 days. We all get stuck in our ways as we age. Myself included. [Here is the study I found so fascinating.](#)]

One person who knew how to bring the playful side out of me was my mom. Her outgoing nature and natural curiosity was so much fun growing up. Pretty sure I was the only kid in the pool whose mom appeared in a Prince video (that saw plenty of MTV airtime during summer of '89). She also had a pretty big spot on a popular sitcom at the time called *Small Wonder*.

"Dude, I saw your mom on T.V.!!!" A big deal back then.

A great gift my mom helped me develop comes into play about this time: how to *befriend everyone*. Yup, sportos, sluts, bloods, the dweebs... they all loved my mom.

Even those weird ducks nobody seems to get, those who just don't "fit in", they gravitate to me and my mom like lunchtime seagulls flocking to a half-eaten burrito on the Lobo campus — and we love every last one. Honestly, those who the mass of society equates with being a bit off are the *truly* interesting people in life.

I was gaining the maturity to understand my teammates who played a lesser role, those more erratic at times. I now refer to them as our "swing players".

They were more susceptible to being intimidated and many were more unique, sensitive people. Sometimes, Fish couldn't get a read on them. He was a confident star on his teams and it was a challenge for him to motivate these guys. But I had done time as the misfit.

Especially in junior high, Drama Brav was not the most popular dude on campus. Santa Ana was an intimidating place to go to school with gang violence sky high. Fitz Jr. High was located in a fairly sketchy neighborhood. I was kind of shut down and did not yet have the maturity to get outside of myself and make connections within this diverse student body.

Back in junior high, there was no sport I dominated at, could barely surf the whitewash, and hadn't discovered I could pull off slap bass lines like Flea (back in his punk days when he was still cool). At the time, my musical passion was playing the trumpet. Except the tight trumpet mouthpiece would dig into my new braces and cut up my lips, which prompted a switch to the tuba.

I mean, how *geeky* is that?

There was also the pretty girl shut-down syndrome going for me, almost certain this stemmed back to these junior high days. Much and I were passing by the cute girl hangout and littering my Coke can seemed a sure way to impress them, to show them how dangerous I could be. One shouted out to me, "Hey Daddy Longlegs! Go pick that up!"

Ouch. I should have left it there.

Because of my awkward days, I quickly gained a rapport with the misfits on my own team and could also easily identify them in our opponents. The players who hadn't come into themselves yet and I wisely respected knowing if we allowed them to get hot, they could be the one to make up the difference and beat us.

Again, I sympathize for those folk not into athletics reading this who have never experienced this, but I maintain athletics in young people's lives *can* teach life lessons. Many view team sports as divisive and juvenile, but how different is that from politics? Yes, it can get a little childish and people get plenty stupid given the comments I had to endure from the stands.

The paradox is that they wouldn't have been telling me how much I sucked if I did in fact suck. It was an effective ploy to slow me down by beating me in the mind game found in *all* sports. I was a sensitive person and had to grow to stand up and not cower in these tense athletic situations. It was something my swing guys would have to overcome as well.

Perhaps the greatest mind trick ever played on the basketball court was Dennis Rodman getting into the head of Karl "The Mailman" Malone during the '98 finals. Malone should have taken the aging Rodman apart that series, but allowed himself to be taken into Dennis' shenanigans. I won't get into the raunchy details, but Rodman was downright filthy in his verbal punches. Playing angry and flustered, Karl was taken out of his game. He made critical mistakes and his traditional clutch play was missing which cost them the series. (Yes, even with Jordan pushing off Russell).

The psychology of sports is such that a player's strengths and confidence can be severely damaged or suddenly change. You see this in baseball especially. A guy can get something in his head and lose his ability to swing the bat overnight. Or sometimes hitting against a certain type of pitcher gets in their head, or even simply throwing the ball! (Baseball players call this the "yips".)

The job of a pitcher is not to boost the confidence of those looking to balloon his ERA, likewise, a water polo goalkeeper does not seek to help his opponents feel good about themselves by allowing freebie goals every so often. We're like gatekeeper dogs, growling at would be intruders and some of us are all bark and no bite.

Yet the more a goalie can get into your head, the less inclined many are to challenge us in fear of getting shut-down and looking bad. They'll pass the ball on to a more confident and *less open* player to take the shot.

I started to use this to my advantage as my reputation as a tough goalie grew. Even when I knew which players were more sensitive to intimidation, by no means did I take it easy on them (like I did serving up cream puffs to Bear); but I never singled them out and put the screws to them as I could have.

Today in business, I get along great with Type A personalities (often business owners), because I don't back down when hashing something out, nor do I internalize all that is said in frustration. They love me for it. (Many "creatives" stomp off in a huff, then attempt to alienate the office in their favor.)

This being said, I would have stronger, more *savory* words, along with bulldog stares for the more assertive Type A leaders of other teams. You can't back down when the big dogs are in your face rubbing it in when they got one past you. "Thought you were supposed to be good"... is a taunt I remember after a scored goal. I'm sure my comeback involved something about the dude's mom.

As the team leader, I learned my voice and retorts represented my team. The nice guy within me started to switch off once I got between the bars of the cage. Killer had rubbed off on me in the pool and that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

My team used to say: "Good! Brandon's pissed... now we'll start to win!".

I was finding a game face and a consistent attitude that channeled my emotions into playing this game, yet, still being true to who I was. I recognized later in life I had this in common with the effervescent Shaq and his dynamic with his Laker teammates.

If he was clowning around as the heart and foundation of the team, taking an opponent lightly, they would lose to inferior teams they had no business losing to. In contrast, if he had his game face scowl on (or was playing against Greg Ostertag), watch out.

I started to appreciate the importance of these swing players on our own team. The expression: "You are only as good as your weakest member" makes a lot more sense to me now having experienced this. If we were to shore up our holes, somehow I needed to help these guys out.

I got to *really* know them. Spending time with them gave me a better understanding of where they were coming from. In return, this increased the patience I was able to have with them. I honestly looked to bring the goofball out, hoping to get them laughing rather than stressing them out. Everybody has a screwball side to them, but most of the time it takes alcohol to bring it out!

I was as good as a six-pack of Guinness.

Even though their role was not as big as mine, it was a role nonetheless and essential if we were to be successful. If I didn't value these players, ignored them or was aggravated they weren't "good enough", I might as well not be involved in

team sports. I would be better off spending my time focused on individual performance and concentrate solely on swimming, or join cross country, etc.

I remember an encouraging phrase The Coach used when he would be forced to call a timeout in our basketball games after an opponent made a run on us:

"That's not going to beat us".

This phrase says a lot — we can live with your mistakes. There is no perfection in life or water polo.

I see a lot of goalies (from all sports) hammering their teams after the ball goes in the cage, yelling at them saying they should have: skated, run or swam faster, should have seen what was coming, or question "why would you choose that path?"; all this being done under the guise of leadership.

I didn't believe coming down on my teammates in that way was my job. (Fish was brilliant at correction.) I steered them, directed them verbally, but once the damage was done I didn't seek to throw them under the bus in any way.

I encouraged them... *that wouldn't beat us.*

My mindset as a goalkeeper was simple. I invited the opportunities to clean up the mess. I owned the blame either way for the ball being in the cage, just part of the job description. I trained with this understanding and in the end, I learned to like being the janitor.

I didn't view a missed assignment as a reason to belittle an already embarrassed player giving all they had the capacity to give. I never experienced any of my teammates quitting on me, which would have been difficult and sometimes requires getting in someone's face. Howbeit, not the nature of this team. Some had different work ethics but never were they giving up which encouraged me to expand the capacity I was able to give.

This being said, I learned a great lesson from one of these endearing dudes.

There was this freshman kid who busted his arm. Nicest guy in the world to this day. Not a monster for us in the pool by any means, a little 5'1" guy and quite honestly not the most naturally gifted polo player. He was held up from any type of practice for weeks due to his broken arm.

Fish would give me time alone to train my goalie drills in the deep pool while everyone else was swimming in the lap pool, with Kennedy in mind. I had Kennedy's one-on-nobody shots being replayed in my head and was giving it my all in training, or so I thought.

This kid started hanging out with me while I worked out, at first, only coming out onto the diving board and chatting with me. I enjoyed the company because even today he is a very genuine person.

He would cheer me on as I would do my drills and I actually was grateful for this. In fact, it got to the point where I would extend myself even more in my effort not to impress this kid, but because he was great at encouraging me.

He was like a little coach. Positive, yet he got more and more comfortable in pushing me, and I let him! I could have easily shooed away this little freshman. Yet, I allowed him to yell and even challenge me.

Years later, I look back and think what was he doing there? It's 6 am, he has a broken arm and can't play water polo for most of the season. Still, his desire to be involved had him waking up with us to cheer me on. He encouraged me to lift the 25 lb. weight (we called "The Slab") over my head while treading water longer and higher.

He measured my performance, congratulated me on a new best mark and put it into my head again and again: *Kennedy was waiting.*

I was receiving something that benefitted my play, and it came from our smallest dude, one who did not put up any impressive polo stats.

Fish definitely picked up on this because he left him there with me week after week. I looked forward to seeing him on those cold, early mornings.

I learned everybody, I mean, *everybody* had a significant role to play, no matter how big or small.

"No such thing as a small role, only small actors". If you are playing a tree, you go out there and play that tree. Even if you only have the one line.

Team sports taught me dependence on others was not a bad thing. I enjoyed both the giving and receiving that came with it.

New Teammate

“Don’t be a guy, the world is full of guys. Be a man.”

Corie to Lloyd Dobler in *Say Anything*

In our quest to match up with Kennedy, providence gave us a new teammate that improved us immediately — a savvy wing defender, talented passer, and our team speed was increased. Most importantly, our offense was boosted adding another 20-25 goal scorer to the roster (averaging about 1-2 goals a game). Yet, we’d never encountered anything like this player before.

This new teammate was a *girl*.

Not only was she a girl, she was an attractive girl. In fact, the Los Amigos Homecoming Queen '91 type of attractive girl.

She grew up in a polo family with older brothers from the City of Commerce in L.A. county. Commerce had one of the first female programs around in Southern California in the late 80s. Tough gals.

Today female water polo is huge. Female college programs were introduced during the time I was playing collegiate ball and would eventually trickle down to the high schools where most programs have a girls team now. But back at the time if you were a girl and wanted to play water polo, you played with the boys.

When we saw Rachel play in her first game with us, her control and versatility with the ball proved she was a natural. It was evident that she had been playing her entire life; her in-game instincts were vastly superior to most in our program.

We were all quick to realize she was a big girl and could handle herself. If someone messed with her, they got a swift kick to the gut (usually accompanied by her calling the dude a “punk”).

Just like Charlie’s Angels drop kicking fools twice their size and looking good doing it.

Game after game, her name would be announced alongside ours during the morning sports recaps with her goal totals. The whole school fell in love with this beautiful Latina girl with haunting green eyes. Here's a quick snippet from the [LA Times](#) mentioning her play mid-season dated Oct. 7, 1990:

“While it’s not unusual to find a girl on a water polo team, Los Amigos junior Rachel is in a class by herself. Rachel, the only girl on the Lobos’ varsity team, has scored 15 goals this season.”

She was essentially tied as our third most efficient goal scorer.

Rachel would give complete interviews in our local Fountain Valley newspaper and naturally she was the darling of our own Lobo Paw Prints that loved to spotlight her. I can't imagine the publicity she would have seen if high school bloggers or flipping Instagram were around in the late 80s/early 90s! Being such a unique person and player, she totally deserved every bit of the attention she received.

Here is a [news clip](#) of a game halfway into our regular season which stood out to me. It singled her out noting she led us with three goals against a talented Santa Ana Valley team:

...scored four times to lead Santa Ana Valley past Los Amigos, 9-8 in the quarter-finals of the Magnolia Tournament. Rachel scored three times to lead Los Amigos.

The Santa Ana Valley team was made up of primarily Hispanic players, like the Commerce teams where Rachel was from. We got on quite well with these guys, a friendship between programs that began my sophomore year. I am sure our diversity at Los Amigos helped facilitate this friendship. The predominantly caucasian Fountain Valley programs of the world would have bristled at getting so buddy-buddy. But we always rooted for Santa Ana Valley and would even enter off-season tournaments together blending our talents.

[My early impressions of water polo in Southern CA was it was more or less a white boy's game. However, that was based on my experience within Orange County. I mean, come on, the best player in the world during the 80s was a Spaniard, and the sport was dominated by European nations. It has really taken off since my time within the So. Cal Hispanic community and it was cool in my years to be a part of that integration and change. Jeff and Drew recruited many of their Hispanic friends to play on their JV squad seeing Santa Ana Valley's success. Again, Los Amigos today is 97% minority and continues to have talented teams, fielded mainly by Latino dudes. I follow, support and root for these guys (and gals!).]

In the game the L.A. Times reported above, Santa Ana Valley knocked us out of going to the finals of a tournament which they went on to win. This was a 25 team tournament, by invite only, fielding talented programs even far outside Orange County, a break-through for us as a program to be competing at this level.

My point being, Rachel having led us in a close quarterfinal game really said something.

Santa Ana Valley was *quite* familiar with her and knew she could play. She didn't sneak up on them by any means. Their goalie matched me with 16 saves. Her shot was the only one going in that day.

It is a common water polo tactic to send a double team to two-meters, and leave an outside player uncontested daring them to shoot. In comparison, you saw

teams doing this to Shaq and his outside gunners would have plenty of room to knock down three-point shots. We were susceptible to this tactic because we had some tough two-meter play going on inside and plenty of guys not comfortable taking the open shot being forced upon them.

This was not the case for Rachel. She could gun. Her brothers trained her with proper shooting technique that put more whip on the ball for her size than many male players.

On more than one occasion the other coaches would scream across the pool to their teams, "You have to *guard* the girl!!!". (Back then, the goalie was right next to the opposing team's bench half the time and I've had some interesting, casual conversations with coaches during the middle of a game.)

She was the only girl *EVER*, I could talk polo with. My greatest passion in life to that point. (My wife thought water polo was played in inner tubes.) It was effortless talking with Rachel, even considering my enormous ineptitude in this area.

Rachel won us all over, gave us a more peculiar identity and she helped me come out of my shell. It almost sounds like a Disney Princess Movie, but she was definitely no Little Mermaid. She would have kicked Ursula's butt.

She was good with everyone, not playing favorites. I remember our swing guys would brighten up as she engaged them in conversation. She wasn't overly flirty either. Many pretty girls her age... that's all they knew. You could tell she had a great relationship with her older brothers as it spilled over into how she interacted with us.

She recognized that I was a different type of goalie, which brought us together as quick friends. Thinking back, there may have been some infatuation by both parties, but being severely hampered in this area she would never know it, (and Fish would never have allowed it!).

Our team was upgraded and we were getting many strong wins in our summer league schedule before heading into our regular season. This was markedly different from last year when I was beginning to learn goal.

A memorable game was against the league champions of the Sunset League, the same league Fountain Valley High belonged to. I was way up for this game and we played them so well. I remember we lost 5-4 but I still took it as a victory for this small scrappy school. We battled in a defensive game with one of the better programs in Orange County, which included a few future collegiate stand-outs.

But we were a program that would actually start and pass to "the girl".

Another meaningful match for us was a revenge game against a team Los Amigos brawled with Jason's freshman year. There was still lingering hostility...

A physical battle and we played to a stalemate, tied with seconds remaining on the clock. Their goalie came out to half-tank and would be taking the final shot against me from distance before going into overtime. He mistimed it, giving me a half second to pull in his shot and fling the ball in the opposite direction with the buzzer sounding immediately *after* it left my fingertips.

Time stood still and it took forever for the ball to land but once it did, it had found its way into the goal. I was mobbed by my teammates and luckily Rachel got to me first.

We were gelling towards the end of the summer, and playing a formidable program one night, but we were thumping them 20-1.

The opposition whistled for their final timeout and I headed for our huddle. I distinctly remember lethargically treading through the water towards our bench. I had a longer distance to cover and my mind was probably preoccupied with

playing over the solo section to Boingo's "No Spill Blood" later that night with Much.

This game was long over. Their team this year was no threat. Their one goal was a fluke, a total lapse of concentration on my part. I finally joined everyone and immediately caught on something was wrong. A hush was over the huddle and I immediately joined in with the concern they all were feeling.

Rachel was crying.

Something had been off. She was quiet and not involved with the offense as usual. She was attempting to explain to us what was going on, but was only getting more flustered and upset until someone finally burst out, "What's his number?!".

"#6", she said quietly.

My concern turned to rage as it dawned on me what had happened.

Remember, we were 20 goals better than this team. Water polo being such a physical sport, we were 20 goals better in a fight. This #6 kid didn't have a chance.

My guys began to take him apart each getting their shots in. I had opportunities to get a few in, but my teammate was playing him so only his back was facing me. Again, "The Douglas Rules" said *NEVER* to hit anyone in the back. I resisted, fired up as I was.

Finally, the kid was fed up, called my guy guarding him a racial slur, and started throwing punches out of the water.

In a fight in the pool, the first person to initiate throwing above the water has the advantage. My friend had to cover up and a few of this punk's blows were landing.

I saw this and pounced out of the cage. I grabbed the kid by his polo cap, started chugging my legs and with all the adrenaline lifted him up out of the water to his chest like I was some kind of construction crane.

Having never done anything like this before my initial thought was: "*Wow, this guy is a lightweight!*".

In my experience, I have found most abusers are.

The kid couldn't move. He was flailing his arms but he couldn't touch me. I could have held him there all day I was so enraged. Then my bro saw his open shot and took it. The crack resonated throughout the pool deck. Already frantic, the crowd screeched out in horror at the awful sound and groan.

The next thing I felt was pain — lots of it. I was disorientated. In fact, I nearly blacked out. Coming out of a daze, I soon realized I was being held completely under the water, and someone was pounding on my head.

It took me a second, but then it dawned on me that someone jumped from the pool deck onto my back and neck. The pain was emanating from a neck injury which plagues me even as I write this today.

Polo instincts took over after this realization and even more adrenaline. This dude was fully clothed, and in the deep end of a pool, that's a death sentence.

This guy was toast.

I tied him up in his shirt, straight-arming him with my left arm so he couldn't move. I put all of my goalie leg strength I could muster into a knee to the stomach and then coming up high out of the water with my eggbeater kick, I dropped my hammer on his head.

The fight was over.

I climbed out of the pool and hit a wall of screaming parents. I stood all the way up and they realized I was in pain, crazy pissed, a foot taller than them all, and had just punched out their coach who jumped on top of my head. They backed off in a hurry.

They knew better than to corner a wounded polo animal.

I was in shock and on the verge of collapse. I remember leaning onto Jeff who had pushed his way through the crowd to steady me and promptly got me out of there.

Back at the Lobo parking lot, I will always remember the hug Rachel gave me. Through tears, she whispered, "Thank you".

This hug wasn't about romantic chemistry. It's hard to describe, but I identified something was different, a barrier had been broken.

This trauma brought something new out of me. My eyes had changed. They didn't see an outsider or some anomaly, they didn't see a fighter or a pretty girl that scared me stupid. They saw a *valued* water polo teammate.

She was one of the boys, but she *wasn't* one of the boys, a sweet paradox and similar to my acceptance within the Lobo BSU. In my estimation, she was the absolute epitome of what it meant to be a Lobo and one of the toughest the school ever saw.

This change also unleashed an intense protector in me and we established a standard that day: we didn't care how bad and tough you thought you were, or what the score was on the board. There was one rule and one rule only when you played us.

You DO NOT touch Rachel.

Lobos Never Say Die

“Why do we fall Master Bruce? So we can learn... to pick ourselves up.”

Alfred

I had to take a few weeks recovering from my injuries. My back and neck were a wreck and I held off on any activity during that time.

Lots of ice. Ice heals my friends. (Along with tons of Starsky and Hutch summer reruns.)

Recovery was difficult, but my spirits were lifted immediately whenever my teammates stopped by. The concern they showed brought us even closer. Confined to a bed over the waning days of summer was bad enough, but my true worry was getting back in the pool for my senior year starting in a few short weeks.

I have had years to think about the actions of that day. It was traumatic for me as I'm not a fighter by nature. Many times you can't correctly measure out how you should be reacting in such an instinctual moment. My lifting the kid out of the water was to get him off of my teammate, to break up the fight. I was responding to my friend taking shots and unintentionally set the dude up to get pummelled.

After my parents filed a police report of an attack on a minor, their coach was fired. We were informed the #6 involved was his little brother. I hope he wouldn't have been proud of how Rachel was treated. I can see from his perspective, it would have been perplexing as to *why* we were tearing into his little bro up 20 goals. I am an older brother not only to Drew but to three younger sisters. I would have defended my siblings if they were being taken advantage of — the same as I would for any of my teammates.

I can't label this guy who jumped on my back a jerk the rest of my life. He acted rashly without all the information... but even with all the information, would he still allow his little brother to get beat down? Hopefully, he would rethink jumping onto my back and neck, but I do concede I was a big fish he was attempting to take down.

I accept we were all reacting with heightened emotion, with each side protecting its own.

I told the police our actions were in retaliation for his unwarranted behavior with our female player. They let me know how badly we busted the kid's jaw up and their coach's face. They weren't very happy about that. Word was quick to spread through the water polo community, and we never had that type of problem again. As stories can go, I had to clarify a totally confabulated version I heard my teammates re-telling in the locker room in college:

"That was you guys? The story we heard was you beat everybody up, including the coach up 20 goals!"

Probably the *other* team's version.

If you are a female and reading this, I wouldn't blame you for being a bit creeped out, or confused why there must be fist-fights in sports, (ranging from nearly every hockey game ever played, to fools charging the mound after the pitcher in baseball). Some things, I don't have an answer for.

I am sure Rachel had to deal with even more junk that would make us all cringe. In fact, it is downright revolting the stories my female classmates from the neighborhood tell me about the pervs around town and the nonsense they had to deal with. I would know nothing about growing up as an attractive female during the 80s and I can't imagine how difficult it would have been at times.

Today I ask myself: “Why was I exposed to such a level of violence playing a sport I loved. What possible *meaning* could be there?”.

It might be relevant to consider my favorite book written by Viktor Frankl who endured what many historians considered the worst of the concentration camps that killed 1.1 million Jews, Auschwitz. His book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, is a difficult read, but his brilliant conclusions from being subjected to this level of torture and inhumane treatment are now for billions to benefit from.

What I gained from his book is that each of us must search out and uncover the meaning in our lives. In light of this wisdom, I am reconciling difficult moments in my formative years and unearthing many clues to my own personal mission statement.

The violent incident I experienced tested my resiliency. Even though I was a positive person, getting injured in such a way put me in a hole. As I worked through this, I gained more Rocky-like stamina — more drive to keep swinging even while taking some hits.

This ordeal with being jumped on took me a bit of time to recover from, not only physically but mentally. I hadn’t experienced any severe hardship until this point in my life and this degree of emotional shock was new to me.

In fact, I hadn't told my wife, Jenny of 22 years about this experience until I started writing this. I kept telling her my neck issues were from an old polo injury, but never went into details. It clearly was alarming for me and I haven't allowed myself to revisit it in this much detail.

On the plus side, it did help to bring me together with my Los Amigos teammates in a way few are, as they encouraged me in my recovery. Adverse conditions, like the battlefields of war, turn soldiers from complete strangers into brothers.

I remember the toughest part of this whole ordeal was going home and telling my parents. They weren't at the game, which was rare, but we had a lot taking place in the Douglas home that summer.

It was my senior year and over all this time I survived Loboland and the Garden Grove School District without ever coming home and having to discuss a fight. I didn't know what to expect. Would they be upset with me? Or would they be disturbed with this violent sport my mom would lament about at times?

Fish came over to sit down and help me talk it over with my folks. I showed him into the living room and I went up and asked my parents to come downstairs as he was waiting. With a worried expression my mom asked what happened to prepare herself for the conversation.

I broke it to her there was a fight, but I let Fish explain the details of it because I was still a bunch of nerves. I was also in serious pain with all the adrenaline finally coming down.

My mom's reaction I was somewhat prepared for, but not for my dad's. He almost came unglued. I had never seen him in this state before, complete *fire* in his eyes, then, visible concern for me, followed by this look of almost guilt...

At the time, I didn't know what to think. Was he upset with the coaches and going to blame Fish?

My sister said I looked like a dog about to be punished. In my flustered and emotional condition, I honestly remember I felt guilty about my role in the physical damage done.

Now, being a father with children of my own, I empathize a bit better with what both my parents were experiencing. No, his anger was not directed at me or my coaches — his reaction was because he was *fiercely* protective of me.

I was still his little guy... and there I was, quite a bit taller than him, wincing in pain while icing my neck after a full-size adult jumped on top of me in the pool. But I was still his little hurler in his heart, the skinny kid who would box out players twice my size for the allure of some chocolates, yet, had the onstage talent and outgoing persona of the wife he dearly loved.

I had never seen him so upset. *I guess the guy did hit me from behind.* From that day forward, it was rare for him to miss a game.

Even with business going poorly, he would show up unexpectedly in the middle of L.A. somewhere at an away college match. One time we were battling a team of hotheads when Ham looked up distractedly out of the huddle and smiled. We all turned to see my dad defending us verbally to the hostile crowd and arguing with the refs. (He was the only person in the stands cheering for us.)

Now that I get to go out to the mound to check and see how the hammer of my own little hurler is holding up, I can empathize. But at seventeen years old, my fear was in disappointing him. We always had been open and honest with each other and in my emotional state, it was important to me for both my parents to comprehend *why* we were digging into this kid.

When we were alone, he explained that he did not condone settling skirmishes with our fists, but at the same time, in certain circumstances, we don't back down from a gunfight.

The best coaching he ever gave me was along these lines:

I was entering into my second state championship game in my sophomore year of college. We were facing a team led by five absolute monsters from Germany with National team experience (Olympic prospects). It was all I could do to contain them, and the word was they would get the better of us here in our final showdown.

The Coach drove with me all the way from Fountain Valley to Long Beach Shores (versus me driving myself or having to go with the entire family in the Vanagon).

We drove the whole way in silence. He allowed me to ponder, think and prepare the entire ride. As we arrived he looked at me and simply said:

"Go out and play *your* game".

Might not sound like much advice, yet it was dripping with wisdom.

He was telling me the only one that could beat me... was me. If I reacted to what these guys were doing rather than making them worry about me, that is where I was vulnerable.

I had to be aggressive; lead with the risk-taking, involved goalie play I established in high school. If I were to sit back, intimidated and scared... I would lose.

He realized this from coaching me in hoops and by this time his understanding of polo was phenomenal. He knew I was capable of taking over a game, but still susceptible to not assert myself if a team was in my head. I would get lost, caught in limbo. Being only half-way committed is not where you want your keeper to be.

I had to come out of the gates just right and I would be fine, not take too much unnecessary risk and expose myself, but push the limits enough so the opposition would have to react to *me*. Ham's pre-game pep talk was along these lines as well. Great advice from The Coach.

Similar to these formidable opponents in my state finals match, I resisted letting this injury get in my head.

I wanted to be a tough player mentally, to match what the pool was bringing out of me physically. My resiliency was challenged, the entire situation tested my resolve, but I hadn't backed down from defending a teammate. I thought, surely I

would do it all again if I had to. This mettle was starting to become a part of me and would prove to be invaluable conditioning for the future as that would not be the last time someone jumped on my head (metaphorically speaking). We all have to move past the neck-crushing moments. To quote The Stallion:

"You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain't about how hard ya hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward. How much you can take and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done."

Well said Rock.

How to Take Down a Bully

“This just in. Lane Meyer will be racing Roy Stalin down the K-12!”

Better Off Dead

The pop charts had gone utterly downhill with Wilson Phillips and freaking Milli Vanilli topping them. (Cobain and Grohl arrived on the scene shortly to shake things up a bit.) One of my all-time favorite debut albums was released by The Sundays, and Elfman’s score to *Edward Scissorhands* completely floored me.

The year was 1990.

I made a remarkably fast recovery and was back in good form. With that behind me, it was now time to rumble with Kennedy for the last time in my career. Here’s the run-down:

I continued to grow and now stood at a solid 6'5", broad shoulders, and my arms went all the way down to my knees giving me an almost 6'8" wingspan. (I saw Mrs. Beaver again about this time... she barely recognized me.)

Yes, Drama Brav was all grown up, and he was pissed.

Having good size isn't everything in goalkeeping. Mobility is key. I had added a nice amount of inches to my side lunges and my back peddle stroke was lightning quick. My run-swim-runs were even faster.

My specialty was blocking one-on-nobody and penalty shots. A nose for penalty shots was something I maintained above a .500 percent clip even in college. Nobody liked shooting them on me because if you got blocked, it's the equivalent

of getting body slammed off the top rope. The crowd goes nuts, and it completely takes the wind out of you.

Sometimes I employed intimidation tactics: Bulldog stare downs, slamming their shots down with authority and some words to back it up; and thanks to Killer, I got pretty comfortable in staring down an entire bench. The Coach used to tell me Larry Bird could change the course of a game with his stare alone.

I trained hard for this moment with the mindset of stopping shots many believed should have been freebie layups, because that gave us the best chance to finally beat these guys. My team had grown tremendously and everyone had the potential to get hot. Even my little work-out friend played his role in getting us here.

Kennedy had been tearing up the Garden Grove League by 10 to 20 goals a game as per usual up to this match, but so had we.

Their biggest advantage over us, of course, was their speed and manpower off the bench. They had some young talent inside, but nothing my defenders and I couldn't handle. Keeping their counter-attack under control was the big must, to cut down the number of times I was left alone to contend with two or three of them like last year.

We were ready for the gunfight of our lives as we arrived at the O.K. Corral wearing our best Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday faces to go after these guys.

A familiar dynamic resurfaced to begin the game: a speedy Kennedy player broke free of the pack (like I had my freshman year) and was all alone waving the ball at me from point-blank range with plenty of time to put it by me.

Rather than thinking: "*Not again!*", the expression on my face and inner thoughts went something like this:

"What up dude... I remember you from the locker room last year. Believe me, the moment the ball leaves your hand, I'm going to slam it right back down with TWO HANDS RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOUR FACE!!!!@#\$"

That's exactly what happened to set the tone.

In fact, two one-on-nobody saves twice in a row with our crowd going nuts. (The pool deck stands were so full Lobos were climbing on top of the roof to see it all!) It seemed all the other schools in our league were there, cheering for us to take down Kennedy. It was the first time in four years a school in the Garden Grove District was supposed to challenge them in water polo.

We went on to beat them... bad. 14-4.

The unexpected happened that made this victory extraordinary. Our swing players stepped it up and put us way over the top. Not playing scared, they made play after play and we were united like never before.

I honestly remember thinking, *"What is going on here???!"*

They were the reason the score got ridiculous. We had seven players scoring goals, and my goofy band buddy Smid scored three times. (I mean seriously, dude only scored 11 goals all year and three of them came against Kennedy???) He led us along with our two big gun scorers. I had 14 saves, but that was even below my season average of 16.7 a game. It was a complete team effort.

Quite frankly, Kennedy could have taken their early lumps, then turn it on to challenge us down the stretch, but they stopped playing. They could have kept swimming us like last year with my guys fatigued going into the fourth quarter (with barely any subs). However, they had not been tried as we had since joining our league. Wins came easy for them, and mentally they were beatable if pushed back on.

Like most bullies.

This year, Kennedy changed *outside* of the locker room. They passed us by the exit, shooting daggers at me and any comment would have set things off, but they didn't say a word (along with the Kennedy cheerleaders who were unusually tight-lipped throughout the game).

Understandably... they just got slapped by a beaver tail.

For the most part, we were gracious winners. I was thrilled for my teammates, our own unsung heroes. I was expecting to do the heavy lifting to finally get past these guys, but they let me coast.

Killer was beaming in the stands, bobbing his head at me. He was a huge part of this victory.

In water polo, your opponent has to fear you a little bit. But even if I didn't listen to death metal like my man Killer, my experience was that I could still be an effective leader and be my own brand of tough (even if I preferred far less intimidating bands like Devo and The Talking Heads).

The next day at school I went to sit down next to my friend in English class and she greeted me with, "You messed some fools up last night".

I remember her reaction the best because like Rachel, she was both the pretty girl (Lobo Homecoming Queen '90), yet a friend I could clown around with throughout our many shared classes together. I was no longer running from these girls, yet I wasn't trying to get involved romantically with everyone in a skirt. I finally learned it is possible to be friends and teammates with the very girls who used to put a different type of fear in me.

Slaying the dragon was cool, but I was no Dirk the Daring. I had help. I was still buzzing about those swing players of ours that came up so big for us. I was glad to set the tone, get the crowd into it early and they carried it the rest of the way.

I saw them in the hallways the next day with big smiles on their faces and talking with everyone. It was way cool. Even if I was getting more of the attention and credit — I understood something deeper had taken place.

We finished the season out strong and advanced in the playoffs winning in a big upset over the eventual CIF state champs in swimming later in the year. (Once again, I saw plenty of one-on-nobody shots... wicked fast polo team.) Even so, the victory against our nemesis was the one that counted.

Kennedy had me pegged for years as a threat and a talent capable of beating them. Yes, I set the stage, but I didn't do anything different than what I had done the year before! I owned the first quarter of my junior year against them, but they ended up destroying us.

I owned the first quarter of play this year, and my teammates beat them, executing as I had never seen them before and they were not intimidated by these guys anymore. The very players Kennedy didn't think could hurt them, were the ones who eventually did. Those they would scout out, and see nothing special about their individual skills, their assertive play carried the team to victory.

Being a team captain that instilled confidence was gratifying. I couldn't believe what was brought out of this inimitable team. I would play on highly talented rosters in college, and frankly, that has its own challenges. Yet setting the correct expectation levels and defining a role for someone they are capable of filling, and encouraging them no matter what... that is a leadership formula I value to this day.

I learned it playing high school water polo.

This night was special because it was almost a gift for me. My teammates were the ones who surprised me like waking up Christmas morning to find the Millennium Falcon I wanted *soooo* bad, and the celebratory Tommy's Chili never smelled so sweet.

My most memorable Lobo moment was given to me by the guys (and gal) I had taken up for repeatedly, given exhaustedly to, even willingly sacrificed for. This victory was more to me than beating someone down but having a group of individuals overcome and overplay an opponent superior to us for years. We challenged each other, took up for one another, and were fiercely loyal to each other — we were bonded together in a common cause that ignited a fiery synergy that came to a crescendo during that game.

Fish was right, it was the beginning of a new era. We recaptured our identity, we were once again a program not to be trifled with.

Kennedy High School was soon moved from the Garden Grove District. It was clear they needed to be playing against the bigger schools.

Today... I am grateful I played during the short time they were in our league.

Thankful there was real urgency that tied me to my teammates, and it wasn't our hatred for Kennedy that forged this bond — hate can only take you so far, but what they brought out of us was something beautiful.

The Wonder Years

“What would you do... if I sang out of tune?”

“With a Little Help from My Friends”

(‘68 Joe Cocker version)

During the closing days of my senior year, Joff would come flying at me all perplexed, "Dude! Brav!! Why is (band girl's name) wearing your letterman jacket??!!".

"Ahhhhh, oh no! Well, they stole it from me... you've got to watch out for those band girls."

In truth? I let them wear it.

I was still naïve and shy with romantic prospects, but I knew full well during the late 80s/early 90s, what it meant when a girl was seen around campus sporting a dude's letterman jacket.

Especially with my stock going up after our big win.

Joff was fully aware of this as well and highly protective of me and the image I stood for as the face of the Los Amigos Water Polo program. I honestly adored my days in the Lobo Marching Band, even if it didn't add to my cool factor. Wearing those hideous 70s uniforms and band hats (shakos) was a different type of humility for me.

My band director Mr. Wilson was easily my favorite teacher in high school. He helped in my drive to develop into a well-rounded musician. Because of him,

T-Bone and I got to play "Conquest" with the Trojan Band at the Coliseum back in '87 against Oregon. Even for a UCLA guy, that was cool.

I was so dedicated to the band Drew and I marched in an early morning parade in Laguna Beach, and then hightailed it to an Orange County All-Star game I was scheduled to start in, clear on the other side of the county in Tustin. We sprinted uphill, all the way back to our parked Vanagon, lugging our tubas. Ahhhh, to be young and have that type of energy again.

(Joff was an honorary band member showing up to clown around on bus rides, as well as harass us by stealing our music during performances.)

I had fun traveling all around California on band trips for parades. Those long obnoxious bus rides should have driven Mr. Wilson insane, but he was all smiles. We would play in a parade and then clown around with several other traveling schools staying at the same hotel.

I was comfortable around the girls in the band and we would goof off singing around the piano as one would pound out Andrew Lloyd's iconic theme to the *Phantom of the Opera*. I would entertain them in my melodramatic Drama Brav voice, "Sing once again for me...!!". (Of course, only when Glue was out of the band room.)

My jacket was covered in water polo award patches and completely swallowed up whoever was wearing it (mostly younger underclassmen). It was quite the sight. My wife, Jenny, said there was no way a well-liked athlete, in her elitist high school, would allow freshmen girls to be seen wearing their letterman jackets. In fact, even dating underclassmen was considered *faux pas*. However, I saw Gio treating the sweet little googly-eyed Mexican girls with such kindness... and took after him considering it an honor.

My homeboy Joff would make it a practice to go through six periods of classes scheming on how to get the stolen jacket back into my possession. He'd report

back to me, "She never took it off, not once! I followed her around all day... it was blazing hot in the afternoon!".

However, I was happy to field questions from giddy Lobo girls inquiring into the relationship status between me and whoever was wearing my jacket on a given day. What I disclosed then holds even more true today: "We're full on buds".

A simple gesture and kindness to those who look up to you can go a long way. I learned this from all the attention I got from playing high school water polo.

It wasn't until we were older with kids I divulged to Joff over monster pastrami sandwiches I willingly gave it to them. Man, did I get castigated throughout the rest of my senior year. "Brav!! How did they steal your letterman's... *AGAIN??!!*".

Even with that, it was easy for me to forgive Joff for all of his sophomoric antics, no matter how many times he would stress me out. For instance, he habitually stole the Vanagon keys and sped off joyriding, unlicensed, (with his accomplice Glue). Frequently, laughing girls at school would point out his artwork made with permanent marker of bikini girls on the back of my legs. (Drew and I were *unusually* sound sleepers.) On top of everything else, he nearly got my scooter impounded by the Fountain Valley Police!!

Little brothers.

These months I absolutely cherished. Even though I was a senior, these guys brought out the playful kid in me I never allowed to die. I'm glad I never got too cool to hang with the underclassmen or launch an occasional orange at a passing car. Oftentimes I instigated sweaty mosh pits on our trampoline where we attempted to take each other's heads off while the dulcet tones of The Dead Kennedys came blaring out of my boombox.

Over the years we created our own home video production company (influenced by Monty Python). Much of our early work was spent impersonating WWF

wrestling matches (complete with pre-match interviews). We then got organized and started filming other types of Drama Brav produced, SNL-influenced, off-colored shorts. My favorite production was an exaggerated parody of our everyday polo life with Joff nailing the primary role as my eccentric friend Smid. He followed that up with a dead-on impression of our varsity basketball coach we often butted heads with. An instant classic. I wish I could find the footage for them... man, I've tried.

Come to think of it, we all could have benefitted from more civilized interactions with a group of girls over the years. Would have been nice to lead them to some victories in that department.

In fact, I attempted to help out my boys on one of those band trips. Two girls from another school had seen me and Smid outside our room throwing the football around. They called our hotel room to chat us up. It was Drew who answered the phone:

"It's girls!! What do I say!!??" Poor kid was petrified.

"Just calm down... ask them their names."

"Soooooo, what are your names?"

He blurted them back out to me with his hand over the phone.

"No, no! Not for me... you. Talk, talk! Ask them what school they go to."

Glue inquired and got a long answer in reply. He nodded his head and muttered some type of indiscriminate response.

Frustrated, I blurted out, "Dude, just ask them to meet you somewhere."

"Sooooo, you want to meet somewhere?"

Excited, Glue turned to me, “They do! Where should I tell them?”

“Tell them by the Coke machine at the front of the pool, and take this fool with you.” I grabbed another freshman polo kid, and sent them off packing (after they both spruced up a bit).

It had been coordinated over the phone in detail what they both looked like, their names, right down to what they were wearing. These girls were very thorough. A sure victory for the Lobo polo squad. Assist Douglas.

My boys turned the corner to the pool and waiting expectantly in front of the Coke machine were two smiling girls, impressed with what they saw in these two young bucks. My guys were easily identified by the description given, but the girls asked to make sure,

“Hey, you guys are Drew and Mark, right?”.

But Glue freaked.

“Us? Nahhhh, we're, uh, we're Rick and Randy! Come on Randy.” And they fled the scene.

I was kinda like the king of the dipshits...

Graduation came soon after and I was excited to *officially* start playing for GWC that summer. I finished high school setting a new CIF state record for saves in a season, was second in CIF state history for career saves, third for saves in a single game, first team All-CIF, and named a high school All-American.

I left the Lobo Polo team in the very capable hands of Joff and Drew. They were essentially the replacements for myself and Killer. Except they were even better and sure gave Kennedy a good beaver tail slapping.

Two years removed... I was enjoying my second straight state championship win with GWC. A few days later, as a Lobo alumnus, I came to the same Long Beach pool my team won at days earlier, to support my little Los Amigos crew. They made it all the way to the CIF State Finals game, led by Joff's goalkeeping and Glue's monster two-meter play, (both trained in The Douglas Rules).

Fish had been to the finals before and lost in '82... but ten years later my guys would win it all. The first Lobo CIF State Championship in twenty-four years of the school's existence.

Now, Rico is jealous.

I could see my contributions in their play. Glue came to plenty of my JV games, and I worked with him as a young two-meter player (a complete natural). Of course, our five-mile trips back and forth to the beach helped toughen him up. Joff locked down the entire cage, stopping two penalty shots in a row in that finals match then had words for his shamed opponent to further get in his head:

"Is that *all* you got?".

He remembers my distinct chant from the stands: "Two hands for #2!! Two hands for #2!!". (Taunting the poor #2 opponent as only a fellow keeper could).

After the final buzzer sounded, the place erupted in hysteria. I had both high school and college polo coaches coming up to me left and right congratulating me for my season at GWC, but also to ask questions about these talented guys. I was like a proud parent. (Ham had stars in his eyes asking me about these two.)

Everybody on the team was family. One I played with during the Killer era, and all were fixtures on the Douglas trampoline mosh pits. These were my boys, all grown up, and they all loved Boingo.

I loved to see how Joff and Glue took care of business as the team leaders. Their teams had even more of a mix of Latino players than during my years, two being named to All-CIF teams. The team's identity was pretty loosey-goosey. A bunch of knuckleheads, but had their game faces on once the yellow ball was dropped. Determination and that child-like spirit was alive and well on the Lobo pool deck.

At times, I would tell people I would trade all of my individual award patches, for only one CIF State Championship patch that adorned their jackets.

I don't think that way now looking back. I wouldn't have changed my experience for anything. However, I am grateful I had my college days to get those state championships. My Los Amigos days were all about fighting for legitimacy, scrambling to cover as much ground as I could to keep my teams in games. My time there helped build some momentum for this program and set a bar of expectation. The upcoming crew took it to the next level from there.

I can honestly say I was more happy for *their* victory than I was for my own. What a year for Lobo Polo.

Just like that, this chapter in my life came to a close. This beautiful moment marked the end of my close affiliation with Los Amigos. I moved overseas to Japan, my friends graduated, and we were all relegated to alumni status.

Although we all moved on, the friendships formed during these wonderful years have never diminished, even if we go a spell without seeing one another.

These days, I make the occasional Lobo alumni game. These have become legendary. All years are encouraged to come back and it is one big love fest. Reliving memories is what old dudes do best.

I only played goal once at one of these games as playing field was easier on my aging legs. My man Much made it to the game about halfway through with a good friend of ours. I had to give them a little shout-out, and some entertainment for

old times sake and started slamming balls down left and right. I then saw the Lobo goalie out of position and fired from cage the distance of the pool skipping the ball off the water and landing it snug into the upper right corner.

I looked up into the stands after my little flurry in expectation of Much standing, waving his arms and leading our supporters in cheers of:

"Vivo Bravo!", "Vivo Bravo!!".

But they had missed it and were heading out of the exit opting to take in a nostalgic trip around campus, perhaps even lunch in the commons area like old times.

After the game, I questioned, "What up homeslice? You didn't even stay five minutes and I was putting on a show...".

His response was classic Much, "We'd seen it already".

Sometimes, you need more than those marching band hats, but some good people in your life who will help keep you humble.

Life, the Universe, and Everything

“Show me that smile again...”

Growing Pains

The *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* taught us to make sense of the ultimate answer in life, we must first ask the ultimate question. In this universe, no supercomputer or AI was smart enough to generate that, but the ultimate question could be found in a more primitive state. Hence, the earth was created. Maybe Douglas Adams was onto something there.

Playing water polo with all of the trash talk, black eyes, locker room show-downs was definitely a more primitive state, and it did serve as a fantastic learning ground. It makes more sense to me that we have the capacity to discover more from the simple things. Maybe the ultimate questions and answers can be obtained by getting back to the basics and the fundamentals of life.

Perhaps, life can be as simple as a flower, but still... be a complicated thing.

At the time, in 1987, without a doubt, I was supposed to be playing water polo, and playing it at Los Amigos. Not trying to get ahead, not taking advanced placement or night classes; that would take me away from what I really needed to learn.

It wasn't the time to be out playing gigs with Gio. Not out surfing with Much every day after school. Nor even digging out septic ditches for needy impoverished people in a foreign land.

Pounding it out at the Lobo pool and taking in life lessons is where I needed to be.

Perhaps you view life as randomness. Maybe Jason and the fellas were just bored one summer when we met at the theater. Was it by chance they introduced me to a sport for which I was ideally suited?

Was it happenstance that brought me together with the Black Student Union in the midst of heightened racial tensions and enabled me to learn a thing or two about love and acceptance?

Was it normal attending high school with a professional drummer who took me under his wing; or being able to train one-on-one with a stand-out collegiate polo player going into my senior year?

How... improbable.

Perhaps it was yet another strange coincidence having the perfect teammates, mentors, coaches, and competitors who challenged me to grow as a player and overcome some major holes in my game.

On top of it all, by sheer dumb luck, I got to play alongside the next year's homecoming queen — dramatically shifting the way I viewed women!?

Given my sarcasm, you can see I don't view it that way. I believe there are no chance happenings: every relationship, trial, loss, and victory happens for a reason. Many times, it is only after the fact we can analyze the many synchronicities life brings us, (exactly like Dr. Frankl taught me).

In plays and screenwriting there is a three-act structure model (*Act I*, *Act II*, and *Act III*). This divides a story into what is referred to as the *Setup*, the *Confrontation*, and the *Resolution*.

My water polo playing days completed what I would consider *Act I* or the *Setup* of my life. My *Act II* has certainly been one of *Confrontation*.

A lot of athletes struggle with this after their playing days are finished. We find ourselves daydreaming about the time when our bodies worked, and perhaps our lives would have been different if we only won that game back in '82. Paying a bill doesn't quite equate to making a timely goalie save, getting a clutch base hit, an unassisted tackle or making the free-throw to send the team into overtime. Perhaps it should be, and maybe our minds haven't reconciled all the attention we used to experience from playing team sports. (Making us the butt of many jokes as we attempt to relive this past glory through our kids.)

Sports can give such an incredible, and predictable structure. Coaches constantly work to improve your play, challenging you, holding you accountable for mistakes. Teammates sharing this time in life bond you together with everlasting superglue. The competitors are there to push you and make special friends after you are done battling each other. And who doesn't love being cheered on! The people supporting you are special indeed. Yes, we fall in love with the sports we play and the identity it gives us, but without this supporting structure we are used to, many stumble in transition. Is it possible we can take what we started on the playing field and continue to build on it?

I think Magic Johnson was able to. He was, of course, an assist-man and had rare creativity that made his teams better. After his playing days, he became a well-respected businessman and philanthropist in the Los Angeles area, building up impoverished areas and bringing back business and jobs to troubled spots no other businessman would *dare* touch.

His play on the court helped him to form an identity and the years of competition allowed him to nurture and grow his craft into a sort of art form. This had a direct correlation to the risk only he could take doing business in the future.

Yes, Magic was rare indeed, most athletes struggle to make sense of retirement. Michael Phelps keeps finding himself training in the pool and Jordan retired three times. Can you blame them? How do you come down from being the best?

Playing our sport becomes our identity. No wonder we get stuck.

For me, coming into marriage, career, parenthood, etc. was a completely different type of skip shot and I have endured my share of challenges. In fact, I have frustrated every boss I ever had. Each saw my enormous potential and sometimes brilliance in a certain area, yet something was blocking me from truly putting all the pieces together. Every entrepreneurial work project or musical endeavor would show promise, but nothing *entirely* sustainable came out of them or could remotely compare to the success I experienced as a water polo player.

On top of sorting through all this, I was put into emotional overload because as my college water polo playing days were coming to an end... we lost my dad. Woke up one morning, and my Coach was gone.

It felt like an *entire team* jumped from the pool deck on top of my head.

Words cannot express the void we felt immediately in our young family (my youngest sister was thirteen). Much of my time writing this has been done in tears, both tears of laughter and the ugly kind. I had forgotten so many of his funny quotes and toughness. Recollecting and exploring all the stories have served as a type of therapy session. There were parts of my loss I hadn't yet reconciled, even over twenty years removed.

I needed to *remember* how kind and selfless he was, *remember* the incredible influence he had not only on me and our family, but my classmates, and teammates. A granular look at those years has given me valuable insights to all his hidden wisdom that was applicable to life but given through the lens of our common bond of athletics.

Remember my pop had plenty of spark to him. Man, I loved that spark. Grabbing tough rebounds from guys twice his size, or taking on an entire stand full of rabid fans. I can see from his life if I was to generate my own spark I needed to have *both* the red positive wire and the black negative wire terminals plugged into my battery. These two needed each other.

Can't be all sunshine and roses (Drama Brav), nor all fire and adrenaline (Killer taking on the entire locker room).

My dad was a great example of having a good mix of both the positive red and the negative black; he knew when it was appropriate to showcase some Scottish grit with me, and when I needed a hug.

In this context, The Coach was able to pull off the impossible: being both a stern disciplinarian giving me the structure I desperately needed to excel, as well as being my closest confidant and mentor.

As I have been writing I realized I blocked out much of the more granular details from my playing days. I couldn't clearly recollect the many joyful moments; they had become buried because my dad was such a big part of it, and remembering him unfortunately hurt.

Little by little, he was becoming a fading memory.

I am thankful for the premonition to write it all out because the memories of his lessons and mentorship have all flooded back. As a result, I have regained a part of me that was lost.

The quirky, talented, happy go lucky, gutsy guy my dad took much of his time to help develop and loved so much — has been playing too far back in the cage for a long time. Playing tentative, playing scared. I can hear him say:

"Go out there and play *your* game."

In order to play my game, I have had to move past what was hindering my *Act II* which has taken some real digging. A portion of my child-like spirit died with him, hindering my creativity. My memories only started coming back once I allowed them to, along with the epiphany I had lost some of my water polo moxie. It was refreshing to hear his voice again clearly instructing me from the past. Now I can hold onto those lessons with a far deeper understanding, lessons lost with the passing of time.

I can now evaluate and discern where I have been playing too conservatively, or too aggressively and exposing myself in life, business, and relationships. At times I was pressing, putting pressure on myself to hurry up and *carpe diem* to honor his memory, fear being the main motivator. This wasn't what he would want. He only encouraged me to *be me*.

Watching him go through *his* doozy of a second act, and then end up losing him early was difficult. It does serve me today, however. Taught me to keep playing and hustling in life, even if my play was inconsistent and I was continually getting beaver slapped by the Kennedy's in life — I would eventually find my groove and individualistic style.

At this time I am more ready to embrace even the most difficult moments of the present, rather than retreat and cling to past success. I can step up and be the leader my father and water polo trained me to be. The Uncle Rico in me can now rest.

Love and miss you dad, I won't be taken out of my game any longer.

Water Polo's Final Lesson

“You see the luck I’ve had, can make a good man... turn bad.”

The Smiths

You may have read the quote above only to hear in your own head Morrissey’s brooding vocals lamenting: “Please, please, please, let me get what I want.”

I recall all of those polo run-ins and the difficult, frustrating times with a type of fondness. The only reason I ended up getting what I wanted in the pool, was because I endured the pain and frustration required to better myself. I didn’t feel entitled to polo success because I had a talent for the sport, in fact, it can sure humble you in a variety of ways the moment you believe you’ve arrived. I absolutely loved playing and the fierce competition lit the fire under me to put in the effort to better my teams. Having gained this mindset, I enjoyed the perfect water polo career (in my estimation).

The good times are fun for a change, but they only came about after some tough years. (The Lobo CIF win represented the greatest of the good times.) Although there is no way I would have had that crazy look in my eye without those Kennedy guys. Today, I can drive past La Palma without wincing.

My polo days are long past, but I often go to the Golden West campus, just to hang out.

As I walk the different pathways, I take in the distinct minty pine scent of eucalyptus trees encompassing the campus. The familiarity of this place is comforting, my own type of safe haven.

It's been a special place for me. I practically grew up here, starting as a young kid with the Orange County Children's Theater. Every performance and many practices were held here. It also is where we played my high school varsity polo games, where I taught swimming lessons over the summer, and yes, years spent on campus all day as a collegiate student-athlete (Also, where I would head when ditching school!).

I sit in front of the Forum II auditorium or even go inside on the rare occasion when I am allowed as a non-student. I had several of my college classes in this forum setting, but it was also where I had my scenes with Mrs. Beaver, the exact place I was left to improv my way out of a tight spot.

Playing goal was not all too different at times.

Sometimes I sit in the bleachers at the pool and images come to mind of my BSU Lobo pals on the roof of the facility when we played against Kennedy. Their cheers and celebratory jumping and dancing all around replays in my mind. Classic.

I still hear Fish's voice encouraging me to "Go get it!" after I made the decision to dart forward out of the goal to make a risky steal attempt.

I picture Ham motioning for us to huddle up and can hear him bellowing out instructions. Seems like just yesterday.

Ha! I remember frustrating my teammates pretty bad at practice as they were facing me in our one-on-nobody drills. Ham's philosophy was if you were all alone, in front of the goal with plenty of time, the ball should be in the cage. Carelessness, laziness, or lack of focus on the shooter's end would prevent the goal.

Except they were playing into *my* game.

High school water polo prepared me with the determination to stop these type of shots and they were only making me better at my craft the longer they prolonged this drill.

My team was supposed to score a certain amount of one-on-nobody goals in a row to end it. I don't recall how many Ham required, but I do remember the team goal having to decrease, which frustrated him to no end.

To the point, one time my freshman year Ham full-on called out my team. He challenged someone to step up and absolutely guarantee him the ball would be in the goal against me. He re-emphasized vehemently, "Do not raise your hand unless you can do this. I want a 100% guarantee!".

Only one hand rose up.

This kid was brash and confident, a freshman like myself. We battled each other in high school and my outgunned O.C. All-Star team beat his bad; we both came into the program highly touted. I guess he resented our past and the attention I got because at the time he was not the kindest teammate. This made me put on my Killer face even more.

He was the equivalent of a nasty, closing pitcher with multiple pitches, an incredibly creative player shooting the ball and I had to be at my best to get him. I couldn't be too aggressive in moving out to cut down his angle; dude employed a wicked lob shot he could put in if I overstepped my bounds.

He came at me in attack-mode with a look I never saw before from him, coming in at his favorite angle, point-blank about five meters out and moving in where he felt most comfortable to pull from his bag of tricks.

I stayed low, churning my legs, set like a spring ready to explode with my brow lowered giving him the same type of glare which said: "No, I don't like *you* either".

He had a quick trigger and loved the high corners. Yet, I had tipped out enough of these shots to let him know this was a risk, playing into my strengths. I was playing him with my hands wide sculling the water, to show him I was ready to fly to a corner. Skip shots close to my body were troublesome for me; I learned to block these shots with my chest. I was expecting one of those.

But this kid was going for broke. He went for the donut, which in water polo is a complete slap in the face to the goalkeeper. He understood if the ball went in, the cheers would have extended to Irvine.

That was a mistake.

To score on a goalie with long arms, the book usually is to beat him quickly over his head which made our arms come together resembling a donut as we attempted to block it. The ball entering through the hole would bring the humiliation. This wasn't the best shot against me, because the benefit of having lean arms was there wasn't much bulk to inhibit quick movement. Also, my reflexes at the time were cat-like.

I slammed his shot down with authority. He looked very bad, and I didn't dare say a word lest he comes charging like a batter after a pitcher that had thrown at *his* head.

Ham didn't show any emotion and nobody *dared* cheer for me, but he calmly started into the next drill (as if nothing happened). Strange as it may seem, after this showdown, this teammate and I were friends — especially since I didn't further humiliate him with any sort of trash talk. At this time, I let my game do the talking, no longer clawing for respectability like when I was in high school.

During the closing days of my GWC sophomore year, I was on a mission doing this one-on-nobody drill preparing for the state finals; the ball rarely went in. Ham stopped it early into the drill and told us to gather around. My thoughts were:

“Here we go again... I feel for you guys always getting yelled at, but I’m not going to stop blocking your shots!”.

Ham was almost somber. He explained in a very calm voice, he had rethought his philosophy on one-on-nobody shots, considered it a disservice not to acknowledge my ability to get at them. We needed to “give credit where credit was due” and he started an applause with everyone promptly joining in.

At first, I joked around with all my teammates hooping and hollering, it wasn’t uncommon for us to applaud someone’s efforts with everyone smiling and joking around.

Nevertheless, Ham kept the applause going until it got awkward for me. This fueled my teammate’s yells even more and he was giving me this look of pride that was almost fatherlike. Emotion started to creep in. The long grueling hours I dedicated over years were being appreciated. I finally said, “Thank you”, in a more taken back voice and it was only after that he moved on.

Again, Kennedy was the reason I dedicated myself to blocking the one-on-nobody shot, the very dudes I wished death upon my three-ring binder. They humiliated me with it, which fueled my workouts. Today, I am glad they embarrassed us and their fans harassed us. Why? Well... that’s what kids do. What would the 80s Lakers have been like without Larry Bird and the Celts pushing them around and the notoriously foul Boston crowds taunting them?

The irony is I didn’t do the heavy lifting to beat Kennedy, I had made enough of a name for myself to get into *their* heads and my comrades polished them off.

However, I did need this skill to take on those five monsters from Germany in my GWC state finals game. They were talented enough to get off wide open, close-range shots on me all game long. The outcome of our battles through the year was either decided in overtime, or by one goal.

My GWC teams were the big dogs who could usually outswim and out muscle everybody; my one-on-nobody skills were rarely necessary for us to win. But we had met our equal and needed a difference maker. I had to be that Lobo goalie once again.

That day, I played the water polo game of my life.

While I was making the point-blank stops, narrowly making bold steals... my guys were putting the ball in the cage and running up the score. We had plenty of room going on to win and I tallied 18 saves, 5 steals, and 3 assists. Ham subbed out the field starters with plenty of time left on the clock in the final quarter.

The place was rockin' acknowledging their efforts as they all came out of the game and started celebrating on the sidelines. I was confused as to why I was still in the game and not taken out with my teammates. Being a part of that moment would be nice. I figured Ham respected this team so much, he wanted to make sure the janitor was staying late to get all the cleanup done. These German guys could score in quick bunches and I was holding them in check.

I played a bit more which gave us even more breathing room putting the score at 13-6. Then I saw my goalie bro make a mad dash across the pool deck and dive in like a Lobo doing a run-swim-run, wrapping me up in a bear hug as he replaced me. Ham was giving me my *own* curtain call.

I thought the place was loud when the starters left the game. Everybody was standing.

I exited the pool by the opposing bench who were also standing and clapping. I had pitched a perfect game, and they were all letting me know it.

I didn't know what to do as I walked the long way back to the other side of the pool to our bench with the applause only getting louder. I kept my head down,

both physically and mentally exhausted having fought the fight of my life. I didn't know how to take this overflow of appreciation.

When I finally allowed myself to look up, I saw a band of brothers beaming with excitement all ready to pounce on me. Ham's face is what stood out most. He was wearing the same look of pride he had when he initiated applause for my efforts back at practice. He finally had that elusive Los Amigos gunfighter he wanted so badly.

That was the last varsity collegiate game I ever played, even with all the big universities begging me to join them. Why didn't I go on? Well, *quite* another story; come crash a Lobo reunion, I'm sure I will be telling it there.

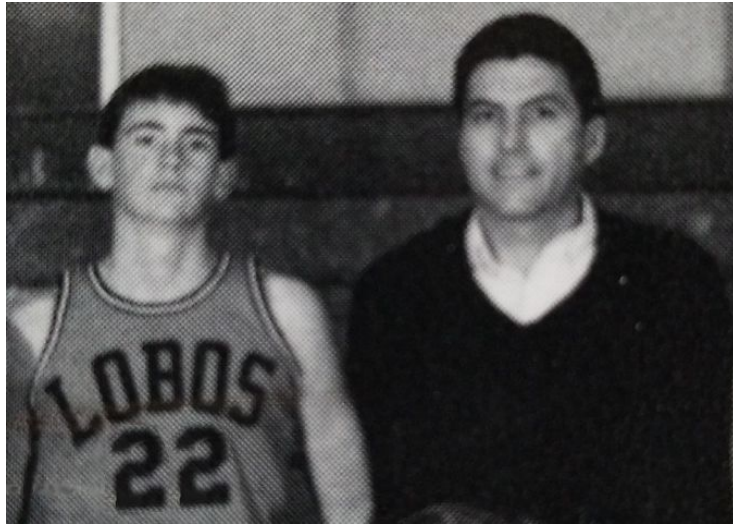
Right now, it is late at night, and I can't sleep. Standing in the doorway, I watch my boy sleep who has been sick for a while. I smile. He's my little Killer. It's been a tough bit, but this won't beat us.

I understand now "playing my game" really *didn't* end in that finals match. Water polo planted something permanently in my heart; the keeper is still there — aggressively defending my home turf.

The unforgettable fire has been rekindled. I have searched and discovered *meaning* for my life: I will always be my brother's KEEPER.



Dedicated to The Coach



Glen Kenneth Douglas (1947-1998)

www.BrandonDouglas.com/pictures

© 2019 All Rights Reserved