

“Ouch!” I screamed and immediately throwing a bright yellow penalty flag high up in the air and blowing my whistle. Our head football coach, who was serving as my officiating partner that day at the annual powder puff football game, placed the ball down and came over to consult the penalty call.

“What do you have, Coach Hoffman?”

“Illegal touching!” The sideline broke out with laughter. Coach Galewski had trouble containing himself as well and responded, “OK. What happened?”

“Trevor slapped me on the butt,” I said indignantly.

“Well, we already flagged them for unsportsmanlike conduct when Alex ripped his shirt off following the last TD. Why don’t we let this one go?” Coach Galewski reasoned.

“But Trevor slapped me on the butt,” I said again. I turned around to see a number of our junior football players laughing hysterically at the scene. Trevor, Xavier and Austin were beat red from laughing. Dylan could hardly contain himself as he let out his loud and infectious laugh.

Working hard to suppress my own amusement, I feigned resignation and walked slowly to pick up the flag. In mock consternation, I pointed at Trevor, “OK. I’m letting it go with a warning, but I have my eye on you. Keep your hands to yourself!”

These powder puff football games could get pretty competitive, and the girls who play seem to take it pretty seriously. But the boys – mostly football players who serve as coaches – always seem to find a way to make it fun. They sometimes push the limits of decency, but after a few warnings, things settle down. This year was no different. We were only about two minutes into the game and I had already thrown two flags – both of them on the coaching staff – but it was all part of the fun.

As Coach Galewski put the ball down to start another play, a cool Lake Michigan breeze blew across the football field at Spaltholz Stadium at South Milwaukee High School. It reminded me why we were here in the first place. It reminded me of why this was so fun. Why it was so important. As my thoughts drifted back, I started to think about a day very similar to this one 10 years earlier and about 50 miles to the south. Though the events and people of that day were far away in both time and distance my memory of them was amazingly close.

Sunny, but cool, the breeze off the lake that day kept the temperatures from getting very warm. Spring temperatures along the lake can vary by the minute with even a slight change in direction of the wind. I gripped my stopwatch tightly in anticipation of the start of the race with a feeling that something great was about to happen. Even so, I was a bundle of nerves walking slowly toward the finish line. I can only imagine what was going through the minds of my three hurdlers as they awaited the start of the 110 meter high hurdle final. I can only imagine what was going through the minds of all the boys on the team as we competed in the conference championship meet that day. We had been through so much together in the last 18 months. It was only fitting that our friend and teammate was watching from the bleachers that day. Our thoughts, I’m sure, were with him and the smile on his face.

Albert was the kind of kid any coach would love to have on their team. He practiced hard and he played hard. He was not easily discouraged and often played with pain. Above all, he found a way to have fun, and being around him was fun. I had the pleasure of coaching him in both football and track. In football, he was a hard-nosed fullback and linebacker who wore number 33. In track, he was a sprinter.

Although not the fastest runner on the team, I knew he was something special during his first race of his freshman year. He was scheduled to run the 400-meter dash at Racine Horlick that night. On a 160-meter indoor track, this is a 2 1/2 lap race. As the gun went off, I noticed that Albert's shoe was tied rather loosely, but it was too late to do anything about it. Sure enough, as he rounded the curve on the first lap, the shoe came flying off. It landed not too far from me, so I hurried over and bent down to pick it up. As I rose up with the shoe in my hand, I expected to see Albert there to take it from me. But when I looked up he was no longer there. He was still running the race.

He finished the entire race with one shoe on and one off. I had to stop myself on two occasions from pulling him off the track. He was in some pain and even limping a bit on the last curve. Somehow it seemed that pulling him from the track would be worse. His friends had lined the track and were cheering him along the way. The look of determination in his face told me that he needed to finish. After the race, he approached me with his head down and an embarrassed look on his face. I asked him what was wrong.

"I didn't do very well," he replied.

"Didn't do well?" I said "You just set the record for the One-Shoed Run!" I promised to put it in our record book and sent him off with a smile on his face to ice his sore foot.

I may not have realized it then like I do now, but Albert's effort that night and the support of his friends were indications that this was a special group of kids. There were some good athletes in that class, but not great. Academically, most of them were very good students. One or two were even Ivy League caliber, but most were what you would consider "average" high school students. What set them apart as a group was their ability to work together to achieve success.

Albert was a prime example. He was a good student and well liked throughout the school. Although he was an athlete, his friendship knew no bounds. He was kind to everyone and liked to help those in need. He was always there to console someone when they were down with a kind word or lift them up with a joke. As an athlete, he supported his teammates and seemed to gain more satisfaction out of their success than his own. It should have been no surprise that his teammates surrounded that track that night. Whatever he did seemed to pull people together. It was a terrible loss for everyone when he passed away just before Christmas vacation of his junior year.

Albert had suffered a brain aneurysm during the first week of December in 1999. He made improvements over the next couple of weeks and appeared to be getting better. Just when he looked like he was going to be able to come home, his condition worsened and he died. I have only experienced the loss of a few students in my career as a teacher. Each and every time, it has had a very significant effect on the student body. Maybe because Albert was such a good friend to all, his death had a very far-reaching and long-lasting effect on both students and teachers alike.

To their credit, Albert's classmates bonded together and decided to make something positive out of his passing. Their efforts led to a number of fund-raising and community building activities as a way of memorializing his life and his effect on everyone. A scholarship was started with the money they raised. A tree was planted on school grounds in his honor. Our track team that year put his initials on our team T-shirt. The football team wore the number 33 on their helmets the following year to honor the number that Albert wore. Always looking for a way to fill that void, the athletes on the track and football teams dedicated a number of games to

his memory. Unfortunately, the pressure to perform in his memory was too much for them to bear.

As the 2000 track season progressed, I started to notice the effects of this pressure. At our conference relay track meet in early May, the boys dedicated their performances to Albert. Our relay teams carried a baton with Albert's picture in it hoping it would motivate them to win the meet. The problem was that we weren't prepared to handle that kind of pressure. The team that year was young. With only two seniors on the team, Albert's junior classmates were expected to carry a great deal of the load. Despite their best efforts and best intentions, things did not go well. Ups and downs are part of a normal high school track meet. Rarely does everything go right. An experienced team can weather those down times and stay focused. We did not. With each failure to execute, our kids felt as if they had failed the memory of Albert. Having had our emotional energy sapped, we finished seventh that night out of 10 teams. Two weeks later, at the conference championships, we finished ninth, our lowest finish at a conference meet in nine years.

During their senior year in football, it happened all over again. The players once again dedicated game after game to Albert. Despite some close games early in the year, the players failed to secure a victory until the second to last game of the year. By that time, they were deflated. They had tried to win for Albert, but in their minds, they had failed. The sad thing was none of the adults, including myself, knew how to handle it either. We had dealt with our grief and felt that the kids should be over theirs as well. As bad as things were, we were all afraid to discuss it with the kids for fear that it would open old wounds and make things worse. In hindsight, NOT dealing with it was the worst thing we could have done.

Despite their lack of athletic success, this tight-knit group held together and persevered. To some extent during the winter, they were able to get beyond some of their grief and continued to prepare for the track season. Their work paid off. From the beginning of the season, we showed great improvement over the previous year. The seniors showed great leadership through both their effort and their accomplishments. In designing the team T-shirt, they chose the word "TOGETHER" to be printed on the back. True to their word, the seniors showed the support and caring they had always showed for each other, but extended it to the underclassmen, as well. It was like having another set of coaches on the team.

As the 2001 track season was coming to a close, it was apparent that we had a pretty good team. We had won the conference relay meet and had several other good performances that year. We were confident that we had a good enough team to win the conference outdoor meet. I couldn't help but wonder, however, if the boys were still feeling the pressure to perform for Albert. I decided not to repeat the mistakes of the past. It was time to address the issue head on.

The night before the conference championship, it is our tradition to have a spaghetti dinner. Each member of the team contributes some item to the occasion. The coaches cook and serve. In order to eat, all of the athletes must participate in some sort of skit. The skits usually mock the coaches, and everyone has a good laugh. After the meal, everyone who is participating in the meet leaves to have a final pep talk in a separate room. I use this time to go over final preparations for the meet and conclude by recognizing the seniors for their accomplishments during their high school careers. In the past, I have instructed the seniors to fill the front of the room as they enter. This year, I kept one seat open.

As I finished with the last of 19 seniors, I moved to the open desk. This one was for Albert. Just as I had felt during football, I was concerned about opening old wounds.

Considering the events of the past year, it was important that the boys did not feel as if they had to win one for Albert. I guess I just felt I needed to say what should have been said long ago. I told them that it tore my heart out to see them suffer over continuous losses in track and football. I could see that they were blaming themselves and feeling as if they had let someone down. I apologized for not saying something back then. I, too, was afraid. I, too, was grieving, but we should have been doing it together.

Then I asked them, "What would Albert say if he were here? He would probably punch you in the arm and tell you to quit feeling sorry for yourselves. Then he'd make some sort of wisecrack, slap you on the ass and we'd all feel better."

Thankfully, they laughed, and I noticed they were beginning to loosen up. I finished by telling them, "All Albert wants is for you guys to have fun. He doesn't care about the score. He just wants you to be happy. If you believe he's up there watching, let's go out tomorrow and put on a show for him. Show him you're having fun!"

I even said that we were going to have so much fun tomorrow, that I would be able to sit in the stands and just relax while watching the meet. At this they really started to laugh, because they know I can't sit still during a meet.

"OK", I admitted. "Maybe I'll just sit down for a bit. I'll take a seat up there with Albert and he'll be smiling."

As the kids suspected, I did not do much sitting at the beginning of the meet. I was not sitting when Adam took first place in the shot put. I was not sitting when Ross took first place in the high jump, nor was I sitting when Joe had a personal record in the triple jump by 18 inches to win. This all happened before the start of the running events.

The first running event that day was the 4 x 800 meter relay team. Nick, Jason, and the two Joes were seeded fifth. When the gun went off, they seemed to feed off the success of their teammates. With each succeeding runner, the excitement grew. Our third runner, a freshman, ran his leg in a time of 2:03 and took the lead. Our anchor runner held on to win the event as we finished in near school record time. At the end of the first running event, we had scored an unheard of 51 points. But we weren't done.

As the gun went off for the 110-meter high hurdles, all three of our hurdlers shot out to the front of the pack. With each flight of hurdles, they moved out in front of the rest of the schools seemingly trading the lead back and forth with each other. As they crossed the finish line sweeping the first three places, I leapt for joy. Seventy-five points after two running events is an amazing total. As gravity began to take hold on my body, my feet somehow forgot to land on the ground and I found myself lying face up at the sky with my arms outstretched above my head. My heart still beating loudly, I don't think I could have felt any better about my kids than at that moment.

It was then that I remembered what I had told the athletes the night before. I also became more aware of myself and my surroundings. Feeling somewhat silly with the other coaches and officials looking at me lying on the football field, I got up and headed to the bleachers. I scouted out a spot at the top where there wasn't much of a crowd and sat down. Just then, the wind shifted. What had started out as a cool easterly breeze off of the lake turned into a warm breeze out of the southwest. I imagined that it must have been Albert smiling.

I guess he decided to play a joke on us as our fortunes turned. From that point forward, if something could go wrong it did. Although we did score more points, we did not win another event the rest of the meet. We were even disqualified in a relay, and our hurdlers who had done

so well in the high hurdles struggled in the intermediate hurdles later in the meet. I guess our heads were getting too big. I'm sure Albert got a good laugh out of that at our expense.

At the end of the meet, we were all clueless of the final score. The host school had not been announcing updates of the score throughout the meet. As our athletes waited on the football field for the final score, they lined up to form a question mark as if to say, "Well?" Then they formed the number 33 in Albert's honor. This time, however, it was with laughter and joy – the way Albert would have wanted it.

The announcer read off the final scores of the day with the top two teams. "In second place, Racine Park with 98.5 points and winning the 2001 Southeast Conference Championship is South Milwaukee with 131.5 points." We were elated. There were hugs and smiles, but also tears – a catharsis of emotion as we processed everything that had happened that evening. Not only had we won the meet and set a conference record for points scored, we had won the meet by a margin of exactly 33 points. Albert just had to have the last word at everything.

Each year since, we gather together to honor Albert and to fund a scholarship in his name. Both current and former students, teachers, administrators, family and friends come together to honor's Albert's finest qualities – competitiveness, togetherness, and plain old fun. The proceeds of the powder puff football game fund the Albert Nazifi, scholarship which is given annually to deserving South Milwaukee students. The game has become a tradition at South Milwaukee High School. It is one that I suspect will continue for quite some time, and I feel fortunate to have been there at the beginning.

It's all the butt slapping I can do without.