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REAL WORLD DOESN'T GIVE MANY BREAKS

Struggle to fit in taught painful lessons worth learning

One of the toughest things about living with a handicap is that you want to be and look like everyone else because inside, where it counts, you are just like everyone else.

I remember standing in my gym shorts, as a first- or second-grader, and looking up at one of the dozens of wooden poles hanging down from the ceiling. Because I had only one arm and two fingers, I didn't have to climb it, but I was allowed to try. I embraced that pole with arm and legs and tried somehow to snake myself up. Finally I walked away somewhat embarrassed.

When I was 12 years old, virtually every man I admired smoked, So I smoked too. I had to discover a way to light the matches that was different from the way others did it. So I would bend a match over in the matchbook and holding it between my knees, rub the red tip of the match across the striking panel with my thumb.

If I managed to get my thumb out of the way in time, I avoided a burn. If not, the tip of my thumb developed a charred sort of blister that hurt quite a lot but went away in just a couple of days. I might have let someone light the cigarettes for me, but I did not want to be seen as needing help.

I liked to dress the way the other guys dressed as well. In those days, standard summer dress was khakis, sneakers, and a white tee-shirt rolled up at the sleeves. The more muscular the guy, the higher the sleeves were rolled. The problem I faced was that if I rolled my left sleeve, it would reveal my stump of a left arm, only about 6 inches long. That was the last thing I had in mind.

Though there was no way I could coax even the hint of a bicep out of my right arm, being a slave to fashion I rolled my right sleeve all the way up.

In every way I fought to appear like everyone else.

I played baseball and softball until the other boys grew too strong and skilled for me to compete with them. Since I couldn't wear a glove, I learned to catch a ball between the crook of my arm and the side of my stomach, just below the ribs. It often hurt to catch a ball like that, but it seemed to hurt more when a teammate would toss the ball softly underhanded rather than firing it to me as he would to anyone else.

It hurt to bat, too, because I did it with the bat in the crook of my arm, driving the knob into the back of my rib cage as I swung. When the time came that I had to admit that I couldn't compete on an even basis, I just walked away from baseball, not content simply to watch my friends play. Things went similarly in basketball and football.

Things seem far different for children now. Parents and schools often protect children with disabilities from both the physical pain of trying to grow up acting and looking just like everyone else and from the emotional pain of realizing that there are going to be limits. There are special sports programs for special children. There are books, fictional or true, about role models who have overcome one impairment or another and achieved great success against all odds.

Make no mistake – I believe all these things are major advances -- yet I am not sure that things have improved in every respect.

As I look back, I realize that I learned something worthwhile from clinging to that pole with no one there to help me, from persisting to light my own matches despite the pain, from my experience of trying to look like everyone else, from moving on to things I was better at than sports. These were painful lessons, but lessons nevertheless. They made me realize that I was going to have to compete with everyone else to get ahead and that no one in the real world was likely to give me a break just because I was missing a limb and a few digits.