

Who's Got It Better Than Us? Feb 1, 2016

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When I was growing up, there was a local car dealer in Ann Arbor that had a program where the coaches at Michigan got to drive the extra dealer cars. We didn't have much money, and we didn't have a car of our own, so my parents shared the dealer car. Sometimes my dad, brother and I would walk outside and the car would be in the driveway. Other times, if my mom was out, it wasn't.

"Hey Dad, where's the car?"

"No car today, guys. We're walking ... Grab a basketball: 100 with the right, 100 with the left. Let's go!"

So we'd dribble down the sidewalk, dad leading the way, yelling: "Who's got it better than us?!"

Me and my brother trailing behind, chanting: "No-body!"

More often than not, it would be my dad who had the car, out on a long recruiting trip. Recruiting wasn't like it is today with planes and private jets. Recruiting took a lot longer. He'd be on the road for months at a time, coming home on the weekends whenever he could. Sometimes weeks would go by and we wouldn't see him, or the car. So my mom took charge — and she was just like my dad.

"Mom, where's the car?"

"No car today, guys. We're walking. Grab a basketball ..."

That's how both my parents were. They made everything exciting growing up. Even not having a car.

Sometimes we'd be sitting down watching TV and my dad would tell me and my brother to run upstairs and grab him something. He would time us. Every time. It was like the world record was on the line. My brother and I both wanted that world record, so we'd run upstairs as fast as we could to see who could get back to my dad first. He would make us compete.

Or maybe he just really wanted a beer as fast as he could possibly get it ...

I shared a room with my brother for 16 years, and my dad always made us feel like that was the greatest thing in the world. Like we had this whole house, and my brother and I had a special piece of it all to ourselves. Never mind the fact that most kids wanted (and a lot of kids had) their own rooms. We were lucky to share a room. We got to share each other's stories, each other's dreams.

"Who's got it better than you guys?!"

"No-body, Dad!"

That's how it was in our house. A lot of excitement. A lot of competition. A lot of love.

Later on we realized, Okay, maybe some people did have it better ... But my parents were right about just about everything. It's staggering how right they were. Maybe having an exciting childhood in a loving home is as good as it gets. And we had that. So how could anybody have it better?

Growing up in Ann Arbor, all my dad's friends were coaches. I remember Tom Minick, who was my first football coach. He was also the Sheriff of Washtenaw County. A real man's man. Us kids would ask him, "What are we doing today?" And he'd pull out a jack-hammer and say, "We're jack-hammerin' this driveway, and you kids are gonna pick up the rocks and put them in that truck over there." Then he'd get to working the jack-hammer. For us kids, that was pretty cool to watch, and to be a part of that kind of work made us feel valued.

Tom Minick, my dad, his friends — they always had us working. Good work, too. We learned early the importance of being productive.

I was seven years old when my dad first showed me how to cut the grass. It was a big job for a kid my age. We had a pretty decent-sized backyard. It was on a hill — tough to mow.

But I cut it so good. I double-cut it. I cut it at an angle, then cut across it at another angle, like a checkerboard. The way I'd seen in the outfield at baseball games. And I loved to climb trees, so when I was finished, I would climb to the top of the tallest tree in our backyard and lay face down on the highest branch, just looking down, admiring my work.

That was one of the best feelings.

As a kid, to have adults think you're valuable enough to perform certain tasks gives you a real sense of confidence. Cutting the lawn. Raking leaves. Shoveling snow. Walking the dog for our neighbor Mrs. Trumm — who was a German professor at Michigan — for 25 cents. Picking up the rocks and putting them in that truck over there ...

It gave you a real sense of pride.

That's just how the people were in Ann Arbor when I was growing up. It wasn't just Tom Minick and my dad's friends. I could tell you about teachers, coaches, clergy people. People I learned from who had a profound impact on me.

Like my nextdoor neighbor growing up, Rudy Silverstone.

He would always listen to Tigers games out on the front porch, and when they played the Indians and Vic Power would catch the ball one-handed, Rudy was horrified. He couldn't stand it when fielders made one-handed catches. It drove him crazy. He wanted to see two hands catching the ball over the head. Every time.

I used to throw the baseball up in the air to myself to catch fly balls, and the side yard of our house was on a slant, so sometimes I'd throw the ball up and it would hit his house, and I would catch the fly ball off his roof. His wife, Myrtle, didn't like it very much, and one day, he came outside and said, "Okay ..." and I thought I was in trouble. Then he whispered, "Don't listen to her. Just make sure you catch the ball over your head." And he swung his hands over his head and clapped them together like he was catching a ball. "That's how you catch a fly ball."

That's the kind of community it was. Everybody was always watching you, always there to help. If you did something wrong, they'd let you know. In no uncertain terms, they'd correct you. It was very hard to get away with anything. At school, in the neighborhood — somebody was always watching.

I find it to be the same place today. It's changed over time, but at its core, it's the same. It's still vibrant and alive, full of good, genuine, down-to-earth people who laugh easy and make you laugh. I still feel that love here — how people care about and want the best for their kids, the way my parents did. I go all over this country recruiting people, and it's enjoyable. When I'm inside these homes, it doesn't even feel like work. I meet so many good families everywhere I go. And they all want the best for their sons and daughters. That's the common thread.

We have that here in Ann Arbor. Very strongly.

I've moved about 20 times in my life. Three of those moves have been to Ann Arbor.

The first was when my dad took a coaching job at Michigan under Bo Schembechler when I was seven years old.

Bo Schembechler was bigger than life. My dad came home from practice every day with a new story. "You'll never believe what Bo did today! He said this and that to the team, and they were eating it up!" Most of the time, it was about the importance of being a team. Team, team, team. That was something that always stuck with me. It's all about the team. It's something I've applied to my life as a player and a coach, but also as a husband and father.

Team, team, team.

The second time I moved to Ann Arbor was after my dad took a job at Stanford while I was in high school, and we left for Palo Alto. I decided to come back to play football at the University of Michigan.

From what I've experienced — and from what so many people I've talked to have experienced — whether you're going to Michigan, you've just graduated or you graduated 30 years ago, you're happy you went to Michigan. When I was going here, I was so excited to be here. I felt happy. Productive. I never thought of what it would have been like if I had gone somewhere else. After I graduated, it was the same. It just felt like this was where I was supposed to go. It didn't feel right to go anywhere else at the time, and to this day, I can't picture having gone anywhere else.

I've talked to a lot of people who feel that way about Michigan — and I've talked to a lot of other people who feel that way about their college, too. It happens everywhere. You probably feel that way about where you went to college.

But in my unscientific surveying of people I've talked to, I feel that it happens the most here at Michigan.

Which is why finally, I moved to Ann Arbor a third time. To be the head football coach.

A lot of people outside of Michigan asked me why I decided to make that third move to Ann Arbor. It's pretty simple: I love football. I love coaching. I love Michigan. And for me, there's no better place for those three things than right here in Ann Arbor.

Having moved as often as I did when I was young, to be able to come back here and actually see my kids going to the same schools I went to, and experiencing things for the first time that I remember experiencing myself, feels good. Seeing them experience The Big House. Going to dad's office. Going to the same Dairy Queen I went to.

A lot of people probably have those kinds of memories from the places they grew up. I have my fondest here in Ann Arbor, the place I stayed the longest as a kid and that left the biggest impact on me. I have so much gratitude to the University of Michigan and to the people I've met who've shaped how I think in a very positive way. I can't think of any place in the world I'd rather be.

Who's got it better than us?

No-body.

