



[Comments](#)  2 | [Recommend](#)  1

Patton: This dad's heart aches

 [Download story podcast](#)

11:19 AM PST on Tuesday, November 25, 2008

By **GREGG PATTON**
The Press-Enterprise

KENOSHA, WIS. - I read recently that Wayne Gretzky said one of his greatest joys was watching his son play baseball.

I always liked Gretzky. Now I find out we're in the same club: Parents Who Love To Watch.

Maybe even a little too much.

But for the millions of you out there who ever skipped out of work early, turned down a golf weekend or got up at 4 a.m. to drive 200 miles to watch a 10-year-old kick a soccer ball or shoot a basketball or swim 50 meters, maybe you can relate.

It is Saturday and I have traveled halfway across the country to watch the NAIA Cross Country Championships. It is not work. It is strictly a personal indulgence. On the roster of the Cal State San Marcos women's team is a 22-year-old senior named Whitney who likes to shop, go to the beach and run long distances.

She is my daughter. I am her father. This is her last race.

I have been watching her play soccer and softball, and run track and cross country for 17 years. I can't believe it is ending.

Twice this has happened. In the same year.

A few months ago, her 18-year-old brother, Zack, finished high school baseball, then offered a closing encore, six weeks of summer ball.

On a Monday night in July, in the final inning of a lost tourney championship game, there was a final base hit, a final turn at first base and -- a couple of outs later -- a final jog off the field.

He gathered his stuff in the dugout. I patted his back.

"Nice game," I said, meaning something much bigger, but not knowing what else to say. And that was that.

What I have now are simply pictures in my head. In the same way that ESPN archives its major league baseball, NBA and NFL highlights, I have mine stowed away, too.

I close my eyes and I conjure them up. A line drive in the gap, my kid standing at second base. A dive for a soccer ball and a header in the back of the net. Comfort thoughts. Daydreams.

I will leave other moments on the cutting room floor.

I have an archive for his sister, too. I always see her running. Even when she played soccer, my favorite visions weren't of goals or leading passes, just her running, with braids bouncing or ponytails streaming, but always strong legs shooting her forward.

Other parents, with older kids, always told me to savor these times. Believe me, I have. But, still, where did they go?

People ask if I am suffering from Empty Nest Syndrome, with both kids out of the house. I say not at all. It doesn't bother me that when I come home there are no dirty dishes in the sink, no laundry scattered, no lights left burning.

What I suffer from is Empty Sports Schedule Syndrome.

I admit some of us are a bit kooky about this, the glow we get from watching our kids perform, compete and play, succeeding or faltering, it doesn't matter.

Once I drove Whitney to a soccer tournament in Lancaster. After the first match, I drove 90 miles home to Zack's Little League game that night, and then 90 miles back to Lancaster for an 8 a.m. soccer match the next day. No, I didn't have my head examined.

We've seen it all, of course, in our house. The joy of victory, the agony of sitting on a bench. They've earned their trophies and photos, and newspaper clips and ego boosts. They've suffered the inevitable disappointments. The tears and anger, hurt feelings and bitter pills.

I wouldn't want to have missed any of it. I am only sorry that I couldn't see it all, as much as I tried.

And so here we are.

I am standing in a park in Wisconsin where the running path comes out of the woods, about 200 yards from the finish line. I wait there for Whitney. I am lined up with other parents, students, teammates and coaches. As she approaches in a stream of competitors, I start yelling, "Way to go, Whit! Go hard, go hard! All the way in!"

Later she will say she heard me, and that she ran hard because I was there. I hope it's true.

More than a month ago we were talking casually about her training, and the few remaining meets.

She stopped and looked at me with the same face I remember from her toddler days, at the movies, when she would always cry at the end -- not because of a sad ending, but just because there was no more story.

"Dad," she said. "I don't want it to be over."

Neither do I, kid. More than you can imagine. Neither do I.

Reach Gregg Patton at 951-368-9597 or gpatton@PE.com
