What are your memories of high school?

I was sent to Bergen Catholic for high school beginning in September, 1967. Going to an all-male Catholic high school in the late 1960s was a fairly standard experience for boys coming out of Catholic grammar schools. To me it seemed like my going to a Catholic prep school was pre-ordained. I had been told repeatedly by my mother and others in her family that Lodi High School was a substandard place to get an education, particularly for people who wanted to get into a decent college (and I had been told for my entire life that I was going to college). In addition, I had never attended a public school in my life, having been in a Catholic grammar school since kindergarten.

So when it came time to apply to high schools, I chose to apply to Bergen Catholic, Don Bosco and the recently-opened Paramus Catholic. I was particularly intrigued by Paramus Catholic because it was co-institutional. That meant that although classes would be all-male, the campus and activities would be co-educational. For me that simply meant maintaining the status quo. I had always been in a co-ed school. Going to an all-male school would be a radical change.

I took the entrance exam and was accepted into all three. I ended up choosing Bergen Catholic mostly because of knowing upperclassmen there. My two cousins Bob and Marty were already at Bergen Catholic and seemed to like it. Despite its lure of “almost co-education,” Paramus Catholic was a brand-new school, and that raised risks of not only the school not attracting the best teachers, but also not having a reputation with college admissions folks like Bergen Catholic did. Bergen Catholic had a 99% college acceptance rate. If you went there, you were going to get into college somewhere. And it had been made clear to me that the only reason I was going to a college preparatory school was to get into the best college I could.

Now I should mention that there was a dissenting voice in all this. My father was a member of the Lodi High School class of 1936, its first graduating class. He saw the school as perfectly adequate. In addition, not being particularly religious (despite a VERY religious mother) he was leery of continuing Catholic education for another four years (“hasn’t he had enough of that!”). Finally, there was the cost. As I was going through the high school admissions process, my father was going through the process of learning he had a terminal illness that would kill him before the end of that year. Although the $350 annual tuition at Bergen Catholic was very modest, I think he knew that he might not be around to earn that money, and he didn’t want to leave my mother with that expense. I learned later from my mother that to ease his mind, she had told him that if the cost became impossible, she could always transfer me to Lodi High School. As it turned out, the Bergen Catholic Father’s Club just happened to have a scholarship that paid 100% of the remaining tuition for any boy whose father dies while attending the school. So I ended up going there for free. But we didn’t know that while my father was alive.

Going to an all-male prep school back then was very different from the public school experience. First, there was a dress and appearance code. We had to wear a jacket and tie every day. The jacket and tie had to be on at all times except in gym. No facial hair was allowed. And in an era when long hair was very much in style, we could not have hair that covered our ears. When we complained about these military-like requirements, we were told, “If you don’t like it, go to public school.”

The attitude at Bergen Catholic was very much one of superiority to public school. We were told that we were the future executives and leaders of the nation. The school flaunted its status as elite, and promised us all a life of privilege if we just followed the rules.

One example of the mindset at my high school was the fact that, unlike at just about every public high school at the time, there was nothing as practical as shop class at Bergen Catholic. They didn’t even offer a class to develop a skill that would become very important in a few years when the personal computer was introduced -- typing. When I asked why, I was told that as executives we would have secretaries who would type for us. We just had to learn to dictate.

My first semester of freshman year was a difficult transition from grammar school. The Irish Christian Brothers were not into the sympathetic hand-holding that the nuns had offered in grammar school. The brothers expected us to be responsible young men. Unlike the simple punishments of the nuns like writing some phrase 50 times or standing in the corner, the Irish Christian Brothers believed in corporal punishment. It was not unusual for misbehaving boys to be grabbed by the tie and pushed up against a wall, shoved to the ground or even punched in the face. And again when we complained, the answer was “You don’t like it, leave.” It was as if we were the raw recruits, and they were the drill sergeants trying to toughen us up. There was no crying in an Irish Catholic Brothers high school.

Misbehaving came in many different forms, from not wearing a tie on a hot day to a fistfight in the bathroom. I knew one chemistry nerd who decided to drop sodium into a toilet to watch it explode. He got detention for a month.

After a short time most of us learned to stay out of trouble. Those who didn’t stay out of trouble got detention, called “jug” after the Latin “sub **jug**em,” which was the Roman term for a prisoner (literally “under the yoke.”). Jug was always after school or, in extreme cases, on Saturday. It sometimes involved merely sitting silently in a classroom for an hour or two with your hands folded in front of you. But many times it involved what would accurately be characterized as slave labor. Whatever physical task need to be done around the school, boys in jug were available to do it. It could be pulling weeds, picking up garbage or cleaning the toilets. The idea was to show you the life you might have if you left the college prep path your parents had put you on.

In keeping with the army basic training feel of the place, gym was a rigorous mix of grueling calisthenics and competitive sports. I was never much interested in playing sports (other than baseball), so gym was especially torturous for me. Freshmen got gym in first period. So we would no sooner arrive at school than we were in the locker room changing into our uniform gym suits. After sweating for an hour, we would shower and then be off for our second period class. I found out after the first year that I could get out of gym by going to the band room instead. All it required was that the band director was there during the period I had gym. I never had another gym class again after freshman year.

I should mention that I joined the band as soon as I started high school. I had been in a garage band when I was in eighth grade and was still taking guitar lessons my freshman year. But since the high school band did not need a guitarist, I had to learn a new instrument. I had been a big fan of the music of Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass after their “Whipped Cream and Other Delights” album came out two years earlier. So my first choice was the trumpet. Fortunately, the band needed trumpet players and I was sent off with Brother McPadden, an Irish Christian Brother who had learned to play the trumpet after falling in love with the sound of Bunny Berigan a few decades earlier.

Since I already knew how to read music, all I had to learn was how to get those notes out of a trumpet. Brother McPadden was very patient with me and the two other boys he tutored. Soon I was playing well enough to join the band. That meant marching in uniform at all the home football games. We played lots of Sousa as well as the alma mater of Bergen Catholic (“Lead on Bergen Catholic High”) that had been written a few years earlier by the band director, Mr. Obrotka. We played that after every touchdown. But our most popular tune was Bert Kaempfert’s “A Swinging Safari.” When the clarinets started that song, the crowd would almost always give a cheer. The song was used on the popular TV game show “The Match Game,” so everyone knew it at the time.

Little did I know that when I joined the band, I had joined one of the high school cliques that would thereafter define me to my classmates. Like most high schools, there were the jocks and the nerds and even the theater kids. But I was now a band geek. High school then was, and probably is to this day, about pigeonholes. Very few were the people who could cross over from one pigeonhole to another. I knew one kid who was a track star and also was in the band, but that was very unusual.

Letter sweaters were a status symbol at a jock school like Bergen Catholic. You could get a “letter,” which in this case was a big interlocking BC in the school colors, by being on any of the major varsity sports teams. The letter featured a little indicator of what sport you played (usually the ball involved). But incredibly enough, you could also get one for being in the band. It came with an image of a musical lyre in the middle where the athletes had footballs and baseballs. No band member ever wore a band letter because if any of the jocks saw you wearing a sweater with a letter for band, they would ridicule you and rip the letter off the sweater.

Jocks were the kings of the campus at Bergen Catholic. I think that’s as true today as it was then.

When I went to my 50th class reunion a few years ago I got to see how the jocks turned out. Many of them were trial lawyers; others were surgeons. A surprising number were career salesmen. But I think the most interesting thing is that the reunion was attended by a larger percentage of jocks than any of the other social groups. It seemed like they all wanted to return to the days when they were kings. Their talk was about games gone by and locker room pranks. I was the lone former band member there. I quickly remembered what it was like to be the low man in the hierarchy.

I survived high school because of being in the band. But it was not a great experience for me. I felt out of place in a school where the most important thing was sports. It was a high testosterone environment that was probably even worse for the gay guys. The fact that there were no girls there was also very damaging to my teen social development. There just was no easy way to meet girls at Bergen Catholic at that time. I lived 10 miles away and there was no social life there for me. I didn’t go to my senior prom. Many of the guys who did go went with neighbors, cousins and even sisters. The absence of girls at Bergen Catholic created a toxic male atmosphere that could not have existed if the school was co-educational. I saw that for myself a few years later when my college went from all-male to co-ed in my sophomore year. But that’s a story for another time.