

## The Backyard

Some definitions:

**Maturity:** Postponement of immediate gratification for future gratification.

**Gratification:** Many times parents find their fullest satisfaction through the success of their children.

When we moved to Saint Albans, West Virginia, we knew we were going into a great neighborhood. We bought an older house with a huge, fenced, backyard that fronted a park with a lake. The backyard had two large trees that offered deep shade throughout most of the summer day. The neighborhood was an old "Union Carbide" subdivision. Second generations were moving back into the subdivision to raise their own children where they were raised. We knew there were lots of children the age of ours up and down our block.

Our kids were young; Pat was 5, Ben was 4, and Katie was 2 years old. Next door, the George's had a household of kids: Aaron George was Pat's age, Andrew George was Ben's age, and Ashley George was just a little younger than KT. Across the street, The Onda's had Nikki, who was KT's age. Also across the street were the Drummers; Rusty was Pat's age and Alyssa was also just a little younger than KT. Adjacent to our house was an entire neighborhood of kids, all ready to play their childhood away in our backyard and in the park.

What a place to raise children! Six kids the age of ours as neighbors. We had the lake in a park just out my backyard. There was fishing, a playground, a baseball backstop, basketball courts, large grass areas, and hundreds of ducks to feed just through our fence gate. With the park just out our backyard, who would have thought that my fenced-in backyard would become the neighborhood playground?

I have always been a man who likes a nice stand of grass. With fertilizer, water, and careful mowing/trimming, you can make a yard look good in just one season. That is exactly what I did to my new yard in Saint Albans. I poured the fertilizer and weed kill on and we had a good year of rain. By the end of the next summer, I had an excellent lawn. By carefully mowing the lawn in absolutely straight lines, and criss-crossing the mowing pattern every time it was mowed, I had a lawn worthy of a major league baseball infield.

The lawn was perfect for the occasional game of pitch and catch or wiffle ball batting practice with my very young kids. They were still too young to be in any organized sports. So, once or twice a week we would run barefooted across the thick and luxurious carpet of bright green grass as we played tag or baseball or kickball. The lawn was perfect for such duty.

I had an old boss, Billy D Moore (once the Maintenance Manager at the Olin, Charleston, TN, plant) come visit me on business that fall. We cooked out in the back yard and he really fired me up when he said, "Fred, you've got this yard looking great." The next day, I started talking to my wife about installing a yard sprinkling system.

Let me tell you about wives and yards. Wives really don't care a hill of beans about the yard when compared to other things. "Install a new sprinkler system, sure honey, as long as you have..." (here, you insert a list of everything your wife has ever wanted and that you will never get done or be able to afford). In fact, I can't remember my wife ever playing on the lawn, let alone in bare feet. Nobody can really enjoy perfect grass until they have walked on it in bare feet or played golf on it. I guess wives don't do those types of activities.

So, even though the idea of installing a sprinkler system did not fly, I knew that I could continue to improve the lawn. Remember, fertilizer, weed kill, pesticides applied before dry weather, and rain always would make it look better. If I had to, I could always hook up a hose to a sprinkler.

My wife seemed to enjoy having me around for those first two seasons. I had to be around because I was sometimes mowing the lawn three times a week. She would shake her head and smile that knowing smile wives can show, as I would say "Gotta go down to the 7-11 and get more gas for the lawnmower".

Then, my idyllic lawn growing days started slipping away. My children stated participating in organized sports like baseball and soccer. My backyard became the playground of choice because it had a chain link fence that was perfect for serving as the homerun fence or keeping the soccer ball in play.

The problem started slowly. A few kids would show up and start playing soccer in the back yard. Cleats did not appear on their feet yet, so, the lawn seemed to hold up alright to the occasional game. It was an insidious road towards lawn dysfunction; a trap to lure me into giving up on the lawn. How could I know that a few games in the backyard would eventually develop into a family and neighborhood crisis?

The problem really stated surfacing as the children got bigger. They also started wearing cleats while playing soccer on the lawn ("Geeze, Dad, my feet slip and it helps me beat the other guy."). We soon had an escalation of soccer cleats; essentially a cleat war. In fact, it became apparent that any kid stepping on my lawn had to wear the biggest and deepest cutting cleats that could be found. ("Mom, can I go over to the Paschall's? Yes, hon, just make sure you wear those new cleats we got

you.”) I would look out into the back yard and see clumps of my turf flying up in the air as a dozen pair of cleated soccer shoes (24 lawn chewing, mud churning, toe-dragging, earth gouging feet) cut, weave, and (most horribly) slide tackle on my precious lawn.

My kids seemed to miss the warning signs. At first, I would ask them “why can’t you play in the park?” Then, it graduated to “you need to take a week off playing in the back yard to let the grass recover”. My wife saw it coming; “come on Fred, let them play in our yard”. The straw that broke the father’s back occurred when I came home after a day of rain and found the entire, cleated, city of Saint Albans playing soccer in my back yard. Do you know what happens to a soccer field when it is played on while soaked? The field can be ruined in one day of play. Well, that is what was happening to my back yard. By the time I found them in the back yard, the lawn was ruined. What was I to do?

I did what any father would do, I blew my top. I screamed at them, “**What in the world are you kids doing to my lawn?**” Almost all of the young faces looked up at me, surprised at my violent display of wrath. It made me even madder because I could tell that not one of them had the slightest idea what I was screaming about. We were living on different worlds. In their world, there was no comprehension that I would want to take care of the lawn. In their world, they were just playing soccer. In their world, they had to listen to me because I was a parent, but, they did not have the slightest idea what was wrong with them playing soccer in my back yard.

My kids knew. They weren’t looking up at me. They hung their heads; either because they were embarrassed by my tantrum or they understood that I did not want my lawn tore up and they allowed it to happen. To this day, I hope and pray it was the latter.

I looked daggers at the insidious herd of lawn destroyers. I instinctively knew I was at a threshold of neighborhood relations, but, I didn’t care. I screamed at them, “**Look at what you have done to my lawn. You get off my lawn, right now. There will be no more soccer played in my backyard. All of you go home, right now**”.

My anger was so apparent, so intimidating, that there was not a whisper of disagreement. There was just a quiet (if careful) shuffling as they left the back yard.

For a week or two, the backyard was silent and empty. The damage to the lawn would take a year to fix, but at least more damage was not being inflicted. My wife had not reproached me for my decision, but, I could tell she was not happy with it. Later, I was to find out that several of the parents had heard about and discussed the incident. Kathy Onda once told me “I thought you would never let another kid in your back yard”.

I wear the pants in my family until Jeanne tells me to take them off. She let me have my way for a week or so, then she started bringing the subject back up. “Why can’t the kids play in our back yard?” “I like knowing where my kids are and what they are doing.” “You can have a nice lawn after the kids have left the house.” “People can’t see the back yard, why are you worried about how the lawn looks like back there?” Finally, she told me, “Let the kids play soccer back there. You have a life time after they are gone to grow your stupid grass. Now is the only time you can let them play in their own back yard. The joy you will get over their pleasure, of watching them grow up in your own yard, will be much greater than the joy of a nice lawn. You need to give the back yard to them. You can keep the front yard for yourself.”

So, I took my pants off and abdicated to the wishes of my wife, my children, and the numberless horde of Saint Albans kids who seemed to like tearing up my backyard more than destroying their own. I said, “Alright, I’ll let them play soccer in the rain with cleats on in our backyard. We can watch them grow up with chunks of our turf in their teeth. I’ll let them plow it up and plant it in weeds if that makes you happy. They can tear it up so much that I won’t even have to mow it. They can do to it what they like: I don’t care anymore.”

So, as I predicted, the lawn went to hell, but a strange thing happened to the kids. **They got good at soccer.**

KT and Nikki started playing traveling soccer with a team they stayed with for 6-8 years. They also played high school soccer together. KT was a quiet, analytical, playing machine. She would just grind the opponents up. Nikki was an extraverted, dynamic, ball of energy. She would mouth off to the opponents, then break their hearts with speed and skill. Their high school coach was Chester Wojcik. Chester was not extremely savvy about the details of soccer, but, he understood motivation, teamwork, and sticking to principles. With KT and Nikki anchoring the team, and his innate ability to get good performance out of all of his players, his high school teams did very well.

I can remember going to practice and watching Nikki argue with Chester. She would disagree with something he wanted to have done and would end up almost in tears after fighting with him in front of the entire team. Chester just egged her on, and eventually would win his point. But, I saw him clench his jaws many a time as he put up with the Onda mouth.

As seniors, KT and Nikki were named to the first team, all state, soccer squad. KT was named her conference player of the year. Nikki played a season of college soccer at Concord College. After watching her two older brothers do poorly academically while playing college athletics, KT decided not to play soccer in college. Both feel that the soccer in the

backyard, against older boys, was what launched their soccer careers. *Two first team all state soccer players and a conference player of the year came out of my back yard. A women's college soccer player came out of my backyard.*

To my delight, just this spring I found out that Nikki had coached the Nitro High School girl's soccer team with Kim Spencer (another traveling teammate who was the head coach at Nitro). In 2008, their team won the WV girl's state soccer tournament. *A WV girl's state championship soccer team came out of my backyard!*

Patrick Paschall played college soccer at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs (UCCS) for several seasons. Pat and Ben Paschall both played college basketball at UCCS. Aaron George played four years of college soccer at King's College. His brother, Andrew George, played four years of college basketball at Covenant College (on top of Lookout Mountain in TN.) *Two college soccer players and three college basketball players came out of my backyard.*

Aaron George went on to coach both the girls and boys soccer teams at Trinity Christian High School in Dublin, Georgia. In 2008, his girl's team took 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the state tournament of the Georgia Independent School Association's Div II. In 2009, his boy's team took first place in the state tournament in their division. Because of this, Aaron also was named the GISA high school soccer coach of the year for both years. *A GA girl's state soccer runner-up, a GA boy's state championship soccer team, and a soccer coach of the year came out of my backyard.*

Most importantly, Ashley George met her husband-to-be at a soccer game. *Weddings came out of my backyard!*

The results of my sacrifice is so outstanding I just have to list them again:

1. Two, high school, first team, all state, girl's soccer players came out of my sacrifice.
2. A high school conference player of the year came from me giving up on having backyard lawn.
3. A women's college soccer player came out of my sacrifice.
4. A WV, girl's, high school, state championship soccer team was a result of skills developed on my muddy lawn..
5. Two college men's soccer players came out of my demolished backyard.
6. Three college men's basketball players came out of my ruined backyard.
7. A Georgia, girl's, state championship runner-up soccer team was a result of Aaron eating turf out of my back yard.
8. A Georgia, boy's, state championship soccer team was results of me letting Jeanne give up my backyard.
9. A GISA soccer coach of the year came out of the dirt and mud of my backyard.
10. Ashley George's love for soccer started in my demolished back yard. Because of my sacrifice, she met her husband at a soccer game.

Of course, God, and their parents, may have influenced these results. But let's face it, the backyard was the incubator; the catalyst, the beginning. One man's sacrifice, and the loving advice of his wife, helped all this happen.

That is the way it was, because that is the way I remember it.

**Post Note:** Kathy Onda watched in bemusement as I rolled, laughing, on her living room carpet. I could not stop laughing. I laughed so hard I was crying. I laughed so hard that if I was a woman, I would have peed my pants. What strange occurrence caused such merriment?

Nikki had just told me that, while coaching her Nitro, HS team, she had had problems with mouthy players who would not listen to her. In desperation, she called up Chester to ask his advice. Why not, he had learned how to handle Nikki, maybe he could give her hints on how to handle her problem kids?

As Coach Wojcik use to say, "That Nikki has the Pittsburg attitude..."

Fred Paschall, 12/09

#### **Christmas Essays:**

2009 – "The Backyard". A satirical history about a man's sacrifice.

2008 – "Loving in Middle America (LIMA)". A satirical travelogue about lovely Lima..

2007 – "What Does Notre Dame Football and Old Friends Have to Do With It?" An essay about personal principles.

2006 – "A Cal Brown Story from Fred's Perspective". A humorous essay about how a boss nailed me.