

Let the Club Do the Work

By Dan Boyts

My father liked to drink. He wasn't what I would call an alcoholic; he didn't get up in the morning and immediately go for the bottle, but at one or two o'clock in the afternoon, he left our family business and went to the local Elk's Lodge to play Hearts and drink with his buddies. His favorite was Old Charter and Seven-up, and he could make a pretty big dent in a bottle if he had half a mind to, but that wasn't often. He was one of the best card players in his circle, and used to school the younger guys in the art of bluffing. After he died, I was amazed at how many people told me how much they admired him, and how many told me stories about him taking their money. Later, I found out he was playing cards to pay the bills because the family business wasn't doing that well.

I didn't think I was quite the son my father wanted me to be until the end. I wasn't very athletic. He was a basketball star in a small town high school and broke his leg in a car accident, which ended his career. That didn't stop him from being a fairly good golfer and fisherman. He wanted me to be athletic too, but I was never very good at athletics. I tried to play basketball. Like he had. But I just wasn't very good at it. He built me a goal at the side of the driveway to practice on, but the friends that helped him build it, constructed it a foot taller than regulation. That didn't help my game.

I wasn't very good at baseball either. When I was young, I played on a Little League team. We were always in last place. I was generally stuck out in left field where I could do the least damage. My father took me to a St. Louis Cardinal's baseball game, but I was more interested in the concessions than the game, and constantly begged for treats and souvenirs. He didn't take me again. I wish I would have been a little older when we went to the game. I wish I

could remember the game. It would have been a great story. They didn't win the pennant that year, but they did the next year. The souvenir ball contained the signatures of Bob Gibson, Orlando Cepeda, Curt Flood, Tim McCarver, Mike Shannon, and Lou Brock, but the girl next door took it and left it out in the rain. It wasn't worth much after that.

We had several boats when I was growing up and I could drive the boat years before I could ever drive a car. It was fun out there on the lake being in control. I would take the younger kids out skiing when I wasn't on the water myself. I wasn't too bad at water skiing. I used to spend hours on the lake jumping waves and leaning out over the water, tugging on the rope to get the maximum speed possible, throwing a rooster tail up from behind. My favorite was a faded green fishing boat with a walk-through windshield and a Johnson outboard motor.

It wasn't really a ski boat, not in the sense of a v-hull and a loading platform, but we made do. It was in fact my dad's bass boat that he used in fishing tournaments. It had the added benefit that he brought home lots of good meals for me and my family. The boat was low and quick, plenty of spunk to get you out of the water quick, and fast enough for kids in their teens or younger. I would have liked to have gone faster, though. I loved the speed and the feeling of being free on the water. With the wind blowing through my hair, and the spray coming up from the ski cutting through the water, I could imagine I was on another continent, or at least in another state of mind.

I enjoyed going camping with him, it was like being somewhere else too. Away from school and the noise of the city. Peaceful, mostly. I remember all the camping trips we took when I was younger. He and his friends would fish for our dinner, and their wives would sit around the camp and gossip or look after the younger kids. It was right out of a Norman Rockwell painting with the picnic tables covered in red-checkered tablecloths. They were filled

with potato salad, potato chips, and pickles, green Coleman coolers full of beer, and red Coca-Cola coolers full of soda pop and ice. There was always laughter and smiles, kids running wild everywhere, something that I missed later as I grew up and faced the realities of the world. When I got older, I went camping a lot. My friends thought I was crazy for bringing so much gear when I camped, but I always had plenty for everyone and we always had a good time.

He took me to the golf course with him, but I wasn't old enough to play with him and his friends. They played for money. He didn't want any distractions, so he would leave me at the putting green to chip and putt. I wasn't that good of a golfer for many years, but I had a helluva short game. When I got older he took me with him. We went to all the area golf courses to play. Public and private, large and small, good and bad. One day when we were on one of our outings with some of his Elks buddies, he told me to "stop swinging so hard and let the club do the work." As I followed his advice, I was amazed at how much better I played when I wasn't trying so hard.

As I look back, these were some of my favorite times with my dad. We would go to different golf courses around the area, tell stories, and give each other a hard time about our games. I even won a few holes occasionally. But not too many. I got the chance to see my dad with his friends instead of the stickler that he was at home and work. I became a pretty good golfer at one point, but it was too late to show him how much I had improved. The golf course was sort of a retreat for Dad and me, a place where we could get away from work and home and responsibilities to enjoy nature.

The game was secondary to the enjoyment of fresh air, trees, green grass, and the song of birds. We didn't talk much when we were there. There wasn't much to say. We could just see the look of contentment on each other's faces. He wasn't around much when I was growing up, so

this was a special time. He was always traveling for business, or hunting and fishing with his friends, or playing in a golf tournament somewhere. When he was home he was always tired from traveling and so he slept a lot. My mother sent me in to wake him one time with my toy trumpet. I didn't try to wake him again. At least not with the trumpet. That's what made the golfing trips so special. We were making up for lost time.

After I graduated from high school, my father bought a greenhouse. I wasn't really into plants or gardening at the time, but I didn't have anything else to do, so I agreed to help. I learned the business from the bottom up and became a pretty good horticulturist. Good enough to make my way in other cities as I traveled around the country. The family business gave me the opportunity to travel all over the country playing music and trying to live a dream that would never materialize. I wasn't willing to sacrifice everything or to be at the mercy of an agent or record company. Fame isn't all it's cracked up to be. If I knew I was going to be in a place for a while, I would go to the local greenhouse and get a job as an assistant manager, or a supervisor of some sort. No matter where I was, I always came back to my hometown and the family. It was a security blanket. I was always grateful that he gave me the opportunity to follow my dream, even if it wasn't his. Maybe it was.

I always did better when I was away from my parents, when I was traveling around the country. We were always nice to each other and more concerned about each other when I was a long way from home. Not like when I was around for a while. We would argue constantly. A habit I learned as I was growing up. There were a lot of nights I went to sleep listening to my parents yell at each other as a child. It became a habit that wasn't easy to break when we bought our business and decided to work with each other in close quarters every day. It was much easier to be somewhere else. Somewhere that made us miss each other and want to be together.

One winter when I was home helping Pop run the business, there had been a blizzard the night before and we were clearing the drive for our customers. A lady pulled in and became stuck in the driveway. My father tried to tell her to let the car's transmission pull her out, but she insisted on giving it the gas. She spun out and knocked my dad against the side of the building where he hit his head. We didn't think anything about it at first, but as the years went by, we noticed he was losing the use of his right side. It didn't happen right away. It was a slow process. His doctors performed all the tests they could think of to diagnose the problem, but there was never any indication of what the cause could be. It was many years before we discovered that this incident was the start of his problems. We would have never discovered the cause of his deterioration if it hadn't been for his drinking.

He contracted diabetes from the sugar in the whiskey and it had caused some issues with his extremities. It wasn't the kind of diabetes that makes you take insulin shots, it was manageable with pills, but stabbing his fingers made them tender and sore. This would have probably not been as much of a problem if he would have stopped drinking, but he liked his whiskey. One of his few indulgences. He quit smoking cigarettes years before. In this case, he was having problems with the circulation in his feet and toes. The doctors were talking about removing the tips of his toes to avoid decomposition. I have never seen him so adamant about anything, even when I screwed up, and there had been plenty of occasions that he was. He was determined not to have the surgery. There was no way he was going to let the doctors start taking a piece of him at a time. Whittling him down to nothing, little by little.

I admired my father immensely until the end, and generally tried to make him proud of me. When will we learn that we have to find success in ourselves and not through someone else's eyes? However, it was then that I discovered he was also weak and afraid. I always thought he

was such a strong and accomplished man. He hid his feelings well. Nevertheless, here he was in the hospital, talking about things I didn't really want to hear, and asking me to bring him some whiskey. I wanted to help him; to take his place if I could, but I knew there was nothing I could do except be there for him. I did bring him some Old Charter one day, but it had been so long since he had a drink, he had lost the taste for it. I was glad. He died shortly after the Fourth of July that year. He told me to go and enjoy the fireworks at my friend's house in the country. They always have a big party. The holiday wasn't quite the same for many years.

I visited him a lot in the hospital. I didn't like the antiseptic smell, the nondescript rooms, and the odor of sickness in the air, but I wanted to be there with him. He and I had been at odds for most of my life and I wanted to take the opportunity to spend some time with him away from the office. Away from the rest of the family. I sat there in the stiff padded chair watching and listening to the nurses in their brightly colored scrubs buzz around the halls like bees in a hive as we talked about life and adulthood. Among the sounds of the hustle and bustle of the surgery ward, there was a mixture of televisions, blaring at different levels on every channel known to man. Occasionally, an alarm would go off and chaos would ensue.

Even with the commotion, the hospital was a lonely place. People tired from stress and long hours waiting to find out if their worst fears would be realized, if it was just a close call, or if was good news for a change. The tumor was benign. The surgery went well. Occasionally, you would hear the sound that made you realize how short life can be. Being there makes you want to close yourself off from everything around you, and focus on the single room, with the single TV, and the single window that looks out onto the world outside. The real world. Not the dreamlike world of imaginary illnesses and wishful thinking. Being there can suck the life right out of a person.

At night, it was like a ghost town. All shadows and whispers. I would sit in the dark room as my father slept and look out over the city. The lights dotted the surface with their orange glow and the traffic curling through the streets like electric snakes winding across the growing city. Sitting up there, looking down, made me feel small. That people are small. And I was one of them. It made me feel lonely and I prayed that my father would get better and go home.

My dad had lost a lot of weight and it was difficult to sit there with him in the hospital room. He seemed so helpless. Not like I remembered him. He was always so tough and strong. We never really had a chance to get to know one another before. I thought he was a hard-ass, and he thought I believed life was just a party. He was always bailing me out of trouble when I did something stupid. I admit I liked to have fun and go out drinking with my friends, but I was also serious. But when I worked for my dad, I always felt like I was a kid that didn't know what was going on. Always unsure and needy. I remember one time when I was on my way to Topeka, Kansas to help a friend on a construction project, the station wagon I had borrowed from him started acting up. I was so afraid that he would be mad at me for messing up his car, I drove it all the way to Topeka before I stopped. He had to put in a new engine. If I would have just turned around when I first noticed the problem, I could have saved it. And, we wouldn't have been necessary to go back to Kansas to pick it up. He never did get mad at me.

The thing is, I learned to party from him. Well, he and the fraternity. And the band. Before we owned our own business he was one of the top managers in a snack food company. There were always people around. It was the days of company parties and social events. Large gatherings of people who worked together and played together. One huge, happy, extended family. I remember sitting under the table full of punch bowls, cookies, and appetizers at Christmas time, hiding behind the green or red tablecloths draped halfway to the floor. Listening

to the jokes and the laughter. Listening to all the stories. Listening to Christmas songs on the phonograph. Wishing I could be part of it, but I was too young. Instead, I hid there, sneaking half-drunk cocktails, home-made eggnog and hot buttered rum from the table above. I learned to love entertaining. It gave me a sense of belonging. When I rented my first house, it was always filled with people, drinking and telling stories. I wanted to be just like him. So I partied.

The surgery turned out to be somewhat of a blessing, because in the process they discovered that when he had hit his head, it had chipped a tiny piece of bone on the inside of his skull. As it calcified over the years, little by little, it had been putting pressure on his brain, which had been causing the loss of function in his right side. When they went in to operate, and removed the protrusion, he immediately regained the function in his arms and legs. We couldn't believe that for all those years the solution was so simple. Why didn't the doctors find it before? Why did it take so long?

We all thought it was a miracle and were hopeful that he would make a full recovery to become active again. But then there were complications. When they went in the second time to fix whatever the problem was a few days later, he died on the operating table and they had to resuscitate him. This caused him to be placed on life support. At the time, the doctors felt there was a chance of recovery and I remember getting into a huge fight with my sister over whether to let him go, or to wait and see. A wound that didn't heal for many years, but I wanted to give my once strong, athletic father the chance to survive. And a chance to continue our talks. I was just getting started. Just getting to know him, the real him.

When the doctors told me there was very little chance he would survive without the help of the life support apparatus, we let him go. I knew he wouldn't want to live that way. In fact, there had been a "do not resuscitate" order that the doctors had either failed to notice, or ignored.

My mother had not been very happy when they called us in the middle of the night to come back to the hospital so they could tell us what had happened. As they pulled the tubes from his throat, I held his hand and he expired. There has never been a time I have felt so helpless or sad, or scared. I have experienced the death of friends and family many times in my life, and I always thought I would be ready for another family member going to the great beyond, but you can never prepare for the death of a parent.

I have never seen much point in going to graves to visit the dead, but I stop by once in a while just to pay my respects. I always felt that people we love never die as long as we remember them. I know that my dad is still there when I need him. To remind me of how to act. To remind me of how to be a man. To remind me that you have to accept the bad to appreciate the good. To remind me of all the times that I know I let him down, now understanding that he loved me anyway. I feel the closest to him on the golf course. Out in the fresh air. Or in a garden working with plants. I spent so many years with him working with plants it just seems natural. It's kind of a habit I guess. Some things just never go away.

He was only sixty-eight years old when he died. As I get closer to that age, I realize just how young that is. I said it was too young at the time, but that was a long time ago. Now, I really know. It turned me into the "man of the family" by default, something I was not ready to be. I still had adventures to take and dreams to follow. No way I could assume the position of strength and immobility. The rock. A rock doesn't move. I move.

I have friends that are nearly that old and most of them seem young and alive, not old and decrepit. They camp and canoe regularly (although I have been noticing they bring more and more of the luxuries from home in their Winnebago instead of a tent and a cooler like back in the day). They live active lives and appear to be in good health. I don't look or feel that old. I don't

get around as quick as I used to, but I try to live a healthy and active life. I wish I had more time to go camping or play golf.

I also know people I went to high school with people that look as old as my eighty year old mother. I don't know what happened to them. They must have a lot of stress in their life to be hunched over and riding electric chairs. Many of them have white hair and health problems; some are dying. Maybe it's from thinking that they are old. I am not old. A lot of the people I ran around with are old too. Or dead. From liver failure or overdoses. All the years of partying didn't treat them as well as they did me.

In the weeks before he died, I finally had a chance to really get to know my dad. You might even say we became friends, sort of. Something that had been a long time coming and something I thought might never happen. Working in a family business, people have differences of opinions and sometimes tempers flare. We still loved each other, but we had different ways of doing things. I was more of a let's spend the money to fix it right, and my dad was more of a bubble gum and coat hanger type of guy. He and I talked about the future of the business and the possibility of selling it among other things.

When I told him I would like to try to continue running the business, he told me "not to put too much into it and know when to walk away." He felt like the days of a small specialty business were numbered and he didn't want me to go down with it. He also told me how proud he was of me and that he had wanted to tell me for a long time but didn't know how. That was something I had been wanting to hear for a long time as well. I remember we sat in the sterile hospital room with machines and tubes while we talked. The TV was blaring from the room next door. Nurses in pale blue scrubs would buzz past from room to room through the mixture of sickness and dying smells that are found in any hospital. I stopped paying attention. I was getting

used to it. I wish he could have died at home, or better yet, on the golf course. I ran the business for three years after he passed.

This was the first time my dad had ever told me he was proud of me or that he felt like I was accomplished at anything. He was usually riding me about being better and getting things done faster. "Time is money." I still hear him in my head once in a while giving me a hard time about one thing or the other. But telling me he knew I could run the business was different, it made me even more determined to keep the business going. I don't think I really took time to grieve, I was so busy trying to live up to the promise I made to my dying father.

I managed all of the technical aspects of the company well. All the timing of crops, the changes in fertilizer, and all the record-keeping were no problem. However, I experienced the revolving door of mediocre employees just as he had predicted, and ended up doing most of the work myself. One season I worked 140 hours a week to get the crop finished. That doesn't count the times the alarm system woke me up in the middle of the night and I had to go check to see if the boilers were working or if someone had broken in. I did catch someone one night, but I ran out of the house too fast and all I was wearing were my pajamas. It wasn't a very fair fight. I was lucky he didn't have a gun. The police came after he was gone.

In our last season, word got around that we were closing after about a hundred years. We were one of the first greenhouses in the area. When it was built, it was out in the country. It ended up in the middle of the city. The newspaper came by to take a picture of our poinsettias. Our last crop. I looked and felt like the walking dead. When my mother insisted on selling the business, I gave in. He was right. I knew it was time. In fact, it might have been just a little past time, but I held on as long as I could. I felt like a failure for a long time until I remembered how

proud my father was of me in those last few days before he died. That has stayed with me as a reminder that not all things are what they seem.

There has not been one day since that I don't think he's still watching out for me. Making sure I don't screw up. I hear his voice in my head often. I even lift my glass to him when I indulge in the rare drink of whiskey. That isn't very often anymore. I'm too busy doing other things. Getting my life in order. A short time ago, I went to the golf course. I hadn't been in several years. As I was playing around the course, I kept hearing my father's voice telling me to "Let the club do the work, son. Swing easy and let the club do the work." I couldn't help but smile at the results. I ended up only a couple of strokes over par for the round. Afterwards, I went to the clubhouse for a drink.