

The Cost of Admission - 1989

A few weeks before cross country camp my freshman year I found out that I was going to be one of only two freshman to attend camp that season. The other was my classmate Mark Byland. Mark was *that* kid in my grade. You know the one. The one who was effortlessly good at whatever he tried. In fact Mark was the best at everything. He was both the Bo Jackson and the Bill Gates of our grade. Through primary and middle school Mark's athletic achievements were only outshined by his academic ones. In high school Mark would go on to become both the homecoming king and the valedictorian of our class. Mark and I had both been recruited onto the Middle School Cross Country Team by Coach Parkhurst who discovered that he and I were the only two kids in 7th grade to break 6 minutes for the timed mile in gym class. One of us had run a 5:40 while the other a 5:41. If you're wondering which time Mark ran then you haven't been paying attention.

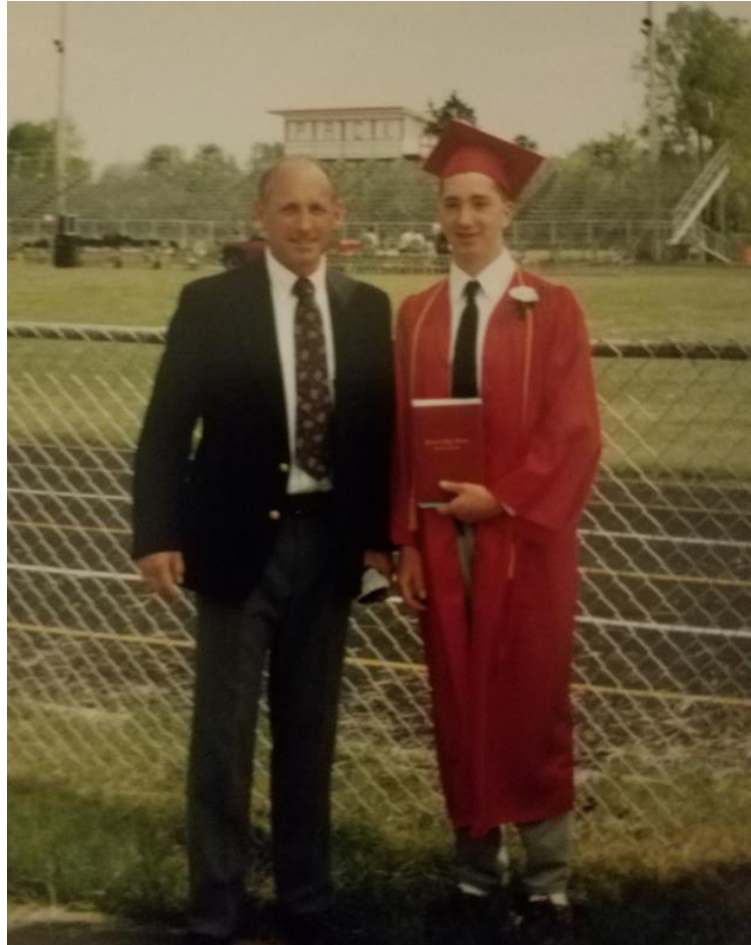
Mark and I were friends because Mark was friends with everyone. He had a natural humility in the way he carried himself that made him impossible to dislike. This quality was actually Mark's secret weapon as it endeared him to kids like me, disarming those of us who could have otherwise chosen to resent him for all his talents and accomplishments. So anyway, I bumped into Mark at the Chris Cook Memorial Run and he told me that he and I were the only two freshman who were going to be at camp. He went on to say that "they run 100 miles in a week up there"... *and even he looked terrified as he told me this!* None of this excited me either as I suddenly turned green at the thought of going to camp. First, I *knew* that I didn't want to run 100 miles in a week (duh), but then when my adolescent insecurities kicked into gear I found a couple other reasons that I didn't want to go to camp as well. In short, I was afraid of spending a week in the woods with a bunch of older kids and being the youngest, smallest, slowest, weakest little kid in attendance. And also... I was afraid of being the only freshman there who was going to be compared to Mark Byland. I decided that a plan must be hatched.

A week or so later I called Coach Tompkins and told him that I would not be able to attend camp that season. I explained that it was unfortunate, and that I felt badly about it, but I would not be able to go. Coach listened intently and then explained that camp was a valuable addition to the season and that he wanted me to go if it was at all possible. He then asked the reason why I would not be able to go. My options in that moment were to tell Coach Tompkins the truth: That I was afraid of being the youngest, smallest, slowest, weakest little kid in attendance and also that I was afraid of being compared to Mark Byland; or I could give Coach Tompkins another reason that I would not be able to go. Of course, I opted for the latter and I told Coach the only fib that I can ever remember telling him. I told him that I couldn't go to camp because I didn't have enough money to afford it.

I still remember the cost to attend camp that season was set at \$35.00 as much of the overall cost was offset by the Chris Cook race and other fundraisers. I explained that I didn't have, nor did my parents have, the \$35.00 to cover the weeklong expense. Coach thought for a second and then asked, "Is that all?" I said, "Yes it is". I believed that I had given him a fool proof explanation for why I would not be able to go away to camp. In the language of chess, I foolishly believed I had put Coach Tompkins in Checkmate.

Then Coach asked, "What are you doing tomorrow?" Unable to think of a quick retort I said, "Nothing". He said, "**Why don't you come over to my house and mow my lawn and clean my garage... You can work off your cost of admission**". Again caught flat footed I was unable to reply in kind. A man without a move, I reluctantly agreed. The next day I showed up at Coach's house and he worked the snot out of me for the better part of the day.

A week or so later I was sitting on the Pine River somewhere deep in the Manistee. Next to me sat Coach Tompkins, Coach Parkhurst, my friend Mark Byland, and a Cast of Colorful New Teammates that would not only welcome and accept me but also surprise and inspire me. Collectively they would go on to give me a picture of what the high school years could look like for a skinny little kid like me, and meanwhile... Mrs. Coach was sitting at home enjoying her freshly cut lawn and a garage so clean she could've eaten off the floor. Checkmate Indeed!



"Coach Tompkins knew what was best for us. He always managed to stay one step ahead of us, and yet he was always right there by our side."

Dan Rader '93