

Coaching Hope

By Dave McWatters



Coach Rick Edwards

I didn't even notice the old coach when I stepped off the elevator on floor five, Sparrow Hospital.

Passed right by him on my way to his room. When I found room 590 empty, the nurse on duty at the hallway worksta-

tion said, "He's with his daughters by the elevators."

I found Rick with his head bowed, wheelchair facing the sun, beautiful daughter on each side.

Hair matted, yellow, the well-fed paunch now gone. I've seen enough death to know we were looking death's beckon. I've seen enough life to know that his daughters' hands upon his kept him breathing through the morphine drip and the confusion.

"Dad," said Katie. "Mr. McWatters is here."

"Dave, please," I returned her gentle smile. Death doesn't deserve such formalities.

"Dad, do you want to talk here or back in your room?"

Rick's head rose as he made it clear he wanted to go back.

His daughters tucking him back, I sat next to the coach and leaned forward.

Many times over the years Rick and I had talked about sports, politics, religion, arts and the meaning, the deeper meaning, wondering if there was anything true behind it all.

Early after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, I continued our exchange of books with one called, "God's Problem", how do we argue with God when faced with unjust suffering, forget people's usual commonalities and superfi-

cial banalities. Neither one of us has much patience for easy attempts at answers.

He didn't need to speak much. Every wheezing breath caught our shared journey, our mutual questions.

I looked up at one of the pictures – his final girls' swim team surrounding an ill coach, signed by all.

"This year's team?" I asked.

nod of the head.

"Will they remember?" he whispered. A pause for a minute of pain-killer induced fade. Actually, I'm not quite sure of the words used, but we both knew the question.

We wonder if what we do moves into the future, if the years of sacrifice, the pain of loss, the hurt of failure, is somehow matched and possibly even superseded by a life made better, a young person growing into greater wisdom by a word shared, a kid strengthened through his challenges.

The coaching association was going to send flowers. I resisted. Coaches don't want flowers in the end. They want to know if they counted, if it all mattered. The unrecognized hours behind the scenes, the worry, the other things missed.

We settled upon a plaque, the "Michigan Water Polo Association recognizes for years of service . . ."

"Rick, here's something for you." I pulled the plaque out of its wrapping.

Holding it in unsteady hands, I helped him read the engraving.

He held it closer to his chest. "Thanks." A simple word, one not uttered by anyone enough in life, now near death, a



word moving between us.

It's hard to hang on to these moments. He asked how the team was doing. I explained how we had come a long way, how these young men who had failed so often earlier in their athletic careers were now, after so much hard work, conference and district champions, entering the weekend's state tournament as underdogs but ready to make the most out of their opportunity.

He sat up a bit as I talked, following the story, wanting to know how it would turn out.

"I don't know what will happen," I said. "The story isn't over."

We don't know how the story will end, we don't know how a person's life will be different a year, ten years, twenty down the road. We just trust that what we are called to do has meaning. The trust can be a lonely trust, or one held by two friends, saying their goodbyes, taking each breath in hope.

Rick's last article Series for the Journal was entitled **"Mental Guide For High School Swimmers"** and ran in a four part series from the September/October, 2007 issue until the May/June, 2008 issue. His insight and articulation will be most certainly missed.

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