Good Baggage, Bad Baggage

Somewhere between high school graduation and age 35, an interesting thing happened: your life doubled.

Somehow, you turned age 18 so you could vote, age 21 so you could drink, and age 25 so you could rent a car. During this time, "going out to play" took on a radically different meaning. Summer vacation used to last forever in the fourth grade; now your two-week vacation (okay, maybe one week) means that you only check your emails twice a day.

Inevitably, we pick up baggage during these years. I've been working with a young woman recently who's thinking about getting married again at age 29: her fourth marriage, three kids so far, one from each marriage. That, my friends, is baggage.

Sure, we pick up that kind of baggage, but we also pick up other kinds. Drive to your old high school sometime and run up that flight of steps you used to sprint to get to class on time. Did you find yourself out of breath? Baggage! And it's usually the kind that jiggles around your waist.

Hey, I'm not saying that being over 35 is bad at all. In fact, I'll argue over and over again that life is better after 35. In fact, our lives are much better than those under 35. What surprises most people is that I think that the athlete over 35 can beat the under 35 crowd, and not just on the athletic field either. For the record, how many lovely young women really find the puking frat boy attractive anyway?

The Assessment

The first thing we need to do is make an assessment of what we have going for us. Advantages to being over 35? Oh, dear Lord, yes!

First, you don't sound stupid. Usually. By age 35, you have some level of what we call in education, "Party Knowledge." This, of course, is the great dirty secret of American education: we teach people simply to get jokes at parties. You know, if I tell a joke about someone treating his wife like Henry VIII treated his wives, you realize that she isn't being treated "nice." Now, nothing can prepare you for a Dennis Miller rant entirely; that would be like asking Warren Miller to film Euripides's "Iphigeneia in Taurus" for an Aspen homeless shelter fund raiser…. but, I digress.

With apologies to Jeff Foxworthy, you might be over 35 if:

- When you talk about Arnold, you mean the bodybuilder…or the owner of the restaurant in Happy Days, depending on what you were doing in the 1970’s.

- When someone asks you about the highlight of high school, you remember the time forty kids started punching and swinging away at a pizza parlor and a bunch of cops showed up and nobody really got hurt but it was really cool because there ended up being more cops than kids and… Compare this to your neighborhood teen who told you his highlight was when he got to level fourteen on some violent game on his computer system.

- When you talk about things you hated in high school, you mention the rope climb in P.E. class because it made your biceps ache for five days. Today, the wise leaders of tomorrow’s youth
have banned rope climbing in many states because it's too dangerous. Guns, drugs, and bombs seem to make it onto the high school campus, but rope climbing is dangerous. Go figure.

Advantages of Being Over 35

Let’s talk about our real advantages now. There are a couple of obvious ones, but let’s look at some of the less obvious advantages first.

Advantage #1: Experience

When we were in high school, every P.E. class began with two laps and an obstacle course. So, all of us would run 800 meters, climb over various walls, "monkey" crawl down a series of bars, hit the dip station and sprint to the teacher. That, my friends, is more work than most forum posters do in a week!

We were also tested three times a year and graded on pull-ups, push-ups, sit-ups, six minute runs, shuttle runs, and a host of other tortures I don’t remember. Then, only then, did we go play the sport of that particular three to six week-long session.

How's this an advantage? Well, somewhere in the deepest hole of your brain, the one scientists are now referring to as the "geezer brain," there are memories of you running, jumping, catching, throwing, biking, hiking, and training. You may not believe this, but it's true: there are people that you interact with everyday who may have never had an organized physical education class.

I work with adolescents daily who can’t throw a football. Why? I was told by one young man, "My coach said I was a lineman." I responded, "You never just played football?" He hadn't. He never learned to throw a football because he never just played. No street football and very little playground ball of any kind. Baseballs break windows, basketball invites the "wrong element," and don’t even get me started on the political incorrectness of hide and go seek.

See? You have an advantage that many of the younger gymrats lack: you've actually done something physical in your life without wearing spandex pants, headphones, and shelling out $500 for a personal trainer. Your personal trainer was called "Coach" and always smelled like locker mold.

So, the advantage goes to the geezer. You probably have a wealth of experience in all this "stuff," but you forgot about it.

Advantage #2: Time and Future Vision
My brother Gary and I talked about this a while back. Gary’s son had taken up discus throwing and, as is the course of these things, Gary found himself interested in throwing himself. After a long, successful career as a runner, he discovered that odd magnetism that throwing stuff far seems to hold for human males. Gary began competing and finds himself in the midst of his third year as a discus thrower.

Our discussion summed up the best thing about being a "master" athlete. If you start today, in four years you'll have as much experience in your sport as any high school senior. In eight years, you could be as accomplished (and as good as) a collegiate athlete.

And if you don’t start today? Well, in eight years you'll be eight years older than you are today. Sounds stupid, I know, but you can choose today to be at your physical peak in a few short years. Trust me, the years are going to be here much faster than summer vacation felt in the fourth grade.

So, the second advantage of being a master is time. Time works the same for all of us, yet after 35 we don’t have peer pressure or some foul smelling guy named "Coach" blowing whistles and forcing us to get off the couch. We have "me." You're the reason for getting back out there. So go!

Advantage #3: Money

My favorite advantage: wallet. This may not be universally true, but generally we're starting to get pretty settled by 35. Those wonderful little plastic cards in your wallet, that number on your paycheck, and those marvels called "investments" all come together as a geezer athlete to provide something called "money." Ah, money.

In high school, if mom didn’t buy those chalk tasting "protein" supplements, you didn’t supplement. In college, the choices were beer or B-15. (I chose beer). The geezer jock can do something amazing: go to the supplement section, click "buy," and have quality stuff delivered to his door in a day or so. Magic. A miracle. Or, as I like to call it: money.

And it's not just supplements. You can also buy equipment. You think chains might help? Buy some and try it out! I never have to worry about crowds at the spa because my gym is open 24 hours a day. I own it, in my home, with nobody else’s butt sweat on anything.
Don’t ignore this advantage!

Advantage #4: Focus

Finally, here's the big one…seriously. If you love to ski or lift weights or do whatever, you probably own a lot of magazines, tapes, DVDs, equipment, clothes, and general stuff related to your passion. Your "competition," that hotdogging nineteen year old, might flash past you on his snowboard, but, give it a day. The total lack of focus isn’t just Jamaican weed, it's his worldview.

Recently, a buddy of mine helped me with a project at my house. He commented that my bicycle was really heavy when we put the odds and ends back away after we finished. In fact, he made some rather cruel remarks about my seventy dollar bicycle that I bought at a local store with "Wal" as part of the name.

"My bike," he said, "weighs a lot less than this."

So I asked, "What did it cost?"

"$1,800."

"Wow, how often do you ride it?" I asked.

He changed the subject. You see, as I discovered later, he never rides it. He has an expensive snowboard that he never uses. He has everything he needs except focus. He has a lot of toys and things that he's bought with his variety of interests…but no focus. Maybe he will when he reaches age 35.

Rekindle the Fire

By 35, you should make some decisions. If you're 35 or older, you already know the decisions. Hopefully, you and your buddies have decided that your garage band isn't going to make it big. You probably know that wine is better with a cork than a cap. And, like fine wine, age can do wonders.

I have a ninth grade daughter and she has a buffet table of life spread before her this year: she can do drama, dance, discus, lacrosse…the choices are endless. By her senior year, the choices will be narrowed. After college, they cut drastically. After marriage and a few kids…well, you know. None.

Use your advantages to rekindle the fire in the belly. Use these four advantages, your past experiences, your vision of the future, your lovely wallet filled to the brim, and your sense of focus to go beyond what you ever thought was possible!

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