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Reaching 50

SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY POET GEORGE HERBERT SAID, “He that is not handsome at twenty, nor strong at thirty, nor rich at forty, nor wise at fifty, will never be handsome, strong, rich or wise.” As I celebrate a half century of living this month, I am 0 for 3, but have a slim hope of still achieving number four.

Current U.S. life expectancy is 77 to 80 years so any way you slice it I’m on the Back Nine of Life having scored, like all of us, mostly pars with a birdie (my family) and several double bogeys (no details necessary) in the mix.

But hopefully there’s plenty of time left to become the person I would like to be rather than the person I am—more thankful, more kind, less cynical, less judgmental. I certainly am not the same person I was as a much younger man, which would make Muhammad Ali happy since he said, “The man who views the world at fifty the same as he did at twenty has wasted thirty years of his life.”

As I’ve gotten older I’ve tried to live by a few simple standards that I think work well for me, and though I’m not into moralizing, please allow me to share a few of them. I’m a big believer in “What goes around, comes around,” which of course is the layman’s version of the Golden Rule, “Do to others what you would like to be done to you.” (Don’t you wish this was etched on the inside of every human’s eyelids?)

Another principle, not always as easily accomplished as I would like, is “Character is doing the right thing when no one is looking.” I hate the feeling of glancing in the mirror and facing the truth that I have done wrong. Thankfully the older I get the less this happens.

And then there’s being a “gentleman.” Forget Webster’s definition; my father told me when I was in college and probably deserved a smack in the face rather than his sage advice, what it really means: Putting another person’s comfort or peace of mind ahead of your own. This goes way beyond giving up your seat on the bus; think more along the lines of not taking unfair advantage of another or being kind toward someone you find completely foolish.

Here are a few other thoughts that I try to remember on life’s journey:

Sometimes it’s better to be silent and let people think you’re stupid than to speak and remove all doubt.

Take your work, but not yourself, seriously.

Enjoy nature.

Tell those you love that you do.

No one is in charge of your happiness except you.

One more quote, from some poet we’ve never heard of, certainly reflects my mood as 50 nears: “Inside every older person is a younger person—wondering what the hell happened.”

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The Official Publication Of The Sports Turf
Managers Association

SportsTurf

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SportsTurf (ISSN 1061-687X) (USPS 000-292) (Reg. U.S. Pat. & T.M. Off.) is published monthly by m2media360, a Bev-AI Communications company at 1030 W. Higgins Road, Suite 230, Park Ridge, IL 60068. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Sportsturf, P.O. Box 2120, Skokie IL 60076-7820. For subscription information and requests, call Subscription Services at (847) 763-9565. Subscription rates: 1 year, \$40 US & Poss.; 2 years, \$65 US & Poss.; 1 year, \$65 Canada/Foreign Surface, 1 year, \$130 Airmail. All subscriptions are payable in advance in US funds. Send payments to Sportsturf, P.O. Box 2120, Skokie, IL 60076-7820. Phone: (847) 763-9565. Fax: (847) 763-9569. Single copies or back issues, \$6 each US/Canada; \$9 Foreign. Periodicals postage paid at Park Ridge, IL and additional mailing offices. COPYRIGHT 2009, SportsTurf. Material may not be reproduced or photocopied in any form without the written permission of the publisher.

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