



Posts by David Stein:

The Celebration of Life Through Sports Award: Michael Pope

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Up until January you may not have heard of Oscar Pistorius. Oscar was in the news recently. He's a world-class track star. His specialty is the 400 meter run. His best time is 46.56 seconds. The World Record is an amazing 43.18 seconds (set in 1999) and is held by Michael Johnson. While Oscar is more than 3 seconds off the record pace, it still gets him into the conversation when talking about the fastest runners in the world. Michael Johnson, while being one of the greatest track and field athletes of all time, did compete with a slight advantage...as do Oscar's competitors...they all have...legs. Oscar is the man who runs on specially designed composite blades attached to the stubs of his legs which were removed just below the knees when he was an infant. Simply overcoming this disability was considered by The IAAF (the governing body of track and field) not good enough and his prostheses are considered an advantage over the runners with...um...legs. They said that Oscar cannot compete in Beijing 2008. Kobe and LeBron? No problem. Get your visas, fellas. The guy with no legs? Nope. He's just not what we want in The Olympics. You know...kinda ruins the whole spirit of the thing.

The blessing out of this, though, is that I have been able to meet a man who knows what Oscar has gone through and I would like to honor this man with our *Celebration of Life Through Sports Award*: **Coach Michael Pope** (right).

"Losing my legs was the best thing that ever happened to me," Coach says.

It's true. When doctors told Coach in July of 2005 that they would have to amputate both of his legs just below the knees (like Pistorius) it was to save his life. His body had been ravaged by diabetes and staph infections in both legs. Plus, he had had quintuple bypass surgery. Coach says, "What was I going to do? Sit in a hospital room and die?" Oh, yes, there were times when he didn't want to fight anymore. There were times when self-pity entered his mind, but it turns out that he actually believed what he had been telling his players for years. He had been telling his players that they had it in them to succeed...to survive...to get the job done no matter the circumstances. Now the coach had to become the player.

Ironically, he got his biggest push toward recovery from a kid he had coached 12 years earlier. Cameron Ford was a small-for-his-position Defensive End on The Indian Land High School Football team in South Carolina from 1992-1994. According to Coach Pope, Ford was the kid he looks back on as loving the game *more* than any other player and playing the game *harder* than any other player. But it wasn't that memory of just a tough cookie on the football field that inspired Pope. It was what happened after football for Cameron Ford that got his coach off the bench and back onto the court 3 years ago. A couple of years after high school, Ford and one of his brothers were joyriding when the truck they were in crashed. Cameron was paralyzed from the chest down at the age of 20. Guess who went to the hospital every day and motivated Ford to go on with his life?

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tell his wife that he couldn't let those kids down. He didn't want them to think he had been feeding them a bunch of lies.

Coach now has new legs and a new life. Here's a shocker: he's back on the sidelines. Yes, we were all very surprised (not really.) Of course he's back on the sidelines. He just needed a little vacation...a vacation to show him how important it is to carry on under any circumstances. According to Coach, there is nothing now that could keep him from doing what he was put here to do...coach, teach, motivate. What makes it even easier now is that since he has lived through all this, he believes everything he shares with his players. Been there. Done that.

Now run another lap and stop you're whining. You can make it.

d player came full circle when Pope was in the
, Coach Pope will tell you about how inspiring
s mentor and throw it right back in his face. He
; he was lectured about during his playing days
ould hang up the phone each day in tears and