I’m a Gay Dad. My Son Loves Sports. Here’s How That Unexpectedly Changed My Life

In trading Broadway for baseball, Bradley Jacobs reflects on the welcome by-product of his son’s athleticism: straight male friendships.

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One night in late May, seven dads stood in a bar singing “Happy Birthday” to me. Each of them were straight. How did this happen?

When my partner, Jack, and I decided to become fathers nine years ago, everyone told us to "expect the unexpected.” I rolled my eyes. I’d heard all about diapers and sippy cups, playdates and sleepless nights. And sure, I expected some athletics along the way. Then our son Lucas, now 7, turned out to be — as Jack calls him — “*all* boy.” As a sports-averse gay man interested in books, Broadway, and the big screen, it’s been challenging to accept that my weekends now overflow with basketballs, baseball diamonds — and bros. Among the eye-opening outcomes of having a super-sporty son: friendships with an underrepresented demographic in my life . . . straight guys.

As a child, I ran from sports. I couldn’t throw a ball, was lost on a basketball court, and although math was one of my best subjects, I remained confounded by football (“1st and ten”?). While I gained my social footing as a teenager, writing for the school newspaper and dancing on stage in *Bye Bye Birdie* in high school, I was chubby, a little fey; in my mind, at least, I had nothing in common with the school’s athletic golden boys. Even though I eventually embraced my creative and artistic interests — and came out at age 19 — sports remained a sore spot I largely steered clear of as an adult. Until now.

With Lucas regularly playing soccer, basketball, and baseball, sports now make up a large part of my weekly routine. And as it’s turned out, a host of heterosexual dad comrades have been with me every goal, basket, and home run of the way.

Take soccer. Lucas wants to be in a league this fall, so over the past two months, I’ve escorted him to auditions — er, tryouts — with five different clubs around New York City. One dad, David, whose son is another soccer aficionado, pointed me toward the necessity of “turf shoes” (who’d ever heard of such a thing?) and strategized with us about whether Lucas should position himself as a forward, a midfielder, or a defender (is this me typing?). He even jumped on the phone with me minutes after Lucas was dinged by his first league. (The athletic director said he “isn’t the right fit.” For Pete’s sake, he’s 7.) “Thing is, you gotta know that other boys have been training for years,” David said, all tough love. “He’ll make it on his own time. Until then, get ready, it may be heart-wrenching.”

Two other dads got me through the highs and lows of this spring's Little League games, held both days of the weekend. Single, forty-something Daniel loves to chat between innings about his parenting woes, and about dating women with, well, daddy issues. (He's promised to take me to the Lower East Side pick-up club The Blond so I can see how the other half mate.) And Joe has made baseball bearable. He and I joke about the Jewish holidays and overshare about our middle-age crises. We created a group text called the "Anxious Jewish Support Group."

Still other fathers have provided a new (to me) camaraderie. Over spring break, Jack, Lucas, and I took a beach vacation with five other families we met the year our son was in Kindergarten, including a pack of dads. The last time I was bare-chested and sitting around a pool with this many men, my back was waxed and I was downing Planter's Punch and making questionable decisions in the Fire Island Pines. Now there were wives, children, beer. But other elements were the same: a hot tub, lounging on the beach, long conversations while the sun set.

Over a week of hanging out, I felt comfortable, listened to, and inspired by these bright, fearless fathers. By the time two daredevil dads, Rashid and Josh, jumped 30 feet off a giant rock into the Caribbean waters while we all swam below, I'd developed a sense of closeness with these guys that was very new to me. And it didn't matter that I chose not to jump. I didn't feel judged. The dads accepted me as is.

That's the funny thing that happened on the way to the soccer field: I felt embraced by these men because, in adulthood, I was secure enough to be myself around them. I owned my athletic ambivalence. I admitted I felt out of place. The time I missed one of Lucas's three-pointers in basketball, I copped to the fact that I'd been scrolling Madonna's Instagram. And you know what? The guys got it. They laughed with me, and appreciated my candor. They shared as well: A couple of times, dads have admitted they're challenged because their sons aren't particularly athletic. If I ever worried I'd be alienated in the world of sideline-dads, those feelings have long lapsed.

Which brings me back to my birthday serenade. Jack and I go for bimonthly "dad drinks" with the spring break crew and other school fathers. The most recent of these gatherings — held at the trendy No Bar in New York's East Village — coincided with my birthday, so Jack surprised us with a cake. The last time I can recall seven guys standing around a bar singing me "Happy Birthday," I was turning 26 at a long-shuttered West Village late night gay spot known as Hell. Yet as I chatted with my dad brethren this particular night, I saw once and for all that — now that we're fathers — these guys aren't all that different from me. Brian knew every nuance of the final arc of ***Game of Thrones***. Raj and Atul hashed out schools, camps, and the best summer cocktails. Miguel and I chatted about careers and his powerhouse lesbian sister.

Doug couldn't make it that night: he was with two of his daughters at a Pink concert. Secretly, I seethed with jealousy over this outing. Maybe we'll do a group "Fathers' night with Pink" the next time she tours? Hey, a gay dad can dream.