

Dear Coach Raffin:

I'm sorry to hear that you haven't been well lately. I hope you feel better soon.

I wrote this letter to say thank you for being my coach and for changing the course of my life. Throughout my adult life, I've applied the lessons I learned on the track, perseverance, patience, teamwork, compassion, and enthusiasm, to difficult situations. Without having the lessons I learned under your guidance, I would not have been prepared to deal with difficult situations as an adult. Thank you.

In recent years, I have begun to realize, as I believe others do, that my most vivid memories are of events that were life changing in that they changed the course of my life. I remember the day I said my vows to my wife; I remember the first time I saw my children; I remember when my wife and I walked into the living room of our first home; and I remember the first time I heard Coach Duane Raffin speak to a group of perspective track athletes.

It was a day in late February, 1974 during my physical education class. I had heard about you from my older step-brothers, David and Daryl Coleman, but had not actually met you. I sat with my classmates on the new, space age gymnasium floor against the west wall at Holly Middle School. As you began to speak, I remember being impressed immediately with your enthusiasm. You told about one of your former stars, Cotrell Williams. I learned later that Cotrell's name stamped all over the record books and plaques in the high school gymnasium. You told us that Cotrell was the most competitive athlete you had ever coached and shared a story about him. During a dual meet, Cotrell was edged out by a competitor in the 100 yard dash. You saw the fire in his eyes after the defeat. You also shared with us how later that day, "Cotrell competed against that same athlete in the 220 and "beat that SOB by 20 yards!" Of course, you didn't curse, but I could tell you wanted to... a sign of your immense enthusiasm. It was contagious.

If I recall correctly, your visits to the middle school were an annual ritual... a right of passage for freshman. "One is not allowed to move on to the high school until you have been recruited by Coach Raffin." I can only speak in certain terms for myself, but I'm convinced that there are countless athletes,

countless lives, that were touched by the enthusiasm you demonstrated at the middle school. It was as a result of seeing you speak that day in February that the course of my life changed for the better. It's a testament of your abilities as a coach that you could have such an impact on those around you by just a brief encounter.

Relatively speaking, the four years I spent on the track and cross country teams is not so long. When I consider the important life lessons I learned during that time, I am amazed that it was only four years. I recall an event in late winter of my senior year that had a significant impact on me. It happened during a winter practice on one of those gravel, ice covered roads that we logged so many miles on. I got into a fight with a team mate, Randy Nixon. After learning of the fight, you pulled me aside in the lunch line and let me know, without actually saying it, that I would not be allowed to run again until I made things right with Randy. I did, and it was difficult because Randy was in no mood for forgiveness, with good reason. As an avid sports fan, I often think of how much today's athletes could learn about life under your guidance.

You probably remember that Randy was tragically killed in a car accident a few years after graduation. At the time of his death, I hadn't spoken to Randy in quite a while. Even so, his mother knew that he and I were close in high school, so she sent me a letter to let me know that Randy had passed. She also enclosed an article you wrote for the Holly Herald in memory of Randy, which I saved until a few years ago when it was destroyed in a flood. The theme of the article was "Randy didn't need Holly High School Track, Holly High School Track needed Randy". With all due respect, I disagree. Randy needed you. We all needed you to learn valuable lessons about life and hard work.

On the cross country team, I learned that hard work pays dividends. More importantly, I learned that it can be fun. I remember how during cross country camp you and Mr. Stallcup assigned a crew of two athletes to work in the kitchen preparing meals and cleaning. All of this was on top of running eight miles in the morning and distance intervals in the afternoon. I couldn't wait to lay my head on the pillow at the end of that day! What I remember most about that day however was the sense of accomplishment I

felt at the end of it. I've felt that same way many times since. Each time I'm challenged at work or in my family and personal life, I try to reflect on that day and apply the lesson I learned.

We had a lot of fun at cross country camp. I still laugh when I think of you and Mr. Stallcup, or "Cupper" as you called him, going into town every night for a "milkshake". I remember thinking as a young, naïve runner, "wow, they must really like ice cream". I learned later that men in their forties don't drink milkshakes late at night... at least I don't.

In my last year of track and cross country, I finally achieved a level of success I had been working toward for four years. You probably recall that I was not blessed with a great set of wheels. Even though, you emphasized early on that hard work would allow me to achieve my goals, even if I had to work much harder than more talented runners. You were right. More importantly, you showed me how to have fun along the journey.

Your message about hard work was not only for those runners that needed it the most. During my senior track season, we were favored to, and eventually won the league championship. The day before the dual meet that season against Mt. Morris, a far less talented team, you informed Kurt Ebert, Roger Coleman, Jeff Lewis, Bill LoWande, and me that we would not be running in the meet, but staying at the high school to practice. We, the athletes, gathered after school on the infield of the track to await your arrival. We didn't know for sure, but realized soon that the next few hours wouldn't be pleasant. We saw you from a distance as you walked through the gate surrounding the football field. I'll never forget Kurt saying "did he lock the gate?"... like you thought we would flee once the practice began. Your message that day was clear. Don't get cocky! You were right; we needed a good practice much more than we needed to coast against an outmatched team. I always wanted to ask you if you had us practice that day, rather than run, because of what happened to the cross country team against Ainsworth the year before. I think we were a little cocky then, and we paid for it when we lost to Ainsworth in the dual meet. You forced us to learn from that defeat however, and later that year in the league meet, we showed Ainsworth who was the better team. Do you remember? We placed four runners ahead of their first man, and I think five or six runners ahead of their second man.

As I sit here late at night thinking of all the fond memories and lessons learned during my time on the track and cross country teams, I realize that I cannot discuss them all in this letter. Likewise, it would not be possible for me to fully express the gratitude I feel for having had the opportunity to learn and grow under your guidance. I remember several others saying that we were lucky because we were actually learning from a college or professional caliber coach. What no one ever said was how lucky we were to be able to interact with and learn from a great human being, a great leader, and a great father.

My greatest hope at this time is that you have no regrets, no thoughts of “I should have done this”, or “I wish I had”. Maybe that’s unavoidable... a human trait. I can tell you however that from my perspective, you did everything right as a coach, as a person. The lives you touched, and eventually changed, as a high school coach are countless. When I think of the role models, heroes, leaders I have encountered in my life, your name is at the top of the list. I wish you, your family, and friends all the best during this difficult time. I am forever grateful to you for everything you did for me during my formative years. My life has been immeasurably better as a result.

With love,

Your student, Billy Ballard