

NextGeneration

Day of firsts that likely won't be the last

Father finds that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree in terms of passion for the hobby

BY DOUG DROTMAN

Being a parent is a life full of a series of firsts. Their first full night sleep is followed by first steps, first teeth, first words, and eventually, the first day of school.

Although these are all special experiences, as a sports-obsessed father, I must admit that I got a bit more joy from the first soccer goal, first baseball hit and especially the first Sunday afternoon we spent together watching football.

Much to my delight, since opening his first pack of football cards, my 7-year-old son Derek has become a collector. He spends hours on his bedroom floor sorting and organizing his football and baseball cards into plastic sheets. Needless to say this has brought back great memories. For me, it started with 1971 Topps Baseball cards, some rubber bands and a shoebox.

So, when I heard that Chad Pennington of our New York Jets would be signing autographs just a few miles from my home at Steiner Sports' sports bar for kids, "Last Licks," in Huntington, N.Y., I decided that it was time for Derek to meet his first professional athlete and get his first autograph.

What was supposed to be the thrill of a lifetime for him, actually turned out to be the memory of a lifetime for me.

Although Derek may not remember the moment that I told him we were going to meet Pennington, it was something I'll never forget. Seeing his unbridled joy and excitement is what a parent lives for. His smile lit up the room and made me feel like the best dad in the world. Derek and I now had two weeks to enjoy the build-up of anticipation.

And enjoy it together we did. Every day I was treated to the Pennington fact of the day straight from the back of one of his football cards.

"Hey dad, did you know Chad has 53 TD passes; Dad, Chad only played in 10 games last year. He threw 22 touchdowns one year and only 6 interceptions. Dad, what's an Int.?"

By the time the day of the signing rolled around we were ready. Just like every Sunday from September through December, Derek pulled out his No. 28 white Jets jersey and cap and I donned my No. 83 Jets green jersey.

As we got into the car, I was very excited, but not about meeting Pennington. The opportunity to share this experience with my son put meeting another professional athlete in a whole new perspective. For



New York Jets quarterback Chad Pennington poses for a photo with Derek Drotman during a signing at Steiner Sports' sports bar for kids, "Last Licks," in New York.

me, it was a mix of nerves and excitement, while Derek appeared to be cool as a cucumber.

But as the time grew closer, the enormity of the moment finally hit him. "Daddy," he said. "I'm kind of nervous."

"Really? What does it feel like?" I asked.

"Sort of how I feel before a test, but a good one," he explained.

Wow. Not only were we sharing this experience together, but we were both experiencing the same feelings about it.

As we walked through downtown Huntington, it felt more like the parking lot at Giants Stadium. Everywhere we looked we saw Jets fans dressed in green and white. Now we were really excited.

And then we saw it – the line. About 250 people snaked around the block, nearly all dressed in Jets apparel and everyone holding a photo, football or helmet.

Although I probably could have whipped out my press pass and gotten to the front of the line, I felt it was important for Derek

and I to relish the entire experience.

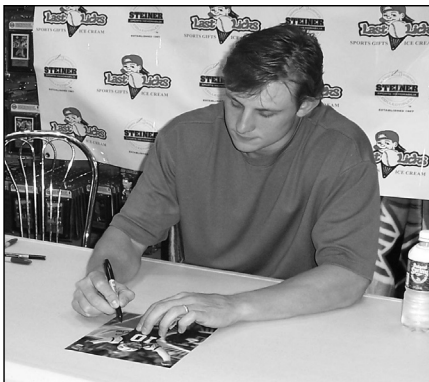
I quickly learned to be careful what you ask for. Despite the prize at the end of the line, Derek was like any 7-year-old in line on a hot summer afternoon.

After five-minutes, I heard, "My legs hurt." After 10 minutes, "I'm so bored."

At 15 minutes, "How much longer?"

It was time for "Superdad" to get creative or a joyous experience might turn ugly. So I suggested that Derek walk the line and tell me which Jets jerseys were the most popular. He came back about 5 minutes later with his report: 20 Penningtons, 12 Curtis Martins and nine John Abrahams.

As we got closer to the store, the excitement began to build again for me. When we were able to see



Pennington's fan-friendly approach made one child's first signing experience a memorable one.

Pennington through the window it became real again and once we broke through the store barrier, Derek was literally a kid in a candy store. To his left was his favorite football player, Pennington, but to his right was ice cream, candy, packs of cards and a wall full of the coolest Steiner Sports autographed photos and memorabilia he'd ever seen.

He wanted everything and did not know what to do first. The moment made us both forget the 60 minutes in the sun. We decided to focus on the autograph and browse the store later.

As Derek walked up to Pennington, I felt like it was his first time up in a Little League game. I was actually nervous.

"How ya doing, buddy? What's your name?" said Pennington.

Oh no, I thought. Will he clam up or mumble or will he speak up loud and clear?

"Derek," he said for all to hear.

"Nice to meet you, Derek," said Pennington.

"Where do you want me to sign the photo? Do you want to take a picture of us?" he asked me.

Although it was the 300th person he met that day, Pennington is one of those athletes that knows how special every meeting is for fans. He knew how easy it was to make Derek feel special. What he didn't know was that he also made Derek's dad feel pretty special as well.

If Pennington had kept his head down (a la Willie Mays) it could have ruined the experience. The autograph is nice, but what I will treasure from that day is their brief conversation and the photo I took of my son with his favorite player.

And that is why I wanted his first experience to be with an athlete like Pennington at a place like "Last Licks." They could have put another 50 people through the line that day but Steiner Sports understands the value of the interaction between athlete and fan. They let each customer ask a question, pose for a photo or shake hands. There was no pressure or goons moving people through the lines.

After Pennington signed the photo and posed with Derek for the photo, it was over. Two weeks of anticipation and 60 minutes in line was now a memory.

I was just about to ask Derek what he thought or for him to proclaim, "That was awesome." But instead, Derek handed me the photo and like a typical 7-year-old asked, "Can I get ice cream?"

Should I lecture my son on the value of appreciating the autograph? Should I ask him to talk about the experience or tell me what he thought about Pennington? Or maybe I should discipline him for being greedy. Nope, there were better times and places for that.

Instead, I relished the moment and said, "Sure, what flavor?"

I doubt in 10 years that Derek will even remember the day, but for me it will always be a special day we spent together. I started out trying to do something special for my son and without even realizing it, I gave myself a gift of a lifetime." ♦