

Supporting Peter



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By Sarah Zobel

I've given a lot of gifts and purchased a lot of incidentals for my family, but I've never shopped for anything so enthusiastically received as the cup I bought my older son recently. Not a drinking cup — an athletic supporter cup.

Peter is a 9-year-old baseball player just beginning a new Little League season. His coach leaves a message on our answering machine telling me that if Peter wants to catch, he will need to wear a cup. This new league has new rules.

Peter is desperate to get behind the plate. He aspires to be the next Jason Varitek, Red Sox catcher and captain. It's not likely: he is slight, not at all beefy, and not endowed with the hefty quadriceps needed to support the hours of squatting. Even so, third grade is too soon to have your dreams dashed, so I decide to get him the cup.

No need to drag him and his 6-year-old brother to the store to engage in a battle of "No, you don't need batting gloves/a batting helmet/ really cool \$30 wind pants/a 12-pack of baseballs to call your own," I think. Instead, I would buy the cup while they were still in school and surprise Peter with his chance to catch.

I drive to the nearest sporting-goods store, which, much to the delight of my inner 12-year-old, happens to be Dick's, and wander around the baseball section and then the youth section but find nothing. There has to be something somewhere. I don't need any great variety — just the one, assuming they are offered in a size for a 65-pound kid.

After 10 minutes of dazed and fruitless meandering, I ask the only employee I see, a cashier, for help. She pages for assistance, and a displeased twentysomething male appears.

"Hi," I say cheerfully. "I'm looking for boys' athletic supporters with cups?" It's kind of exciting to say it out loud, as though I'm asking for something truly dangerous, forbidden.

He doesn't seem to see it that way, and he turns and walks quickly away from me. I follow eagerly, stopping as he pauses to push some shorts on hangers around on a rack.

"Um, I looked here," I say. "I was looking for the compression shorts and cup?" I remind him, secretly pleased that I am hip to the proper lingo, even though I had picked it up only an hour earlier, on the store's Web site.

"Oh yeah, I'm just seeing what we have here," he says in a tone that suggests that I am bothering him — and, to boot, that I am middle-aged. He turns and speeds off again. Once more, I rush to catch up. He leads me to a far aisle in a corner of the store, beyond the lacrosse sticks and ping-pong balls, the water bottles and mouth guards.

"We don't have much of a selection," he says, waving his arm at a display that easily stretches 6 feet wide by 6 feet high. My eyes fall on an item marked "youth." I pull the hard plastic container down from its hook.

"This is what I wanted!" I say, waving it proudly in the air between us. The cup itself, prominently displayed on top of the shorts at the front of the package, is red and looks quite large. "But is this the right size? He's 9, my son." I scowl at the cup, wishing I'd brought the boys after all.

"Well, they come in youth, teen, and adult," Helper Guy says. "Oh, and, uh, peewee," he adds, waving his hand in the direction of an aptly named pint-size black-and-yellow

model.

“Peewee,” I repeat. But it is only my inner 12-year-old with whom I’m enjoying the joke, for I am suddenly alone in the aisle. I wonder if my helpful guide was afraid that I was going to ask what size he wears.

Regardless, he’s gone. Only then do I bother to flip the package and discover carefully printed sizing guidelines that indicate that Peter is, in fact, a youth rather than a peewee.

As I take one youth-size athletic cup to the available cashier, another twentysomething male, I feel like the man who is sent into the drugstore to get tampons for his girlfriend.

It doesn’t matter what they think of me there — me, the crazy, childless cup shopper lady — because when Peter gets home from school that afternoon and sees the gift I have left on his bed upstairs, I am instantly transformed into The Best Mother Ever.

Peter runs back down to the kitchen, where I am fixing after-school snacks, and hugs me. He thanks me repeatedly, beaming and turning the prize over and over in his hands. He looks from it to me and then to the far distance, to someplace I can’t see where he can catch without fear of injury and is cooler than the kids who don’t own cups, even if only for a little while. Someplace where he is maybe, in some way, a little more grown-up.

I know I am meant to be happy about his getting older. In a couple of months, he will hit double digits, and there will be no stopping him. Already, I am required to kiss him in the school parking lot, out of sight of his friends, instead of up by the building, as his brother still allows.

He is happiest when I agree to leave him home alone while I run out to do an errand or when I send him to do a different errand on his own. He has seen the glimmering light of adolescence, of growing up, of independence, and he wants to let it shine fully on him.

I’ve known all along that my job is to let him do that, to let him have a healthy amount of freedom to figure out who he is and what this gig called life is all about. But still, each

night before I go to bed, I tuck him in and kiss his damp hair and whisper, "I love you," just to make sure he hears it one more time.

Each night, I wonder how much longer I will be tucking him in. I want to stop everything, if only for 24 hours, just freeze time and keep my sons young enough and innocent enough that I am still allowed to hover a little.

Even as I return Peter's hug of gratitude, I know we are coming to a new place, somewhere we've never been, and he and I will have to figure it out as we go along. But at this moment, Peter is ecstatic, and very much a 9-year-old. He rushes back up to his room and puts on the shorts, the cup, his regular school pants, and a grin. "Go ahead, Mom," he says as he returns to the kitchen and stands, fists on hips, in front of me. "Hit me in the nuts."

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