

## Saying Goodbye

The football game was seven-on-seven, 14 boys all in the 10 year old or so range.

They argued about whether or not they were hit with one hand or two, or whether the big tree was out of bounds. When they said “fourth and one,” they meant they needed one more completion for a first down, as opposed to another yard.

It was an unbelievably perfect setting, a bunch of kids playing touch football on a farm. The biggest fan, literally and figuratively, was a horse who spent the entire time with its head over its fence, focused intently on the action a few yards away from him.

TigerBlog’s view was from much further away, up on a ridge overlooking the field. The boys were all wearing khakis and dress shirts, like the game broke out at a big family holiday celebration.

Somewhere, TB surmised, Ann Bates was looking down on her funeral and smiling at it all.

An hour earlier, the setting had been a church outside of Philadelphia, where four people who had been much closer to Ann Bates than TB had spent more than an hour talking to the packed house about her spirit, her life, her family, her experiences, her impact on those she left.

Ann Bates, the wife of Princeton men’s lacrosse coach Chris Bates, passed away last week after her battles with cancer. Her funeral was held yesterday, and it was what the funeral of an accomplished 43-year-old doctor/mother/deacon/humanitarian figured to be – equal parts celebration of life and overwhelming sorrow at the tragedy of it all.

As the pastor said, there’s no way to account for the fairness – or lack of it – in life.

In the front row of the church sat Chris and Nick Bates, who shortly would be one of the 10 year olds in the football game. Whenever TB started to laugh at something one of the speakers said, he glanced at those two and couldn’t help but go back to the unfairness of it all.

After the service, there was a luncheon at the same place where Chris and Ann had been married years earlier.

By the time TB left, he had a better appreciation for who Ann Bates was, who her family and friends were, what made her tick, what her life was like before he met her, as it turned out, two years before her death.

He thought of how nice it would have been to see her like she was the day that Drexel, Chris Bates’ former team, beat Virginia, back in 2007, when she stormed the field - past a reluctant security guard - to join the celebration.

He would have loved to have had the opportunity to talk to her about her medical career, their unconventional first date in a hurricane, the time she gave a funeral for a bird. He was sad that he had to wait until her funeral to learn all this about a woman he knew only for her infectious smile and unable-to-be-beaten happiness, even until the last time he’d ever see her.

Beyond that, looking around the packed building, he also knew that this was the very best of what intercollegiate athletics was all about, the way this large congregation was drawn there to celebrate the life of a woman and support her husband, a man most of them knew through college lacrosse.

There were so many Princeton coaches, staff and administrators there that it could have been a departmental meeting. The entire Princeton men’s lacrosse team was in attendance.

There were former Princeton players, both from Coach Bates’ first year with the team and from before he became head coach. There were Drexel players, Drexel administrators.

What brought all of these people - and many others - to this place?

It's what college athletics teaches, and it's not something that is learned in too many other venues.

It's a team. It's a commitment to each other, one that lasts long beyond the end of the game.

It's something born from hours and hours and hours of working to the same goal, of being asked to forego the individual for the betterment of the team.

TigerBlog knows of nothing else that can forge that kind of lifelong bond, not just among two best friends but among a roster of 40 or more players, from any era.

And so when it was obvious that one of their own needed their support, they were there. That's it. TigerBlog doubts that any of the people in attendance yesterday ever stopped to think about whether or not they should go. They just went.

And for the rest of the Princeton people there, people like Mitch Henderson, the men's basketball coach, who has probably had little interaction with Chris Bates and probably never met Ann? Why was he there?

The same reason, that's why. It was someone from Princeton Athletics who was in pain, and so he went.

And Stephen Brundage, who detoured from Baltimore to Milwaukee, where he is now an assistant coach at Marquette, to be there for his former boss, to marvel at the way he had handled the combination of his wife's disease with his team at Princeton while never once letting on about how difficult it had to have been.

When it was over and TigerBlog left, he knew that Chris and Nick appreciated the turnout, appreciated how all of these people made it their business to be there, for Chris and Nick and for Ann.

It didn't make it any less sad of a moment, and it didn't bring her back. It didn't diminish the unexplainable unfairness of it all, and it didn't change the harsh reality of it all.

It was, though, a beautiful service, and everyone in the church knew that it was.

Hopefully it'll make it at least a little easier for the Bates family as it moves forward.

Posted by [Princeton OAC](#) at [5:03 AM](#) 

## 2 comments:

Greg Herceg said...

I'm a good friend of Ann's brother and Chris' brother-in-law, Rick Baldwin. Rick sent me the link to your blog. I was at both the service and luncheon and just wanted to let you know what a wonderful summary of the events you captured. I, too, will never forget the picture of those boys playing football in their nice clothes! Thanks again for your great posting.

Greg Herceg

[December 10, 2011 4:37 PM](#)

[John Rasmussen](#) said...

I have known Ann well since she sat behind me in 7th grade math class, through high school, when we were both graduate students at Virginia, and beyond. Two friends and I journeyed up from Richmond for her service, which you have done a great job of capturing in words. I don't think I've laughed more at a funeral. Nobody who met her forgot her. Thank you for both your posts remembering her. They have been widely shared among her friends.

[December 11, 2011 5:27 PM](#)  
[Post a Comment](#)