

Twenty-one months ago, Ted Foss asked me to speak here and explain this bling I'm wearing... I've titled this talk **The Anatomy of a Letter**.

They say that Fear of Public Speaking is right up there with Fear of death -- but... I retired this past summer after teaching college for 44 years. I'm used to lecturing for 50 minutes – but Ted tells me half of that is all I get.

I do have a handout for the class.

My story is also the story of the Sleight family at West Seattle High School.

We had some unique advantages as a family. Dad was a Boeing engineer who encouraged our academic and athletic success

About the time my sister and I were born, he moved the family to our home at the north end of Lincoln Park.

Football fields, baseball diamonds, tennis courts, running trails and Colman Pool were just across the street.

Dad even built a cabin outside of Goldbar on Highway 2 so we'd be closer to the ski area at Stevens Pass.

He built exercise bars, a climbing rope, and a basketball court in our backyard

He bought us any athletic gear we might want.

This jacket and the one my brother Randy is wearing are replicas -- except for the leather sleeves -- of our West Seattle letterman's jackets. Dad paid for them too.

And mom was not only our transportation to sporting events, but was also an expert seamstress, ready to sew on all our athletic awards or merit badges.



That first picture is of my brothers Don and Randy and me, and my twin sister Laurie.

If you watch the Olympics, perhaps you've seen a few of those human-interest-stories they throw in.

Invariably, they show the trophy room that the parents have set up for some swimmer or skier.

We had a room like that. Our dining room was crowded with trophies and silver ice buckets.

Our brother Don was a champion ski racer, winning races for over 20 years around the Pacific Northwest.

Don was the first West Seattle varsity letterman in our family, lettering in Tennis in his senior year, the class of '59.

And although skiing has never been a varsity sport. West Seattle had a ski team and in the late 50's, Don led the Indians to the All-City Ski Championship Title for three straight years.

Don was 13 years older than I was. He went off to the University of Washington when my sister and I started kindergarten at Gatewood Elementary.

That summer, I actually won my first trophy -- of which I am still very proud. I was named the **Best Dressed Boy** in the West Seattle Hi Yu Kiddies parade.



But it was at about this time that I fell into the athletic shadow of our middle brother Randy.

When we turned out for the West Seattle midgets football team, Randy was one of those guys who had to go to the sauna to help him make weight, I on the other hand, weighed in with a heavy coat on and fishing weights in my pockets.

Randy played offensive right tackle. I warmed the bench. Even when I was cut from the midgets my first year and was relegated to the B's,

I still warmed the bench. I learned three things about football.

- Getting hit was no fun.
- Maple bars after Saturday morning games were awesome.
- And I got a first glimpse into my athletic future. Perhaps you've heard a favorite expression of runners. "**Our sport is your sport's punishment.**"

Whenever the coach said, "*Take a lap*," I was often first in the race around the football field, but I guess I was the only one racing.

Randy excelled in every sport. He played left field and later pitcher in Little League, Pony League, and Colt League baseball -- always making the end-of-season All-Star team. His Pony League All-Star team took 2nd in the State.

That picture of me standing in front of a number of trophies, those were mostly Randy's. And that ribbon on the wall -- Randy won the regional FORD Punt, Pass, and Kick competition twice.

He could have lettered in Football, Basketball, and Baseball at West Seattle but instead did so in Cross Country, Soccer, and Tennis.

He was an all-around athlete. He was voted captain of the X-Country team his senior year and was number one and voted Most Inspirational on the Tennis team.

In his senior year, Randy was written up for his athletic accomplishments in the Chinook -- and again this past May in the alumni Chinook.

Before I get into my own story, let me mention my twin sister Laurie.

You might expect a girl with three brothers to be athletic -- but it's not **my** letterman's jacket which is now the property of Seattle's Museum of History and Industry. That's Laurie's letterman's sweater pictured there -- and here's what MOHAI records about it.

This sweater belonged to Laurie (Sleight) ... who lettered in multiple sports at West Seattle High School after the passage of Title IX in 1972. Title IX banned discrimination on the basis of sex in federally-funded educational institutions and included sports and recreational activities. Laurie was born and raised in West Seattle and grew up playing tennis with her brothers. During her junior year in the spring of 1972, she was invited to join the boy's tennis team, as there was no girls team at the time. Before the first match, the principals of the Seattle School District voted that girls could not play with boys and thus Laurie was not allowed to play. (*The team had a 2 and 8 losing season.*) Title IX was passed that summer on June 23, 1972. In Laurie's senior year, she was the captain of the newly-formed girls tennis team and was voted most inspirational (as represented by the star on the *W letter*). She lettered in tennis and swimming and was voted "Best Female Athlete" by her senior class.

Laurie always dominated me at tennis. The fact was that my right eye kept me from having success in any sport that involved a ball. I could hit a pitch but not catch a fly ball. I could give Randy a good game of ping pong until he returned a soft lob.

As the runt of the litter, and the baby of the family by 10-minutes, was there any hope for me?

Despite failed attempts at football and baseball, I kept trying, and something special happened at Madison Junior High.
(And I'm not talking about meeting my future bride -- I'll get to that.)

Do you remember those peg boards on the wall in the Madison gym? As a 7th grader, I was embarrassed that I could hardly pull myself up one or two holes.

So in 9th grade, when we had to repeat the peg board climb challenge, nobody was more surprised than I was when I went up and down and up and down the whole board. Something had happened to me between 7th and 9th grades.

You see that photo of the nerd in the Madison letterman's sweater? I turned out for nearly every intermural sport and ended up with the second-highest number of intermural points at the end of 9th grade. I received the new MADISON SPORTS AWARD in 1970.

But participation was not the same as athletic excellence. Still, two events stood out to me.

As a 7th grader, the worst thing that could happen was to be picked last when teams were chosen. But in 9th grade, at the start of Volleyball season in gym class, somebody nominated me as one of the six team captains. Was someone playing a joke on me? Maybe not. The team I selected went undefeated.

Then I was picked again as a basketball captain in my 10th grade gym class.



Perhaps others saw me differently than I saw myself.

In my last trimester at Madison Junior High, Mr. Sterling, the gym teacher, did something for me that helped a lot with my future athletic success. I didn't want to turn out for intermural golf or bowling, so he let me start running. After school, I would run from Madison, south along California Avenue through the Alaska Junction and turn onto Fauntleroy Way at the Morgan Street Junction and arrive at home across from Lincoln Park.

That's when I got into drugs.--My drugs of choice were endorphins.

When you start out on your run, your body goes through a transition: Your breathing becomes heavy, and you notice your pulse quicken as the heart pumps harder to move oxygenated blood to your muscles and brain. As you hit your stride, your body releases hormones called endorphins. These are the chemicals behind the "runner's high," a euphoric state following intense exercise. I was hooked.

But there was also a trigger event that had a huge impact on my athletic future. Each June, the West Seattle X-Country team would meet with their coach before the summer training season to get their instructions.

My brother Randy would be a returning varsity runner that fall. He invited me to that June meeting, so I jogged over from Madison to West Seattle.

The first words I ever heard from Coach Vaughn hit home.

"So this is the little stud."

The coach pictured me as what I would someday become.

That summer, and each summer and winter for the next three years, I ran at least 500 miles. That was the goal Coach Vaughn set for us.

In my first X-Country season, I finished 3rd overall in the Junior Varsity Southern Division Championships -- a race of 49 runners from Franklin, Garfield, Cleveland, Queen Anne, Rainier Beach, Chief Sealth, and West Seattle.

But something else hooked me on distance running. In my very first race, I discovered I had **the ability to kick** -- to break into a dead sprint in the last two-hundred yards of race. I won my first JV race because of that kick on the Hiawatha course in front of the high school.

By the way, if you ever saw a X-Country race on our home Hiawatha course, you saw the flattest and shortest and therefore fastest course in all of the Metro League.

That season, 1970, was the first year the West Seattle varsity won the Southern Division title, edging out Franklin by a single point. And brother Randy was that team's captain.

Your success in any sport often depends as much on who the competition is on your own team as it is on your own ability.

A **very good** quarterback can spend the season on the bench if there's a **great** quarterback turning out too.

This was my challenge in the Spring Track & Field season.

Running in a varsity race did not guarantee a varsity letter.

In the spring of '71, I won plenty of junior varsity mile races, but I had to pile up a string of third place finishes to score enough Varsity points to earn my first West Seattle varsity letter.

My locker partner and friend Pat Carney, a Long Jump and Triple Jump specialist, also lettered and we were two very proud sophomores.

My Junior season of X-Country was awesome. We had five seniors and two juniors on the varsity, four of whom had been on the championship team the year before.

Chief Sealth was our principal rival that season (and in my heart, our **archrival** every season). We dominated the Southern Division that year. But in the Southern Division Championships, our third place runner, senior Kirk Hendrickson, came up to me thinking Sealth had beaten us. But when he saw my finish card, he knew we had won -- all five of our scorers had finished in the top 11 places. I was our fifth runner and had beaten all but two Chief Sealth runners. We threw Coach Vaughn into Green Lake.

And I had earned my second varsity letter.

In my junior year of Track & Field, I was strictly a two-miler. But whereas a third-place finish as a sophomore was a challenge, second place finishes as a junior came easily.

But there were two particular races that were unusual. West Seattle's team was not large enough to field a separate Junior Varsity, so some of us were told we'd be running in the Junior Varsity championships.

We were not allowed to compete in our usual events. I was told I would be a sprinter. I had only run in Mile and Two-Mile races on the track before that.

In the prelims, I was assigned to lane one. I'd never started a race from blocks before. And from lane one, the other runners looked so far ahead as they stretched out around the turn.

The 220 is a half lap race. Can you imagine running the curve so fast that your spikes turn in the cinder track before you can lift them to take the next stride?

Well, I won my preliminary heat. I chalked it up to the fact that distance runners train way more miles than sprinters. By now, I'd put over 4,000 miles on my legs in two years.

The next day in the finals, I was again assigned lane one.

I was intimidated as I looked ahead to lanes 2 through 8 and saw I was the only white guy in the race.

The next Spring, in my 12th grade Language Arts class, my teacher let me write poetry on race days when I was too wired to focus in class. Of this particular race I wrote in part...

Out of the of the turn — Dying down the strait away — Snap through the tape ...

There are dozens of stories that could be told about the crazy distance runners in 1971-72.

On one occasion, our X-Country team ran east across the low Spokane Street bridge, then north along Alaskan Way, and through downtown to Memorial Stadium. We watched a quarter of West Seattle football and then ran back to school -- a 14 mile round trip. In the spring, the distance runners on the Track team ran to Sicks Seattle Stadium, caught a few innings of West Seattle verses Franklin, then ran back to school, a 12 mile run just for fun.

I do have to mention one unique training activity in the summer before my senior season of X-Country. My brothers Don, Randy, and I trained for and climbed Mt. Rainier. We all reached the summit together. That's a story in itself.

For my senior year in X-Country, I was the only returning varsity runner. Alas, such is often the case following a championship season.

We had one other excellent runner, a junior named Kevin Adams.

The first two races of the season were on the same Northern Division course at Lower Woodland Park. If Hiawatha was the flattest and fastest course, this one was just its opposite.

The course started on the track near the tennis courts south of Green Lake. It then climbed west uphill with no break until we reached the south bridge over Aurora Avenue and actually ran across into the Woodland Park Zoo -- Over half a mile of uphill running before the first flat stretch. In this race against Franklin, Ingraham, and Shorecrest, I took 4th overall and Kevin was right behind me in 5th.

The next week, we ran the same course against Lincoln and Ballard. It was the first race I was ever in where I was favored to win.

For two miles, six of us raced in a peloton, but just before we came into view from the valley below, I took the lead.

Just as the first half mile of the course went up, up, up, the last half mile was down. In fact, we practically flew down the soap box derby hill before finishing on the track where we'd started.

Alas, that day I really learned about the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.

I won the race going away, but Kevin, who had been right behind me the week before, finished in 6th. I may have won, but my team had lost. I was miserable on the bus ride back to school.

I had a very good senior season. I was voted team captain which accounts for the first star on my letter.

West Seattle was expected to finish 3rd at the Southern Division championships, but I discovered a secret weapon in that race.

My brother Randy came over to Lower Woodland Park from the University of Washington where he was studying Engineering.

With about a half mile to go, I was running in 8th place. That was not surprising since I was a better finisher than a starter. Kevin was up in 2nd place. My brother was cutting back and forth at different places along the course to head me off and cuss me out. He motivated me to pass from 8th to 3rd on the second-to-last big uphill, and I passed Kevin Adams at the foot of the final hill. In 1970 and 1971, our best runners had finished in third place in this race. I had taken 2nd. And our team took a surprising 2nd place in the South.

When the season was over, I was voted Most Inspirational, and Kevin and I shared the Most Valuable Runner Award. This allowed me to fill out the other two stars across the top of my W letter.

Honestly, I was very fortunate that Kevin Adams was just a junior. The next year, he was the Metro League individual champion.

Now, nearly 50 years later, wouldn't it be cool to still have part of your varsity uniform? Well, I have all of mine.

They may have a dress code at school, but not on the swim team. I had two reasons for turning out for the swim team during the winter trimester of my senior year. First, I thought it would be good aerobic work to help me in Track & Field. And **second**, I'd graduate with *more varsity letters than my brother*.



All the kids in our family had swum on the Colman Pool swim team, so this decision was not so odd. My strong legs helped me in the breast stroke, but I swam the 100 Individual Medley only because I could swim the butterfly stroke without being disqualified.

In one race, Garfield didn't have enough swimmers for the 100 Individual Medley. So they decided to hold the boys and girls race at the same time. You can believe I swam my hardest. I did well, but alas, my twin sister Laurie beat me. Or so she claims today, and I trust her memory better than my own these days.

It may look like diving, but I managed to find a place on my W letter for my varsity swimming letter.

You'll also see a megaphone on my letter. I don't count Yell leading as a varsity sport, but just try carrying around cheerleaders on your shoulders when you are a 123-pound runner.

Some notable athletes had been Yell leaders the year before, but my decision to try out for yell leader boiled down to one question.

Did I want to spend my senior year in high school hanging out with the cheerleaders? **Heck yah!** Plus I got in free and got the best seat at every game.

And in hindsight, it was perhaps the best decision I made in high school. I really liked one of the cheerleaders. But there was a rule on the squad that the Yell Leaders were not allowed to date the Cheerleaders. Plus, she was a Christian and God didn't get my attention until years later when Mount St. Helens blew up.

How often does it happen that the prettiest cheerleader is also the valedictorian? I looked her up seven years after high school and three weeks later we were engaged. (Hey, it happens.) And Nancy (the one kneeling in the photo) is here today. She's also a new member of the Monogram Club, holding multiple varsity letters in Gymnastics and All Metro awards for top six finishes on multiple apparatuses and also in the All-around competition. She also earned three varsity letters in Gymnastics at Seattle Pacific University.

I'll bet the *Seattle Times* never ran a full page of **your** pictures.

Nancy is still some-thing of beauty.

My final season of Track & Field finished out my senior year. But I was in for a big surprise. Remembering that 220-yard Junior Varsity win the year before, my coaches decided I would run both the 440 (the quarter mile) as well as the two-mile. Kevin Adams would run the half-mile and the mile. The coaches were maximizing our chance to score points.

One race each year had each southern division team travel north to race against a northern division school at Shoreline Stadium.

Well, **our** trip north came in our very first meet, and I was surprised and pleased to win my first 440 race. Unfortunately, it was West Seattle's only win that day.

We were dominated by Shoreline 101-25. But, I felt better about it later when I learned that Shoreline went on to win the State Triple-A Championship that year.

Because the 2-mile race, eight laps of the track, took so much time, I would run against mostly the same 20 or so runners each week.

There were many schools that didn't have runners that could challenge me in the Two-mile. By now I'd trained and raced over 6,000 miles over the previous three years, the distance from Seattle to Boston and back. So, in those races against Garfield, Cleveland, or Queen Anne which were easy wins for me, I had a unique race plan. There were three good Chief Sealth runners who ran in a pack. Each week, if I was not already ahead of them, I would close with them in lap seven and kick past them on the last turn. It was my guilty pleasure to never lose that year to West Seattle's archrival.

As my last season came to an end, I earned a place in the Metro League Championships Two-mile finals.

We all knew who would win the race. Gordy Braun from Shoreline was capable of running under nine minutes for Two-miles and did. The rest of us would run our personal bests if we could break 10-minutes.

For once, I was running on a quality track on a warm day in the inspiring Husky Stadium. With Gordy Braun setting a blazing pace, the rest of us just tried to hang on. I ran the race of my life, finishing in 9:52, with an All-Metro qualifying 4th place, 21 second off of Rick Hebron's West Seattle school record.

The only other scoring for West Seattle that year was a 5th place in the Mile by Kevin Adams.

I'd been elected team captain, and with my All-metro finish, earned my last two stars for my W letter. But it was June 1973 and I'd only be wearing that letter around West Side High for a few weeks.

Now that I'm retired you might think I'll be telling these stories and more to my many grandchildren. But while I raced at the District level, I never qualified for State.

But both my daughters ran at State in X-Country multiple years – And then there's my son. Yes, I had 6 varsity letters in high school. But Nathanael earned eleven. I never went to State, but he went to State nine times and was twice a State medalist. And as a runner in college, he earned 10 varsity letters and three team awards! They were keeping up a family tradition.

I'm over my time but if you have questions I'll certainly stick around. Thanks for letting me share my story.
