

MARC ARONSON

Stone = Throw

When I was growing up in Manhattan, sports meant running out into Central Park, where depending on my age or the season, we played fungo games, running bases, touch football, softball, pick-up basketball, Wiffle ball—any combination of boys, equipment, and whatever fields we could mark with muddy jackets, rocks, and sticks. Sports was not an activity, it was a time period: Saturday, finish breakfast, run out to the field, see what happened. I realized around the time my son was born that the sports life of my childhood no longer existed in Manhattan. Central Park is a carefully patrolled grass museum, where the wealthy ladies who pay for the maintenance of the park put up endless fences and signs, warning that seeds are germinating and that you had best keep off. Great for grass, terrible for kids.

I can't say we left the city and moved to the suburbs because they ruined the park, but it helped. My son was two when we bought the house on a slight hill in Maplewood, a five-minute brisk walk from the train station. It was not long before he and I would amble down the hill to buy something or look at the trains go by. A walk with a two-year-old is very Zen; it is not

about the end but the journey. He needs to pet the dog someone is walking; to roll down the slight incline to the church basement, and then roll again, and again, and again; to remind me of the place where the wasps (he calls them bees) live, then zoom past it.

Along the way, we pass by a driveway filled with gravel. From the age where he could first walk, he needed to stop there, pick up a stone, and throw it. Not to throw at something as a test of aim—not to throw in anger as a protest—not even to see how far it would go. It was simple: stone = throw.

Sasha's world is filled with those equations: fallen tree = balance beam; puddle = splash; stick = gun = "I shoot you dead"; shadow = "monsters, let's get them"; walk = race = "I'm the winner."

No doubt my enjoyment of his physical, rambunctious temperament and my willingness to shoot monsters and chase imaginary bad guys with him encourages those sides of Sasha's personality. But I did not teach him stone = throw. There is something elemental in that. There is no goal, just an urgent necessity, a compelling need. Dogs raise their legs to trees; boys throw stones.

Sasha is left-handed and is now three. He's willing to spend some time learning how a lefty holds a bat or catches with a mitt or dribbles a soccer ball. His interest in acquiring skills waxes and wanes. Throwing stones is not something he does to sharpen his aim or to improve his ability to pitch. It is just a demand that the landscape makes on his nervous system. Nice small stones that fit easily in your hand are there to be picked up, to be hefted a minute in the palm of your hand to sense their weight, and to be tossed.

We have already started the soccer and tennis and swimming

lessons. My childhood of free play is as impossible here as it was in the city. But at least in the gravel in the driveway, Sasha gets a few minutes of being a pure boy: a being designed for picking up round objects and throwing them. And long may that pure physical joy reign as a boy's freedom, and a boy's delight.

Biography:

Grew up: Upper West Side of Manhattan

Now lives: Maplewood, New Jersey

Random fact: Once stole a pass in high school basketball at the old Madison Square Garden. Clearly remembers the steal and having the whole Garden court ahead of him. Is less clear about whether he made the layup at the other end.

Selected Bibliography:

Witch-Hunt: Mysteries of the Salem Witch Trials

Exploding the Myths: The Truth about Teenagers and Reading

Sir Walter Raleigh and the Quest for El Dorado