

A son's off to college

Yet another change, yet another "new normal."

By Tim Hollenbach

They call it "finding the new normal." When change happens in your life, you have to find and grow accustomed to a new daily routine: the new normal. That's the key, experts say, to adjusting successfully to change.

What these experts don't tell you is that normal doesn't last long.

The next big change for me comes next week. On Tuesday, Aug. 19, I will take my older son, Eric, his stuff and the rest of my money to Columbia, Mo., where Eric will join more than 5,600 others as a freshman in Mizzou's Class of 2012.

Class of 2012? It was just a few summers ago that a newborn Eric came home from the hospital wearing cheap sunglasses to protect his eyes from the lights in his crib that would cure his case of jaundice. Just moments ago, Eric and I had our first catch, and I taught him to ride his bike, and I had "the talk" with him about girls.

Today, Eric is 6'4", wears Oakleys, drives and talks to me about girls. I guess I can get rid of the car seat.

Eric's leaving for Mizzou, of course, is not the first time I've had to adjust to change and find the new normal. I know I'm not the only one, but the last few years have felt as though somebody hit "hyper-space" on my change button. I've switched jobs, moved twice, sent two daughters off to college, welcomed a son-in-law to the family, become a grandfather and gone through a divorce.

After handling all this change, you'd think Eric's leaving the nest would be relatively insignificant. Emotionally pain-free. It's not. Ever since Eric and I went to Columbia a few weeks ago for "summer welcome/freshman orientation," I've been disoriented.

After the divorce, it took some time but Eric, younger son Tommy and I found our new normal. We made the family house a home again, a kind of frat house where we keep each other in line, protect one another, laugh, have fun and live our lives. When Eric leaves, it'll be Tommy and I who have to find that new normal.

Tell me again that change is a good thing. I keep remembering something Eric said to me several years ago, something that I'm sure that he does not remember, but it's a phrase that sums up what I've been feeling about his leaving for college.

I was coaching Eric's baseball team at the time, and a last-minute work obligation came up, forcing me to miss a game. After lining up an assistant coach to cover my absence, I called Eric and told him that I wouldn't be able to make the game. I expected him to not care. I'd missed games before, and I'd noticed no particular reaction. But this time, to my surprise, Eric was upset. "Dad," he told me, "it's just not the same when you're not there!"

Eric, I feel your pain.

That's how I feel when I think about next Tuesday. It's the same for Tommy. I think it's what all the parents, relatives and friends of all the students who will leave for their freshman year of college in a few weeks are feeling.

We'll be fine, we'll adjust and we will find our new normals.

But it's just not the same when they're not here.

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Tim Hollenbach and son Eric.

Hitting curves, fastballs and change-ups

Turns out baseball really can be a metaphor for life.

By Eric Hollenbach

There comes a time in every person's life when you have to deal with change. Like a curveball, you have to keep your head in, not back out and take your best hack. Being a man of baseball, I sometimes look at my life so far as steps in a baseball player's career.

As a young rookie, poised and naive growing up in the suburbs, life as I knew it was simple, nothing but straight fastballs. I'd wake up, watch morning cartoons, eat my favorite cereal and head off to school without a worry in the world. As I got older, the pitches became so familiar that I could drive them up the middle day in and day out. My batting average climbed to an outrageous number, and I thought I was ready for the next level.

When I got the call up to single A — or, as the kids call it, junior high — my head was high, my confidence was through the roof and I was ready to take on any fastball life had to throw at me. Little did I know that they would be much, much faster.

It was a little rough at the beginning of the season. Everything blew by me so fast that I didn't have time to think. Classes seemed impossible, friends seemed to change and life as I knew it was getting more complicated. But I buckled down, developed some patience, looked for the right pitches to hit and began swinging with confidence again. I became ever more eager for that next call up.

Double A — high school — introduced me to some of the nastiest pitches any kid ever sees. Sure, the fastballs were faster, but now the pitchers mixed in change-ups, curveballs and the sickest sliders this side of anywhere. Again,

I lost my confidence and my swing.

I spent four long years in Double A, and it wasn't easy. Tough classes were a nightmare. Homework piled on top of extra curricular activities and sports while teachers blew fastballs right by me. Then, life broke off a very nasty curve: The sudden divorce of my parents, who had been together for more than 25 years, left my knees wobbling and my ankles busted.

Life is relentless, and more change-ups started coming at me. People I thought were friends seemed to vanish as I realized who they were and what they were becoming. All of this led to a career-low average, and my stroke seemed to go for good.

But I knew that a baseball player's career sometimes ends unsuccessfully, and I was determined to not let that happen. With the help of my special "coaches," I found my stroke. I began hitting the fastball again. I started staying in on the curve. I adjusted to the change-up. After taking my practice cuts, I became more outgoing: performing in front of the entire student body at pep rallies; treasuring a small, close-knit group of friends; and earning the trust of a beautiful young woman.

Now, after years of preparation, this young rookie is ready for the big time.

They tell me that in "The Show" — college — the fastballs are faster, the curveballs break harder and the change-ups and sliders bite the corners. To make it in the big time, you have to adjust to all the changes and take your best hack.

I hear the big leagues calling. Somewhere across the river, a booming school in Columbia, Mo., is about to make the call to bring several thousand students to the big time. I am one of them. The chants of "M-I-Z-Z-O-U" are relentless, and they say that in Columbia, the curveballs are the ugliest pitches you will ever see.

Lucky for me, I eat curveballs for breakfast.

Eric Hollenbach of O'Fallon, Ill., will be a freshman at the University of Missouri-Columbia starting next week.