

By Anna Mitchael



## Questions from Deep in the Heart of Texas

**Q** Dear Boots,  
My husband and I met at summer camp, so it holds lots of special memories for us. We've waited a long time for our son to be old enough to go, but now that the time has come, he's got zero interest. Should we make him?

— From, *Camp Crusader*

**A** Dear Camp Crusader,  
Let's talk about John. He's a guy in his mid-forties, lives around the corner from me. On Saturday mornings when I drive by on my way to get donuts work out, John is always outside mowing his grass. The guy's 6-foot-5, an easy 250 pounds, with shoulders so broad he has to turn to the side to pass

through some doorways. I always think those little blades of grass don't stand a chance.

John's size made him a shoo-in for football, and he played all through high school and college. Loved the sport. Here's where John's story starts to weave with yours: John has one kid — a boy who will be a freshman at a large high school next year. Kid's built like a house, yet the last thing he wants to do is play football.

*But how? But why? Such a waste!*  
Can't you almost hear the armchair quarterbacks crying into their Gatorade and whiskies?

For their laments I have no pity, but for John I do. There are things we can pass on to our kids — in his case, stature and a capacity for great physical strength. And then there are things we cannot.

Every Saturday morning in the fall we can use SportsCenter as an alarm clock. In summers we can

forgo the lounge chairs for football in the sand, and in winter we can soldier out in sweatshirts and hats to toss the pigskin. When they first start toddling, we can make sure they always head toward the goalpost first.

Yet, as John learned, none of that guarantees a child will grow into a teenager with a deep and burning desire to walk onto a field lit by Friday night lights in front of hundreds of riled-up-neighbors, a handful of overgrown armchair quarterbacks and most of their adolescent peers to get the tar knocked out of them by some hosses who bussed in from Odessa.

If this makes sense to you, Crusader, then perhaps you are also able to see how it's possible your son might never decide he wants to spend part of his summer meeting brand-new people, in a brand-new place, developing a brand-new appreciation for mosquito spray. As they say — or

at least as my husband and I have often said to each other when our children have earmuffs on — one man’s Disney World is another’s place of torment.

John and I aren’t good friends. Our interactions are limited to waving hello and — because his wife and I are close — once or twice ~~after my workout~~ I’ve dropped off a dozen sugar bombs, and we’ve had an easy Saturday morning conversation. So while I can’t comment on any inner struggle he’s had with this issue, I have observed that, outwardly, instead of feeling rejected by his son’s decision, he has used it to pursue something the teenager does feel passionate about. And now after the lawn is mowed, the son is teaching John to swing a golf club. If it can be said that grass is fighting a losing battle, those golf balls are toast.

Your love of camp and the time you and your husband shared there won’t be weakened if your son doesn’t pack a trunk and take off for two weeks to sing the same songs and bounce on a similar blob. That deep love of place and your commitment to the experience can shape-shift and show up in your son in ways that are unexpected and delightful.

How we keep ourselves open for this. How we learn to notice and then accept changes in the people we love. How we balance holding someone in our hearts even as they are flying away. Crusader, *this* is what our children attempt to pass on to us.

— *Love, Boots*

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**Q Dear Boots,**  
**Every July 4th my sister-in-law goes on and on about how her potato salad is “world famous”** because once, like two decades ago, she got some ribbon at the county fair. Help me, Boots. I need a recipe that will show her up once and for all.

— *From, The Underdog*

**A** Oh, Underdog, do I have the recipe for you. First put a saucepan on the stove. Then grab a can opener and an extra-large can of baked beans. Open that puppy up, then dump those beans in the saucepan and let them heat up. I have friends who add a little extra bacon grease to the pan for heartiness and flavor, and depending on how committed you feel to your artery health you can try that or not.

Once the beans are heated, dump them in a pretty bowl, take it to the family cookout, and when your sister-in-law starts talking about her potato salad, Lord help her, take a big bite of those beans and see if they don't taste a little like freedom.

We can't know why your sister-in-law needs to turn her spuds into such a spectacle, but as adults in this world, we can guess it's probably due to some kind of baggage she hasn't yet worked through. Why? Because as adults in this world, we carry some of that too.

It doesn't take long to heat up beans, and so with some of that extra time you've made for yourself, you could choose to take a look at why it's irking you so badly that she needs this praise. Forgive me if this is an overreach, but my guess is that this inquiry might lead you to a couple bags of your own that it's time to open up and maybe even dump out. They don't call it Independence Day for nothing, Underdog.

Just imagine — if you do this work now you will be so healed by the time Thanksgiving rolls around. It won't even phase you when you have to hear about her exceptionally juicy turkey, not to mention the perfected balance of nut and sugar in her premier pecan pie.

— *Love, Boots*

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