Eric R. Fleming

"F" is for friendship in VFY

Young people in our society have always looked to athletes, college and professional, as idols and role models. Unfortunately interaction between the two groups rarely takes place, especially on a societal basis. The Volunteers for Youth (VFY) program, sponsored by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), brings student-athletes and young people together as friends, to the benefit of both, and the community as well.

The VFY program began at Stanford in 1969, with the goal of helping youths face the problems of growing up by pairing them with student athletes. At present, 47 institutions have VFY programs, with the NCAA becoming primary sponsor in 1977.

The MIT program also began in 1972, and is run under the auspices of the Department of Athletics. There are currently 25 student-athletes (including six directors) paired with elementary and middle school students in the Cambridge area. The program is open to all student-athletes interested in having a young person as a friend.

The word friend is an important one in describing the relationship between the athletes and their "mates." Emphasis is placed on friendship, not counseling or being a surrogate parent. Although many of the young people come from single-parent homes, the athletes do not serve as substitutes "mothers" or "fathers."

An example of a successful pairing of athlete and youngster is MIT basketball player Mark Branch and Curtisewing of Cambridge. Curtis (whose uncle Bill is in the Tufts varsity basketball team) is a ten-year-old sixth-grader with a fine school record, and is interested in all sports, especially basketball and baseball. Branch and Curtis have been paired since last October.

"Having a lot of fun" is what Branch enjoys most about his relationship with Curtis. The two often play video games, basketball, or just talk. Curtis has accompanied the team to several games, and has become "a part of it." (The team has only lost one game Curtis has attended.)

The two have a very open, sincere friendship. Branch and Curtis are very honest with each other, not hesitating to give advice on basketball, school, or life in general. The relationship is best described when Branch mentions, "I look at Curtis not as a teammate, but as a friend."

Curtis and Branch see their companionship lasting for a long time, even if the VFY program ended. The two intend to visit one another, if possible, after Branch's graduation (Curtis says of Branch, "He's a part of my family while he's at MIT"). Curtis intend to visit several of the junior guard's classes during February school vacation.

Recruiting for the VFY program will take place Monday and Tuesday, February 8 and 9, from 10am to 2pm in Lobby 10. The directors of the program welcome all to stop by, and gain an opportunity to, as Branch puts it, make "a lifelong friend."

February 6
Men's Basketball vs. St. Francis
2pm

February 12
Squash vs. Bowdoin
4pm

Women's Basketball vs. Nichols
1pm

February 13
Women's Gymnastics vs. Vermont
1pm

February 14
Women's Fencing vs. Amherst
2pm

February 15
Women's Swimming vs. Wellesley
4pm

February 16
Women's Fencing at Wellesley
1pm

February 16
Men's Swimming, Greater Bosonvs at Harvard
2pm

February 16
Men's Basketball vs. Suffolk
7:30pm

Women's Gymnastics vs. Smith
7pm

Men's Club Ice Hockey vs. Cornell
2pm

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