

Climbing the Ladder > column



By **Seth Darmstadter**
Meckler Bulger Tilson Marick & Pearson

Before the big game, prepare, prepare

Usually my own missteps provide more than sufficient fodder for this column, but this month I'm stumped. Truth is, as I sit here today I'm the associate who needs some tips.

One of the secrets of my success (and sanity) as a young lawyer is overpreparation. Whether I am going into court to argue a motion, taking or defending a deposition, teaching a class or heading into a meeting with a client, it is my practice to consider every possible scenario and prepare for each one.

I review file materials, pore over documents, draft outlines, analyze recent cases and prepare talking points. Some might categorize my preparation as unnecessary, or even obsessive. However, there is a reason why top quarterbacks win games while other equally gifted athletes struggle.

They watch tape; they analyze opposing defenses.

They make plans, they make contingency plans and then they make contingency plans for their contingency plans. Just like a clean-up hitter might know to look for a fastball low and in the zone on a 3-2 count late in a tied game against an opposing team's ace, I like to anticipate my opposing counsel's attack on my summary judgment argument before he makes it.

My "pregame routine" allows me to sleep easily at night and calms my nerves during the most stressful moments.

On March 10, my first child was born. Before Lexi's birth, I worried about whether I would know how to care for her, and whether I had the tools to make for a good dad. Before I had a daughter of my own, I did not know the first thing about raising a child; I did not even know how to hold a baby or how to change a diaper.

In the past, when I was around new babies I was uncomfortable and disinterested and I never even wanted to touch them for fear that they would break.

I worried that I might have similar feelings toward my own baby and that I would want to spend all of my time at the office until she was potty-trained and able to walk. Those were the things that kept me up at night in the days and weeks before she was born.

Then she came out and something inside of me clicked on.

From the first time I held her in my arms I was completely comfortable and overcome with a calmness that I never imagined I could feel.

Before I could resist her spell, she had me wrapped around all 10 of her tiny fingers.

Lexi was born late on a Wednesday, and I came back to work the following Monday.

I immediately made a to-do list of my most urgent tasks, knocked them out one by one and rushed home to see my new family. Same thing happened on Tuesday, and again on Wednesday.

On Thursday, I had a court appearance, a simple initial case management conference. In anticipation, I arrived at my office early Thursday and realized I had not even read this new judge's standing order.

I had forgotten to outline my factual introduction of the case, and I had not yet researched the background of my opposing counsel.

There went my calm. Before I left for court, I managed to prepare for the conference, but when I walked into the room I felt as nervous and uneasy as if it were my first time ever stepping up to the bench.

Walking back to my office after a successful case management conference, I realized that I had a lot of figuring out to do.

I finally had reached the point where I felt in control of my professional life and that control quickly was slipping away. I needed to create a new balance, and I did not even know if such a balance was possible. Sleeping less to create a greater number of workable hours was off the table because that would have meant not sleeping at all.

Working less to create more hours for family time also was not the answer. I thought creating a balance between being a good husband and being a good lawyer was tough, but I was wrong.

Now I had to figure out how to fit fatherhood into the mix without neglecting my wife or my career.

Frankly, I find it odd that this need for a balance is almost never discussed with regard to male attorneys.

I regularly read about the challenges faced by working moms (which I absolutely acknowledge and appreciate), but working dads in two-income households never seem to make it into the discussion. Let me be one of the first to declare that climbing the ladder as a young associate with a new baby is really, really tough.

I'm about two months into fatherhood, my desk is clean and orderly and my daughter recognizes both my face and my voice.

At work, I am now finding ways to fit in my neurotic preparation routine, and I can change a soiled diaper faster than a NASCAR pit crew replaces a set of bald tires.

Still, I do not have it all figured out. In particular, I am waiting for someone to tell me when and how I will ever again fit 18 holes into my life.

If you have the answer to that one, please shoot me an e-mail! ■

seth.darmstadter@mbtlaw.com