

A calm outlook and steady hand – A father’s gift to his son

6/19/2020

When Chicago-based First Officer Matt Yoder was in high school, he loved playing basketball. Luckily, his father, Chicago-based Captain Roger Yoder, was a pretty good player.

One night, during a game of father-son one-on-one, Matt couldn’t break past his dad and take the ball to the hoop. “It was making me so mad because I wanted to beat him,” Matt said.

On their way home from the court, Roger gave his son some fatherly advice.

“There are days when the ball just doesn’t go in,” he said. “But there will be other days — no matter where you shoot from, with your eyes closed or with your back turned — that the ball always goes in. You just shouldn’t make a big deal about either of them.”

Matt said the advice has always stuck with him.

“It’s a great perspective of how he sees things,” Matt said. “He always rolls with it and makes the best of any situation.”

It’s this kind of cool, calm and level-headed approach Roger takes towards life, eventually inspiring his son to take a similar career path.

“I was careful to make sure (aviation) was his dream, and not my dream for him,” Roger said. “When he was little, he would ask me when I would teach him how to fly. And I would say, ‘When you’re ready.’”

Matt decided to start pursuing aviation when he was about 16. Roger taught him to fly and he eventually landed his license during his junior year of high school.

Matt, now in his thirties, is a father himself. He and his wife, Chelsey, have two girls, ages 5 and 7. His older daughter has already shown an interest in aviation, but is still deciding whether to become “a pilot or a princess.”

When he’s not flying a Boeing 737-800 out of Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport (ORD), Roger runs a flight school in Indiana. His goal is to keep flying lessons affordable to help young people follow their passion. “My reward is seeing these kids get their private license, and then go on to college and start their career,” Roger said.

The father-son team share countless memories, but one highlight is when Matt joined American in 2018, and Roger pinned first officer wings on his son during a special ceremony.

“I didn’t realize until that moment that it was a big deal for him,” Matt said. “His jaws were clenched, which caused my jaws to clench a bit. It’s something that will always stick with me.”

About a year later, the two were able to work on the flight deck together during a flight from ORD to Miami International Airport (MIA), with both their wives aboard. They’ve been able to share a few flights together since.

Early this year, Matt and Chelsey decided Chelsey would stay home with their daughters. Like many parents amidst the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, she suddenly found herself taking on three simultaneous roles: Mom, teacher and after-school instructor. While it’s not ideal, Matt said his family has bonded more, helping him make memories with his daughters — like the ones he has of playing basketball with Roger years ago.

The father-son duo are pictured in the cockpit of a Boeing 737 aircraft in 2019.

About one year after Matt earned his American Airlines wings, Roger’s wife, Rhonda (far left), and Matt’s wife, Chelsey (center right), were able to join their pilot husbands on a flight to Miami International Airport (MIA) in 2019.

Matt Yoder received his American Airlines first officer wings from his father, Roger, in January 2018.