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Is There a Better Half?

By SARA MOSLE

IN the realm of college admissions, Harvard is seldom the spurned suitor. But last December, Olivia Rogan of Dallas had a hard time deciding how to respond to its overtures.

It wasn't that she didn't want to go there. She thought she might.

Or that Harvard didn't want her. It very likely did.

In addition to a platinum academic record and SAT scores, Olivia was one of the country's top student policy debaters — an impressive accomplishment in any event, but particularly one for a girl. (Policy debate, which is characterized by almost incomprehensibly rapid talking, has long been a male preserve.) Even before she and her partner won the annual Harvard tournament, Ms. Rogan says, a Harvard debate coach was courting her.

But Olivia didn't have just herself to consider. She is a triplet, and her siblings were applying to many of the same selective colleges. Her debating partner, as it happens, was her brother, Nick, whose own accomplishments, at least on paper, were nearly identical to Olivia's and whose heart was set on attending Harvard. Olivia had already gotten into Yale and their sister Stephanie into the University of Pennsylvania early admissions. (Harvard ended early admissions in 2007.) Nick had not yet been accepted anywhere.

This was Olivia's quandary: Yale didn't have a policy debate team, so giving up Harvard was effectively closing the door on debating. But if she got into Harvard and Nick didn't, she would never forgive herself. She would forever wonder if she had taken his spot.

"Other people were applying to Harvard from our school," Olivia explains, "and it's not like Harvard was going to take five people. Sometimes it only takes one or two. I knew colleges place this huge emphasis on geographical diversity. So were they really going to take two people from the exact same household?"

Applying to selective colleges is stressful under the best of circumstances, but for twins and triplets the process can be particularly agonizing. For one, relationships between multiples, as they refer to themselves, are often exceedingly close. When the rejection or acceptance e-mail arrives, sometimes on a single computer, the glory, disappointment, envy and guilt play out under the same roof, threatening the single most important relationship in their lives, beyond the one with their parents.

Torn by competing loyalties — what they owe themselves and one another — multiples often end up limiting their choices, sometimes unnecessarily.

Without consulting her brother, Olivia abruptly withdrew her application to Harvard. "I'd already gotten into

a really good school," she says. "I don't regret my decision but I do think about it. It's really sad that I'm leaving debate." Nick, for his part, was accepted at Harvard but felt wretched. "I wish she weren't quitting debate, that I hadn't had something to do with it," he says.

Such struggles are likely to become more common in coming years. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the number of triplets in the United States jumped by 400 percent from 1990 to 1998 and the number of twins 42 percent from 1990 to 2004, the result of women postponing motherhood (which increases the likelihood of multiple births) and the development in the 1980s of in vitro fertilization (which often involves implanting more than one embryo). This fall, those born in 1990 will be high school seniors, meaning the number of twins and triplets applying to college stands to increase substantially over the next decade.

When asked about twins and admissions, Stanford declined to comment. Princeton offered only anodyne assurances that all applications were treated individually. William R. Fitzsimmons, the dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard, was more forthcoming.

"One of the great urban legends," Dr. Fitzsimmons says, "is that we have quotas for a particular school or state, such that with twins or triplets we might accept one but not the other. If truly the candidates are equally qualified, the decision would be the same for both."

But that raises the question of what it means to be "equally qualified," especially at a time of record applications. Last year, Harvard had its lowest acceptance rate ever, rejecting 93 of every 100 applicants. It stands to reason that when Olivia Rogan withdrew her application she did indeed increase the chances of acceptance, however marginally, for everyone else.

Duke is one of the few universities that asks an applicant if he or she is a twin or triplet, and if so, if other siblings are applying the same year. Christoph Guttentag, the dean for undergraduate admissions, explains, "The question arose from two different impulses."

The first was purely logistical: "Twins often have very similar names. They might begin with the same initial. It might be Bill and Barry or Jane and Jamie. They often have very similar Social Security numbers, only one number different. They have the same address and often very similar e-mail addresses. And if someone isn't paying perfect attention, the application can be filed in the other twin's folder." (Twins and triplets applying to the same place might be well advised to pick dissimilar e-mail addresses.)

The second impulse, however, reflected a far deeper concern. "The system any selective college uses is geared to making fine distinctions, but it can be a blunt instrument," Mr. Guttentag allows. "It's good at distinguishing big differences and good at magnifying very, very small differences." Small differences, he says, can loom larger than they should.

Mr. Guttentag points to an experience he had as a young admissions officer at the University of Pennsylvania, when one twin was admitted and the other denied. "On the basis of our rating system, one was slightly stronger than the other. Afterward, we got a letter from the father, asking about our decision, and I explained it to him. He said, 'Under your rating system, that may be correct, but I can tell you, I live with these kids every day and they are very, very similar.' The lesson I drew was if we're making different decisions, do those

differences actually mean anything in the real world?”

Whether owing to nature or nurture, Mr. Guttentag finds, twins and triplets can be startling in their academic similarity: in course selection, grades and standardized test scores. “It’s also interesting when they’re not similar at all, and we might wonder why that’s the case.”

Perhaps as a result, Duke considers twins both individually and as a unit. “If the applications are consistent,” he says, “we like to have a compelling reason to make a different decision.” An example of a compelling reason would be if one sibling applied for early admission and the other did not.

Jason and Scott Bade, who will be high school seniors this fall, exemplify Mr. Guttentag’s concerns. Both are top students at Aragon High School in San Mateo, Calif., aiming for Stanford and the Ivy Leagues. Because of tracking, they’ve ended up in almost all the same Advanced Placement and honors courses. Both participate in mock Congress, mock trial and model United Nations, and enjoy tennis and classical music. One notable difference is that Scott is a history and political science buff and writes a weekly political column for the school newspaper; Jason, whose passion is environmentalism, is working to bring solar power to their school and district.

The boys fret about minuscule differences in their résumés, ones they agree favor Jason ever so slightly. Jason did marginally better on the math portion of the SAT, and has straight A’s and a shot at being valedictorian. Scott, meanwhile, received — egads! — a B in second-year calculus as a junior.

It’s not that the Bades think that a single B in a challenging course will disqualify Scott from admission to an elite school. It’s that the Bades, like Olivia Rogan, worry that the Ivy Leagues typically accept no more than a handful of students from their high school, and when they are forced to choose, Scott may lose out to his brother. In a few cases the Bade boys have agreed not to compete head to head. “I’m interested in economics and business, so I’ll apply to the University of Pennsylvania,” Jason says. “My brother, because he’s interested in politics, will apply to Georgetown University.” But neither is willing to sacrifice a shot at Yale or Princeton. “If we divide and conquer,” Jason says, “we might end up both losing out.”

Their high school counselor, the Bades say, has advised them to try to distinguish themselves by pursuing different activities. But Dr. Fitzsimmons of Harvard warns that trying to make distinctions can backfire if they seem artificial. “One is always better off,” he insists, “letting colleges — or a job, for that matter — know what you’re really about, what your strengths are, as, in the end, it’s very hard trying to be something you’re not.”

But the Bades’ problem isn’t that they lack interests; it’s that having spent so much of their lives together, brought up by the same parents and attending the same classes, they’re passionate about so many of the same things. Not surprisingly, they are attracted to many of the same colleges.

If multiples and their families are sometimes skeptical of the application process, it’s because, they say, they have encountered so many wrongheaded notions over the years. Many school districts, for instance, continue to require multiples to be separated in class to help them foster independence. “In this country, we have a tendency to push twins apart,” says Nancy L. Segal, director of the Twin Studies Center at California State University, Fullerton. The science behind such policies, however, has been widely disputed.

"There is no compelling evidence that schools should adopt strict policies regarding classroom placements for twins," says Heather M. Beauchamp, an associate professor of psychology at the State University of New York, Potsdam, who has studied the literature. One 2005 study of adolescent twins in Finland, she says, "found no significant differences in term-grade academic achievement for twins rated as dependent or independent." Still, some families express fear that colleges harbor outdated views that affect their willingness to admit more than one multiple at a time — for the students' own good.

Dr. Fitzsimmons contends that no such bias exists. "I've seen twins argue that the best thing in the world for them would be to be apart in college. That's worked out. I've also seen them argue just as passionately that they should be together. That's worked out, too. There's no one mold."

Take the Elster sisters, triplets from Winston-Salem, N.C. Before college, the longest any of them had been apart was three weeks one summer when Martha Elster went to England. Her sister Elizabeth recalls how friends in high school sometimes referred to her as "one-third," as if she were only a fraction of a human being. When it was time to consider colleges, she says, "we wanted to go our separate ways, become our own individuals."

Elizabeth went to Washington University in St. Louis, where, she says, "it was great." being on her own.

"I wasn't known as one of three," she adds. "I was one person."

Thus when her sister Martha, who was miserable after a semester at Emory, ended up transferring to Wash U., Elizabeth was upset. Elizabeth had won a prestigious scholarship, the Dansforth. Now Martha won the same. "It caused some difficult feelings for Elizabeth to have her sister come in and steal her thunder," says the girls' mother, Jeanine Elster.

The sisters made a pledge. "We worked out a plan for sophomore year," Elizabeth says. "We'd try to be really separate." While they retain their special bond, the girls make a point of taking different classes and having different friends. Their sister Patricia, on her own at Wake Forest, admits to occasional pangs of jealousy over not being with her sisters, too.

The twins and triplets aren't the only ones facing adjustments after years of living under one roof. Leslie Jackson, a mother of triplets in Carrollton, Tex., says that when her two sons and one daughter graduate next spring, she won't have the luxury of getting used to an empty nest gradually.

"Next year," she says, "I'm going to go from having three noisy, boisterous kids to none."

Like her children, she's both excited and daunted by the prospect.

Sara Mosle is writing a book about an explosion at an East Texas school that killed hundreds of children in 1937.

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