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From the Dugout to the Classroom

Why Good Baseball Coaches Have Much to Offer Good Professors

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Professors are many things. We are scholars who publish. We engage in service on our campuses and in our communities. But we are teachers first and foremost. We prepare young people to be successful in the classroom as well as in society. Despite what many see as an inherent tension on campus between faculty members and athletic coaches, those of us who teach students in the classroom have much to learn from those who coach student-athletes on the field. Yes, many athletic coaches receive more fame and fortune than most professors. And baseball coaches are certainly better known for their great pregame speeches, intimate knowledge of double-switch substitutions, and keen offensive strategies than professors are for their best lectures and finest articles. But the best coaches are *also* primarily teachers, and professors have much to learn from them. In many ways, baseball coaches—and perhaps most coaches—are much the same as the professor who teaches English, math, or history, for the best coaches use the teaching principles and skills used by the best classroom teachers.

THE TEACHING PHILOSOPHY OF GOOD BASEBALL COACHES

Let me explain. Armed with a solid knowledge of our respective disciplines, professors have *information* to share with our students. If we are interested in improving how we teach and educate our students, then we would be wise to borrow from the coaches' playbook on how better to impart this disciplinary information to our students. For example, baseball coaches seek to understand how the body operates and how the mechanics of the sport should be executed. Thus, a coach can teach players *what* to do, *how* to do it, and most importantly *why* it should be done in that manner. All coaches teach *what* to do: "on this play, you go over there and field the ball." Some

coaches teach *how* to do it: “keep your feet fairly close together and reverse pivot,” but the best coaches teach *why*: “if you keep your feet closer together, it will enable you to stay balanced, rotate the body faster, and move into the throwing motion even before you get completely turned around!” Teaching players *why* is the coach’s opportunity to *sell* the technique to the player, and *salesmanship* is just as important in coaching as it is in selling life insurance, real estate, or refrigerators. Salesmanship gives the coach a chance to convince the players that *this particular* technique will make it easier to do the job successfully. Unlike the stereotype of the coach who berates players, the best coaches do not discourage players from asking why something is being taught a certain way, because the *why* leads to an opportunity to sell the players on a particular method of execution.

While “selling” a player on a particular skill or technique is much less problematic for a coach than for a professor who “sells” a student on a particular theory, ideology, or philosophy, there does exist a remarkable parallel between the two. Think about it: all professors teach *what* our subject matter is about. We give students factual material concerning dates and important events and people for them to remember. But if all we teach is the *what*, our students may become well-instructed, but few will be well-educated. Many professors teach *how* these facts and dates and people came to be important, but they know all too well that facts and skills learned from textbooks can change quickly as more facts and better skills are learned. The best professors teach *why* these facts and skills came to be seen as important and *why* asking questions and challenging our own conclusions about the data is vital to being educated. Education involves inquiring, close reading, interpreting, recognizing parallels, and understanding causes and consequences. An increasingly technical world needs people who come from backgrounds that enable them to remain critical and allow them to adjust to changing conditions and information. Good coaches have already figured this out! They know that it is not enough simply to *train* their players; rather, players need to reach the point that they understand the *what*, the *how*, and the *why* so that they can make their own adjustments during a game.

Think about how this philosophy of coaching approach applies to the classroom. It is the role of the professor to wrestle and challenge—to ask the question *why* and not merely inform our students of *what* and *how*. As professors, we do our best to ensure that students wrestle with the challenging questions of our discipline. As our world grows more complex and difficult to understand, many professors organize their courses by looking at events in the world through different lenses and at different angles. Since “accidents” of our birth and upbringing—that is, our country of origin and social posi-

tion—leave most students predisposed to adopt only one perspective and to be certain that they have the best view, it is even more important that we consciously identify and separately consider a variety of viewpoints. All one needs to do is read a newspaper or watch the evening news to discover the ongoing clash of perspectives concerning world politics. One of the primary assumptions built into the international studies curriculum is that such advice is particularly accurate for the world in which we all live. For many of our students, the material and interpretations presented in our courses challenge some of the beliefs and feelings they hold about the world. Thus, the mission of most of our courses is not to come to conclusions about what is “good” and “bad.” Rather, our objective is to come to a better understanding of reality by examining and recognizing major patterns and parallels in the world.

We are perhaps best served by having our students think of their undergraduate education as an owner’s manual, like the one you get with a car. The more you understand about your car, the better able you are to travel while minimizing problems you encounter along the way. Similarly, the more you understand about the world in which you live, the more prepared you will be to personally grasp the events occurring in various parts of the globe that capture your attention. The daily events of our world, like cars, look like they can be ignored for long periods of time without damage; however, appearances can be deceiving. Both run better and are safer when given regular attention. But this does not mean that you necessarily need to memorize all the important events, public figures, heads of state, capitals, currency exchange rates, and winners and losers of major wars. When you need those specifics—the *what*—you look them up. And while some dates and people are more important (the *how*) than others, what we ask students to concentrate on is understanding the various perspectives that exist among scholars, intellectuals, policymakers, and political activists alike for explaining events that take place in this world. By learning basic patterns such as these, they will be able to tell when they need to look up specifics and what specifics they should look up. Learn the organizing concepts and basic information, and oftentimes the ability to challenge and educate (the *why*) falls into place.

ORGANIZING AND PLANNING PRACTICE

Most coaches work with team sports played by individuals, and their practice sessions must include a lot of individual work, work by small groups of players, and work by the entire team or starting lineup. Often, only one or two coaches are working with the team, and this creates some challenges to orga-

nizing and properly planing practice sessions. A coach must organize each practice to take advantage of the time, number of coaches, practice facilities, and practice equipment he or she has available. Too often, professors are not as adequately prepared for the classroom as coaches are for practice. That is, it takes a great deal of time, planning, and organizing of one's lecture or class discussion to make it effective for students. There is nothing natural about being an effective communicator, and to do so in the classroom requires at least as much planning as a good practice session on the athletic field. But how often are we, as professors, planning for a good experience in the classroom? Are we not often guilty of knowing our material without giving enough thought to how we will share it with our students? For example, if a team has a batting cage and a pitching machine, the infielders and outfielders could be hitting while the coach works with the pitchers and catchers on various defensive plays and techniques. If no pitching machine is available but there are batting tees, some players could hit off the tees while others set the ball on the tee. With no tees, soft toss or short toss drills could be used for small groups. Even with none of these, position players could work on drag bunting, sacrifice bunting, playing pepper, or just swinging the bat. The groups could then switch, so pitchers and catchers are hitting while infielders and outfielders work with the coach on fly ball communication, short pop ups, cutoffs and relays, or infield rundowns (with outfielders serving as base runners). Coaches know how important it is to plan the practice sessions carefully so maximum use is made of the time available and players are kept busy doing something useful rather than standing around while a few others are getting the bulk of the attention. Five minutes of planning to organize a three-hour practice is sure to result in wasted time and players who come away with little from the session.

THE VALUE OF PATIENCE

One of the great truths about teaching students and coaching athletes is both teacher and coach must be patient. This principle is so obvious it really does not need explanation, and anyone who is involved with teaching or coaching is aware of the frustrations that build up in young students or athletes when the teacher or coach has no patience with those who are trying to learn new skills on the field or organize concepts in the classroom.

But being a patient teacher does not mean ignoring things that are improper, and one of the most important aspects of good teaching is the *constant* correction of mistakes and poor execution. A coach who does not correct mistakes when they occur is not developing discipline, concentration,

and consistent mechanics, and often the coach's failure to correct mistakes whenever they occur gets athletes so confused about what constitutes proper execution that they never develop consistent mechanics. Clearly, the same can be said for teaching. While one would never seek to squash the ideas of students who are wrestling with the material and exploring new concepts out loud in the classroom, it is quite another thing to allow sloppy thinking and writing to go unnoticed or unchallenged. To be effective requires real work on behalf of the professor. Too often, professors mistake the free flow of ideas that universities seek to generate with the nonsense that "anything goes" and that "all comments uttered by our students deserve equal attention." We are experts in our classrooms. Being experts does not mean that we have a monopoly on the truth; rather, it means that we have the responsibility to guide. While this is a slippery slope for some professors to walk, it is nonetheless an area that good professors—and good coaches—walk all of the time.

Correcting mistakes or challenging opinions in a calm manner and tone of voice is very important in teaching, because everyone learns better (and retains information longer) if it is presented in a positive rather than negative manner. The best professors and the best coaches know that this calm and patient correcting of mistakes should continue for a reasonable period of time to allow the student or the player a chance to get accustomed to new material or a different technique. However, even the learning of skills (which should be done in a patient and non-stressful manner) has its limits of patience. Just as some athletes will take advantage if the coach is very calm and patient when the player makes a mistake, some students will do the same, and often both will not really worry too much about correcting it. A player or a student who continues day after day not being able to satisfactorily perform a new skill (after everyone else has mastered it) is either (1) not concentrating properly, (2) not making the necessary effort, (3) too unskilled, or (4) just does not care enough to learn. None of these excuses is acceptable if the athlete or student has had a reasonable period of time to learn the new skill. In such cases, a change in the teaching technique may be necessary to get the attention of the athlete on the field, just as it may be necessary to change approaches in the classroom in order to put some pressure on the student to make a better effort.

Finally, patience in coaching and teaching should never be applied to willingness to work, ability to improve, effort to hustle, or the need for discipline. The learning and development of a skill is best done in a relaxed atmosphere that minimizes stress and tension, but that is not true of giving good effort and hustling on the field or in the classroom. As most players know,

“it doesn’t take any ability to hustle,” and a player or a student who is lazy or does not want to learn *should be* criticized . . . and criticized immediately. While it is important for a coach to have patience with players learning new skills, it is even more important for the players to have patience with themselves. The learning of athletic skills and techniques often requires lots of work, sometimes working on the same thing over and over again until it becomes a habit. Too often in athletics, players think going out and working hard is the complete answer to improvement, and they believe that if you give 100 percent and work hard to improve yourself, you will automatically be successful. Moreover, it comes as no surprise to the veteran professor that too often our students think that studying for long periods of time is the key to success in the classroom. Working hard is certainly necessary to improve, but hard work must be properly directed to be effective. You do not just work hard, you must work hard *at a particular skill* to really improve!

PRODUCTION—PERFORMANCE—MECHANICS—WORK HABITS

Just as most athletes are concerned about their production (i.e., batting average, points scored, number of touchdowns, etc.), most students are preoccupied with their grades rather than with how much they are learning. One of the most overly quoted and least understood phrases repeated in sports has to be the belief that “Practice Makes Perfect.” Somewhere along the way, the phrase was even altered to “Perfect Practice Makes Perfect,” with the obvious idea being that in order for an athlete to get better, one must work hard in practice. However, practice *does not* make perfect; rather, “Practice Makes Permanent.” That is to say, there are numerous things that we repeat over and over again that make it more difficult for us to accomplish a particular skill, not less so. In short, many athletes ultimately discover that what they are making permanent is a skill or technique that is actually more difficult to master, no matter how much they work on it. The same can be said for the study habits of many students, both in terms of how they listen and absorb material during class as well as how they spend their study time outside of the classroom. Again, I think the manner in which many athletic coaches approach this topic can be most instructive for those of us who take pride in our teaching abilities in the classroom.

When coaches speak of *production*, they are referring to the notion of getting the job done, winning the game, scoring the run, getting a base hit, or running for a touchdown. When they speak of *performance*, coaches are talking about the manner in which a skill is executed, regardless of the outcome—for example, hitting the ball hard, making a good pitch, making a

good pass, executing the proper block. *Mechanics* are the proper use of body parts to execute a skill in the way that should produce the best results the greatest percentage of the time, and *work habits* are generally defined as the effort, intensity, and direction of the player's practice time. Now for the million-dollar question, "Which is more important?" Production? Performance? Mechanics? Work habits? For as long as sports have been played, players have been talking about producing: "It doesn't matter how you do it, just get the job done!" This would indicate that production is the most important aspect for coaches to emphasize. From a realistic viewpoint, however, players cannot control production because the ultimate outcome depends on a number of factors they cannot control: a teammate's performance, the actions of the opponent, the direction of the wind, the condition of the field, and so on. It is foolish for players to be so concerned about something they cannot control, because this often leads to an unrealistic outlook about the game. Players are much more realistic when they concentrate on the things they can control.

How does a player control performance? And more importantly for the teaching professor, how does a student control performance? The answer to both questions is by developing consistent mechanics. If players can groove their swing, pitching delivery, or fielding techniques so the same mechanics are used consistently, they have a chance to be consistently successful in their performance, which will lead to consistent production regardless of the situation, the pressure, or the score. A player can control mechanics more fully than performance or production, so players should be more concerned with mechanics than with the other two. Similarly, if students can groove their study habits, their ability to recognize parallels and synthesize material learned in the classroom and beyond, then the subject matter they seek to learn will become much easier to master, regardless of the situation, the professor, or the type of exam.

How do players control their mechanics? A player should consciously work on proper and consistent mechanics in practice to the point where they are grooved and the practice becomes a habit. This is where a strong work ethic must be developed! Then, during the game, the player concentrates completely on one thing—the ball or the mitt or the base—and the body executes the skill with proper technique, because it has been grooved and made consistent in practice. Would not all professors see better production (e.g., grades) from our students if on exam day our students concentrated on displaying the depth and breadth of their understanding (performance and mechanics)? Not surprisingly, the ability to hit home runs is very similar to the ability to produce a higher GPA: both require consistent performance, a performance that is grooved by one's mechanics and study habits. And as

all good coaches and all good professors know, it requires no talent to have a strong work ethic.

Be it the locker room or the classroom, good coaches and good professors really do have much to learn from each other. They know that it is not enough simply to *train* their players and students; rather, players and students need to reach the point that they understand the *what*, the *how*, and the *why* so that they can make their own adjustments during their games and careers, their exams and their lives. While most professors never sat in a dugout during a World Series, the best professors borrow from the same playbooks made famous by the likes of Casey Stengel, Bobby Cox, and Joe Torre: they implore students to be more concerned with their performance than their production.