

Outside the weather was at odds with the season, as a cold wind swept April snow through the open door of my classroom. The figure at the door bowed slightly at the waist, a cultural norm easy for a teacher such as me to grow fond of. Until I motioned him over he would stand in the doorway, and the cold, wet snow would seep into my room—being from Florida, I urged him on in.

One of many Koreans at this school for American military dependents, the young man was short in stature and careful in his demeanor. He let go of the door behind him, and the wind slammed it shut. He winced at the noise, afraid it would offend me. I shrugged it off, and for the second time motioned him over to my desk. “Coach,” he began, and I smiled. It is a title I love more than teacher. The next few minutes I listened to his troubles, and when he finished confiding in me, I stood and patted his shoulder and promised help, “I’ll talk to him.”

He bowed again on his way out the door, and when he was gone I glanced at the clock. The afternoon was gone, and with two days remaining until spring break and the end of the quarter, grades could not wait. Outside the snow continued, but a week in Hawaii loomed with the coming break, and grades, the weather, or the current tribulations of my student-athletes could not suppress the smile that spread across my face as I thought of the sun, sand, and Hawaiian pineapples. I settled behind my desk once again, and set back to work.

We went to see his humanities teacher the following morning. I explained the situation, “The Far East tournament is the highlight of our season, and for the seniors it is the last opportunity of their high school careers. Without passing your class, he cannot go.”

The teacher said, “Two days before the end of the quarter, he should have thought about that earlier.”

I suppressed sarcasm of my own, and tried to reason with him instead. “He has papers you graded but did not give him credit for. If you check your records—“

“Not a chance,” he rebuffed. “I know what this is. One of your blue-chip athletes can’t cut it in my class, and you need him in Japan. Well, guess what? You’ll just have to go without him.”

Early in my teaching career I battled the image of being an athlete and a coach first, to the neglect of being a teacher. I am a coach, but I demand more from my student-athletes than most imagine. The humanities teacher is short, out of shape, and has probably never had an athletic moment in his life. I suspected his antagonism was directed more at me than my student, so I tried again, “What’s the bottom line here?”

He snickered, “The truth?”

“Get out with it; tell me what’s really going on.”

“He’s hopeless.”

“Hopeless?” I repeated.

“That’s right, a complete waste of time.”

I nodded, and without another word turned and, with my arm around his shoulders, led my student-athlete from the room. We marched beneath the covered walk across campus, stomping our feet without caution through the ice, mush, and salt. In the main building I pulled him into the office I rated as high school athletic director. I shut the door and the outside world behind us, and struggled to find words. The office was small and cramped, and felt all the more cluttered for the pictures, banners, and certificates hung on the walls.

“Coach, its okay—“

I raised my hand, but words failed me.

“It is, coach. Thanks for trying.”

He stood to go, the hurt evident in his voice and on his face. I searched again for words of comfort, but the word hopeless echoed within me. Then he was gone, and I was alone with my own painful memories.

It is rare that people bother me with their words. Each of us is entitled to our own opinions—asinine or not. Often I shrug off what I disagree with rather than take exception with it, but on this I maintain without apology that I am right: though we are unique as individuals, we all have three

things in common—we are born, we will die, and between birth and death, in this incredible journey we call life, none of us are without hope.

When I was four, I sat on the front steps of our home at noon each day because I knew my dad was on his way to play catch with me during his lunch hour, and this is my oldest memory.

Lazy summer nights were spent shuffling through baseball cards and listening to the hapless Braves on the radio. One night my dad pointed out that the player I held in my hand just hit a homer on the radio, and at that moment he became my favorite player, and idol. The next spring I saw my first game in person, and that same player stood next to me with his arm draped across my shoulders as my dad snapped our picture. That summer I played organized ball for the first time, and I wore the number and played the position of the hero in that picture.

Who we are, and what we become, are affected by those around us—and in this life we are touched by others, and changed forever by them. There are some people that accept life as it happens and do not ask why, and that never need reasons. How this teacher could declare a young man hopeless, I do not profess to understand.

I need reasons.

I do understand how a single act committed by one person can change forever the course of another life. There is a reason why my father spent his lunch hour teaching his sons to play catch. When he was a child, he did not have a father at home to teach him. He instilled in us a love for baseball, and I cherish the memories of catch in our yard.

I grew up with a gift for baseball—but the reality in life is that not every time we are influenced by others is the result positive, for later in life I lost part of this gift through a selfish and cowardly act by another person—my teacher, and coach.

As a senior in high school our baseball team made it to the final four of the state championships—and it may seem trivial now, but understand that winning this tournament was my dream from the time I first learned to play ball. Just hours before the most important game of my life

I sat with my teammates and joked nervously with one, “You better not screw up and cost us the game.”

“You’ll screw up first,” he replied.

Then the words that haunt me still, a joke, meant for a friend, but overheard by an unseen coach, “Coach might, but not me.”

The most important game of my life, and he sat me.

We lost, and the hope of fulfilling a lifelong dream was replaced with hatred and bitterness.

There was a time we laughed at the old guys up on the hill. The ones that graduated a couple of years before us, and who would hang around the school and the ballpark still, and would sit on the hoods of their cars and tell us how when they were seniors they did it better, faster, and further. We laughed, because we were still doing it, and all they could do was talk. If our goals were not met, there was next year, but it never occurred to us that one day there would not be a next year, and that the guys sitting on the hoods of their cars at the top of the hill, wishing they could have one more year, willing to settle for one last game, could one day be us.

Graduation came, and went. One year, and then another, when an old man found me bagging his groceries at the local store. In the parking lot he thanked me as I loaded his bags, but then he told me, “I saw you play.”

“Excuse me?” I replied.

“Quite a team, you guys should have won it all.”

I said nothing.

“Tell me,” he continued, “where do you play these days?”

“I’m not.”

The old man stared at me. He shook his head and drove away.

That was the bottom for me, the moment I realized the guys I abhorred, the ones that never left or amounted to anything, the same ones that reached the pinnacle of their lives while in high

school only to face a future with their greatest achievements already in the past, was what I had become.

Lessons in life are tough, but some lessons can be learned through the mistakes and failures of others. The mistake I made was allowing what happened to me to control my life. The lesson I learned is what I thought was lost as a senior in high school was meant to prepare me for what I am supposed to do in this life.

I am a teacher, a coach, and this is my second chance.

I am so blessed, for I bore them all with the names of Balboa, Magellan, and Vespucci, and though I may never explore, map, or write of places seen for the first time, I am blessed. I stand before them and see their faces, and in them I glimpse the future, I influence the future, and this cannot be described with words. On the walls of my office two photos stand out, one my father labeled 'brothers', and one a team that should have won it all. The memory of choices made is ever present, but it is the memory of hope that sustains me, and the image of my student-athlete that lingers, for this day will change him forever.

"Coach," he said.

I turned at the tearful plea.

He came back in, and sat down.

This time the words flowed from our shared past of hurt, loss, and regret. Words for all I teach, for all I coach:

Once, someone thought I was hopeless.

If I could be seventeen again, faced with the same choices, I would do one thing different—I would embrace the memories of those that empowered me, and forgive the memories of those that hurt me.

I understand now that the difference between the past and the future is that one cannot be changed, and the other has no limits. This, coach, mine, gave a pre-game

motivational speech, and he said to me, 'The sky is the limit.' He was wrong about me, for not the sky, nor even the stars, is the limit.

Keep the memories of those that empower you, and find success—true success—measured not by what you have earned, but by what you have given. I want for you all the happiness in the world, that you will find the love of your life, that you will achieve each goal set before you, and that you will realize all your dreams.

But student, athlete, fellow teacher, this is the real world, and we know times are not always happy, our hearts get broken, we fall short of our goals, and not all dreams come true.

I have been to the bottom.

When your time comes, find the memories of those that touched your life, and in them, find hope. Let that hope sustain you, and give you strength and courage to learn a lesson, pick up the pieces, and move forward.

Within us all there is the capacity for greatness, at the lowest moments of our lives none of us are without hope, and in the memories of those that touch our lives, we can find both.
