THE BODHISATTVA ON THE SIDELINE

Coaching Youth Sports with Awareness, Wisdom and Compassion

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PREFACE

Over forty million children in America play organized youth and high school sports each year. These young people are counting on their coaches to guide them, to nurture their optimism and spirit, and to always act in their best interest.

Only through a process of rigorous and consistent self-examination can youth sports coaches accede to these expectations, because only through a process of rigorous self-examination are we able to discern fact from fiction, truth from illusion, and reality from melodrama.

As much as I would like to, I cannot claim to having always been a stout and hearty warrior on this journey. As you will read in the pages that follow, I have made, and continue to make, lots of mistakes. But I also know that if I am committed to acting in the best interest of the young people with whom I work, I have to constantly open myself to a process of honest self-examination.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my observations, and I wish you all the best in your coaching endeavors.

DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK

I do not always act compassionately toward the referee**.** There are times when my assistant coach has to stand next to me and remind me to calm down, to take a deep breath, and even to just sit down and be quiet.

I tend to experience feelings of anger toward the referee when I perceive that either (a) he is not protecting the players from injury, or that (b) he is treating the players poorly and in a condescending manner. I need to challenge and reflect upon these perceptions because my "gut reactions" are often wrong.

The referee is in a difficult position. He is the center of attention only when things go awry. Few people applaud the "ref." To those of us on the sideline, the referee may appear headstrong and arrogant; he may come across to us as vindictive, or even disinterested in the events unfolding on the field. These perceptions may not reflect reality. I know that I have to be willing to challenge my perceptions rather than simply accepting them as the truth, as my perceptions are sometimes off-target.

Many years ago I had the opportunity to coach a very talented high school soccer team in an important tournament. In our first game of the competition, it was clear from the opening whistle that the referee was in over his head. He was a youth official who had been thrown into a competitive arena that was beyond his experience.

About ten minutes before the whistle for halftime, one of my players gets kicked pretty hard. No intent that I could see, but she is definitely hurting. Everyone is screaming for a stoppage of play, but the referee is clearly flustered. He appears to blow the whistle while checking on the injured player, but the game continues. And instead of taking control of the situation, he allows play to commence while our injured player is still on the ground.

The other team is now in possession of the ball. They are thundering toward our goal. One of my players remains on the turf. My players have all but stopped competing as they desperately clamor for the referee to stop play. And in all of this confusion, the other team scores a goal.

Well, as you can imagine, the place erupts. Parents are screaming, frothing at the mouth. The other team is celebrating their goal. And meanwhile, the injured player from our team remains weeping on the pitch.

My gut reaction is rage: unambiguous, seething, rage.

As I jog out onto the field to help treat our fallen player, I try to consider the entirety of the situation. My head is clouded by feelings of rage. As I kneel over my stricken athlete, talking quietly to her as the trainer examines her twisted wreck of a knee, I am only partially present. I am still struggling to take a step back, a step away from my gut reaction, from my reactive brain, to try and understand what is behind my feelings of anger.

Rage is often a default mind-state for men. If given space and treated with compassion, rage may give way to other feelings—feelings like sadness.

As I help our injured player off of the turf, I am struck by just how sad I feel. I am sad because bad injuries are frightening, and being frightened "makes me" feel sad. I am sad

because Sarah is suffering. And I am sad for our referee. He is clearly suffering as well. I can see it in his eyes. He is trying to appear stoic and strong, but it is clear that he too is frightened. Perhaps he is frightened by the sheer volume of rage being directed toward him. Perhaps he recognizes that the level of competition, the speed of the game, is beyond his experience. Perhaps he simply feels alone.

The moment is saturated with emotion. I fight back tears as I head to the bench to find Sarah's replacement. With the game on hold, I walk quietly out to the referee, put my hand on his shoulder, and tell him that I appreciate how hard he is working under very difficult circumstances.

After the game, a game which we lost 0-2, I do not spend much time talking to my team about soccer. I talk about the referee. I talk about fear, and sadness, and compassion. I talk about rage, and where rage often comes from. I talk to the players about how important it is to try and understand why we respond to things the way we do. And I share with the players my process—a process during which I moved from

a place of anger, to a place of sadness, to a place of compassion. Soccer I know can wait until tomorrow.

Had I believed in the irrefutable validity of my anger, I never could have reached a place in which my heart softened and opened to the gentleman officiating the game. In proceeding from the assumption that perhaps my anger was "inaccurate," I was able to step back from my gut reaction and examine my response from a place of awareness.

Some of you may be reading this and thinking that I am asking you to give up your opinions and convictions, or that I am suggesting you live a wishy-washy existence in which you are defined by a lack of confidence and passion. I am not. I remain a fiery coach. Committing to a process of self-examination does not diminish my intensity. But I also know that I must strive to see things as they truly are. When I see things clearly, honest actions naturally follow. When I act based upon false assumptions, or when I believe that I am correct without opening my beliefs and perceptions to

introspection and scrutiny, I risk behaving in a manner that is neither compassionate nor honest.

In America we often believe that the best coaches are masterful motivators.

Take, for example, this clip from a University of Florida booster:

Gator Football head coach Urban Meyer may be a master planner and football game strategist, but much of what makes him great has nothing to do with the X's and O's on the football field. Although he does have a certain knack for game preparation and halftime adjustments, his bachelor's degree from the University of Cincinnati is actually in psychology. He loves the art of motivating and preparing his players mentally for the task of what's ahead of them and searches for different and new techniques to do so on a consistent basis. In the past, Meyer has used quotes from opposing players and coaches, videos and pictures of certain end-zone celebrations, videos of sportscasters speaking negatively about the Gators, numbers of yards and points rivals scored on them for workouts, speeches from high-profile coaches and friends, full-wall

murals of news clippings and pictures, and many other tactics to keep his players giving 100% at every practice. (GatorTailgating.com)

Coach Meyer is not unique. Find any highly successful coach, and you will in all likelihood find an accomplished motivator.

When I first started coaching high school soccer, I prided myself upon my ability to motivate my teams. I tapped all of the time-honored tactics that have been employed for generations by athletic coaches and army generals alike. I spoke of such lofty ideals as commitment, selflessness and sacrifice. My voice often quivered with emotion as I held on high the great virtues of effort, team spirit and dedication to excellence.

Young people, by their very nature, lack self-awareness. This of course is one of the gifts of youth as well as one of its liabilities. Because they are so pliable and impressionable, young people are easy targets for adults possessing charisma and the appearance of wisdom. And while we trust that our youth athletic coaches act in the best interest of our children, and while the majority of us in the coaching profession believe

that we are doing good and honest work, without rigorous self-examination we cannot be absolutely certain that our actions are both pure of intention as well as beneficial to the kids whom we coach.

Emma's story is instructive. Emma was an excellent soccer player. Emma was not, however, inspired by my pregame motivational speeches. In fact the opposite was true: Emma often shut down and turned off completely when I was talking. Emma did not trust me. She found my emotional appeals quite insincere and manipulative. When prodded, she told me so.

Coaches often accuse players like Emma of being "uncoachable". But Emma was ***not*** uncoachable. She was a talented and brilliant student-athlete. She made marked improvement from game to game, and she enthusiastically embraced the pointers given to her by the team's assistant coach.

I regret that I didn't possess sufficient self-knowledge at the time to recognize that Emma's perceptions about me were in some manner accurate. I was an adroit motivator, but I lacked the self-awareness to recognize that there

were times when my attempts at motivation were self-righteous and artificial. What I called motivation was at times, as Emma pointed out, a form of manipulation. But instead of acknowledging this possible truth, instead of honestly examining my perceptions about coaching and about the supposed art of motivation, I shut Emma out. I was unwilling to challenge my own views about coaching. I met Emma's negativity toward me with defiance and arrogance, and I closed my heart to her.

When we refuse to open our perceptions to scrutiny, when we repudiate self-awareness and embrace the *appearance* of confidence and self-assuredness, we risk acting dishonestly. As youth sports coaches, we may perceive that we are doing the right thing when we strive to motivate our players. Without careful self-examination, we may never recognize those times when the truth contradicts these perceptions.

In closing my heart to Emma—in assuming without honest self-examination that I was right and she was wrong—I created a great deal of suffering. Emma suffered because her

coach, in an effort to protect himself from the possibility that he was wrong, stopped coaching her. And I suffered because I created a reality that I chose to dogmatically defend without the slightest willingness to admit that perhaps, just perhaps, I was wrong.

When we choose to believe everything we think, we not only reject the truth of our own fallibility, but we often cling to stories and assumptions that are shrouded in delusion. And few things create more suffering than does a stubborn adherence to perceptions that are untrue.

Again, do not get me wrong. There will be times when, upon reflection, you will come to the conclusion that you are indeed correct. My daughter is an excellent example of this proposition.

We were driving home from daycare. My daughter, just two years old at the time, was making some kind of a scene in the backseat. I must have said something to set her off because she quickly retorted, “Dad, I hate you.” Well, being the calm and collected model of good parenting that I am (ahem), I bit my lip and

gently responded, “Honey, I know that deep down you really love me.” At which point there followed a long period of careful reflection from the backseat. I watched through the rear-view mirror as my twenty-four month old daughter, perched quite regally in her car seat, reflected upon her true feelings for her dear old dad. And then came her well-measured response: “No dad, deep down I really do hate you.”

Seriously though, there will be times during which, after careful self-examination and reflection, you will stand by your perceptions. And that is wonderful! But in order to coach our kids from a place of wisdom, we have to be willing to examine, and if need be reject, our old perceptions and beliefs.

PRACTICING A LANGUAGE OF INTROSPECTION

We tend to make statements, or adhere to internal talk, that goes something like this: “I am angry” or “I’m so darned frustrated!” or “I am happy,” etc.

Do you notice how, in these kinds of declarations, we personally identify with the feeling or emotion or belief? “***I am*** angry,” as if angry is our name and anger is our identity. Statements like this leave no room for investigation, no room for introspection, no room for non-attachment.

Anger is a feeling. It is not a state of being.

It was the end of a disappointing game. The team that I was coaching appeared confused, dispirited, disorganized and thoroughly beaten. The score was 1-4, but it could have been worse. And yet this was a team against whom we could compete. Player for player, we matched up reasonably well with our opponent. *What had gone wrong?*

During the final ten or so minutes of the match I urged the players to continue competing, to keep playing hard. But the majority of my conscious energy was focused on the following question: "*What am I going to say to the kids after the game?"*

The players, at least on the surface, appeared to be putting forth a lack-luster effort. And I wanted to be angry with them. My response to the situation on the field was anger. I couldn't wrap my head around anything other than the fact that my players had given up.

I needed time to reflect upon my response to the unfolding scenario. But time was not on my side.

Michele McDonald writes, "…There is great power in patience because it cuts through arrogance and ingratitude. It is the path that lets us move from resistance to acceptance and spontaneous presence. Holding on to our judgments about others and ourselves is a major cause of impatience…" (*Finding Patience*, From Tricycle Magazine)

What I needed now, more than anything, was patience. I needed time to sit, without

judgment, and to observe and reflect upon the day's events. But in the compressed space of the competitive arena, it is often impossible to find the time we need.

During the last ten minutes of the game, I made an effort to try and observe my thoughts rather than to accept my thoughts as truth. What was I feeling? Was I feeling embarrassed? Was my ego all bent out of shape? Was I angry because I really believed that my players had quit, or was my anger masking something else? Perhaps my anger was covering up feelings of sadness. But why was I sad? I was furious! Wasn't I?

I stood on the sideline and paid very careful attention to the states of mind that I was experiencing in the waning moments of the match. I also made an effort to pay careful attention to the expressions and body language exhibited by my players. I struggled as I attempted to view my players through a lens of gratitude and compassion, rather than through a haze of frustration and incrimination. I wanted to blame the players for this defeat. I wanted to protect myself.

As the final whistle blew, I saw things clearly.

The players were physically tired. I had not done a good enough job of getting them match-ready with regard to the fitness component of my training regimen. More importantly however, the players were mentally unprepared for this game. I had done exactly what I strive and hope ***not*** to do as a coach: I had focused their attention upon the idea of "winning" this game, and what winning this game might feel like. And the moment the other team scored their first goal, my players became unhinged from the present. I had built up the feeling of winning, and the players had become lost in the fantasy of how great it would feel; and in that unreflective moment I had undermined the effort and strength of this wonderful group of kids.

After the game I sat down with the team and shared with them what I was thinking. I apologized for not getting them more match fit. I also apologized for setting them up for disappointment by talking about winning, rather than helping them remain fully focused on the

present, and fully engaged in each moment of the game.

It was an emotional post-game for me.

I was not sad because we had lost the game. I was moved by the players' resilience in light of my poor coaching. And I was moved by the fact that, when I made the choice to view the players with compassion and gratitude, reality quickly came into focus. What had become clear to me, upon reflection, was that the effort of this team, in the face of my poor coaching, was in fact quite heroic. They possessed the strength and courage to continue competing, even after I had unintentionally sabotaged their effort through my unreflective pregame words and by my lack of thorough fitness-related preparation.

Self-awareness is the foundation upon which adults should base their actions. And self-awareness can only exist when we change our language, our self-talk, to include the possibility that our initial perception of things is wrong.

In stating that I was *feeling* anger toward my players during the soccer game, I granted myself permission to investigate the cause or reason behind my anger. I also gave myself

permission to recognize that perhaps I wasn't really feeling anger at all, or that the feeling of anger was hiding another feeling. Finally, in asking myself the question and contemplating why I was feeling anger, I was able to step back from the anger and thus to observe the feeling with more clarity.

Here is another relevant tale from my days as a soccer coach.

On this particular day, the players on my team seemed uninterested in soccer. They appeared to me to be going through the motions. There was no effort, no hustle, and no passion. Practice was a study in lethargy, with an apparent lack of commitment, and I was starting to feel angry.

I tend not to be the explosive, yelling type—though I do have my moments. I tend to be more of the brooding, quiet, grumbling type. And as practice ground on, I began to feel that familiar lump of frustration and anger bubbling up into my throat. It was time to stop training and to meet with the team.

"Bring it in!" I hollered.

The players stopped what they were doing and began walking toward me.

"RUN!!!" I screamed.

Replete with what I perceived to be purposeful petulance and negative attitude, the players jogged in and readied themselves for what I can only assume they figured would be a good dressing-down.

I paused. I asked the players to sit down in a circle. I sat down with them. I picked at the turf for a moment, softened my gaze, and then began:

"I'm feeling kind of frustrated about what looks like lack of effort today, a lack of commitment. This is what I am seeing, and what I am sensing. Maybe I'm off-base on this one. Since I don't see you during the school day I have no idea what stuff might be happening, and what you are carrying with you to practice. I can only tell you what I perceive. And, it may very well be that I am filtering what I see through some lens that I am not aware of. At this moment, I'm not totally sure. But I know that I am feeling angry and frustrated.

"We have a huge game coming up on Friday. And I want you guys to be ready for that game. But maybe I'm asking for too much during training, pushing too hard. All I know is that I'm feeling frustrated about what appears to be lack of effort and commitment on your part, and my job at this moment, as your coach, is to prepare you, to the best of my ability, to be able to compete against our league opponents.

"I truly appreciate that you have chosen to be out here, practicing in the wind and cold, rather than not playing soccer at all. I want you to enjoy the experience, and I know from doing this for a very long time that a lot of enjoyment comes from competing and from preparing to the very best of our ability. So, let's get back to training, and let's see if we can pick up the intensity a bit."

Am I always so calm and reflective? No. Sometimes I go straight into temper tantrum mode. However, as the years have gone by, and as I enter my third decade in this profession, I find that I usually possess enough patience and experience to at least call the kids in for a chat,

even if it is only to inform them that I am rapidly moving toward a Rumpelstiltskin moment.

Changing our language may appear an extraordinarily simple and subtle change, but it is also an incredibly powerful change. By simply communicating what I was feeling to my players, I was able to open my heart to the possibility that they were giving the best effort that they could at the time.

Earlier in this story I mentioned that I perceived that the players were "giving me attitude" when I called them in for our chat. That was my perception. That was my interpretation of what I was seeing. But is it possible that my perception was inaccurate? Is it possible that the attitude that I thought was being directed toward me was, in fact, self-recrimination on the part of the players? Had I perhaps created a training environment that left the players feeling like failures?

I recently had the great fortune of coaching an amazing young woman named Joan. Joan is a talented soccer player. She is also kind-hearted, inclusive, generous of spirit, and brilliant. But Joan can be incredibly hard on

herself. One mistake on the field, and Joan's optimism and buoyant spirit can wilt in an instant. What is also worthy to note is that when Joan feels as though she is not measuring-up, her "attitude" suffers. Joan can become surly and mouthy, even toward her coaches.

I know Joan. I know that when she is acting defiantly and angrily toward me, she is probably transferring some old way of dealing with disappointment onto me. I also know that, when this is happening, if I simply pull Joan aside and gently ask her if she is *feeling* frustrated about the game or about her performance in the game—and she usually answers "yes"—that I can tell her, from my objective observer status, that she is in fact doing a wonderful job and that her perceptions in this case are incorrect.

I am not a psychotherapist. I do not psychoanalyze my players. But, I do model for them the difference between *being* angry and *feeling* angry. And, I do tell them that when they are feeling a certain way, sometimes that feeling is not, based upon my objective observations as their coach, aligned with reality.

BEING PRESENT

In 1994, the University of Connecticut women's basketball team played the University of North Carolina in the NCAA East Regional Finals. The winner of this game would go to the championship round in Richmond, Virginia.

The game was close, though the Huskies were trailing in the waning minutes of the fourth quarter. With perhaps a minute left on the clock, Geno Auriemma, the Connecticut head coach, called time out.

I recall that during the time out, the television camera focused in on star player Rebecca Lobo—who in that very same instant was "caught" staring at the scoreboard. When Coach Auriemma saw this, he abruptly stopped his strategy session, looked Lobo in the eye, and implored her to just play basketball. I couldn't hear his voice, but no need to be an expert lip-reader in this case. The words were clear: "Just play basketball!"

The coach didn't look angry. In fact, if anything he seemed, at that moment, resigned to defeat. His body language told the story. His shoulders fell and slumped forward, his head

turned a bit to the side, and his eyes lost their fire.

Perhaps Coach Auriemma wasn't lamenting the score of the game. Maybe, in that instant, the coach came to the realization that he had failed to adequately prepare his players for the intensity of the moment. Even Rebecca Lobo, the leader of the team, an all-American and eventual hall of fame player, couldn't remain present. She could not stay focused upon the moment. She was, as one can only imagine, so afraid of losing, so averse to the feelings of despair and heartbreak that would surely accompany such an outcome, that her attention, her awareness, were drawn away from the game and to the scoreboard high above the court.

In Buddhist philosophy we learn that we are the authors of our own suffering as we cling to those things that, by their very nature, are transitory and impermanent. In sports, we lose the ability to compete when our focus is drawn away from the moment and instead into fantasies of joyful celebration as we hoist the victory trophy above our heads. But as those of us who have been doing this for a very long time

recognize, the celebrations are brief. The feelings of exuberance and relief that accompany victory last but a few short moments. We may try to recapture the sense of elation that arrives with a big win, but this, of course, is a dubious enterprise; because we can no more bottle the ecstasy of the championship moment than we can the stunning rainbow glitter of an autumn day in Vermont.

Perhaps we should make a conscious effort *not* to grasp at such transitory states of mind. Perhaps instead we should embrace *every* state of mind as an opportunity to learn more about what makes us tick.

Pema Chödrön explains, "…Feelings like disappointment, embarrassment, irritation, resentment, anger, jealousy, and fear, instead of being bad news, are actually very clear moments that teach us where it is that we're holding back. They teach us to perk up and lean in when we feel we'd rather collapse and back away. They're like messengers that show us, with terrifying clarity, exactly where we're stuck. This very moment is the perfect teacher, and,

lucky for us, it's with us wherever we are…" (*When Things Fall Apart*)

The coach has quite a responsibility. He is called to guide his players not simply toward victory, not simply toward improving their understanding and capabilities with regard to the game of soccer (or basketball, etc.), but toward a recognition that each moment, each feeling, each response to the world around them, is an opportunity for growth. The coach is provided the unique opportunity, during training and during competition, to help his players learn a little bit about themselves. It is this journey toward self-knowledge that demands our concerted attention.

When Rebecca Lobo glanced at the scoreboard in the waning moments of the basketball game, and when coach Auriemma implored her to simply play basketball, the coach was moving Rebecca toward an understanding of how her attachment to the fear of losing distracted her from the moment-to-moment tasks of dribbling, passing and shooting the basketball.

The successful coach helps his players recognize that the feelings that accompany winning and losing are fleeting, and that the actual joy is found simply in the moment-to-moment participation in the game.

This past year I had the privilege of coaching an extraordinary group of young women at an independent school in Oklahoma City. What made the experience so incredible was not our record (we finished the season at the bottom of the league table), but the fact that the girls on the team made the commitment to play soccer, to be present and focused on "the now", regardless of the forces stacked against us. One moment stands out in particular.

We were playing in the second of three tournament games at the end of the season. The score stood at 0-0. The competition was fierce. At halftime the players grabbed a quick drink and walked out onto the field to sit and chat. As the players shared observations about the game, one of our four seniors, Jennifer, announced the following: "I have never in my life had this much fun playing soccer."

We were 0-7-1. We had scored two goals all season, and had over thirty scored against us. We had played probably ninety percent of our games in our half of the field. And for Jennifer, at this moment, none of these things mattered. She was completely present. She was competing to the absolute maximum of her ability. She was, in fact, playing her best soccer of the year.

When we remind our players to just play the game we help them move closer to the present and away from the fantasies of the future. All of the ancillary stuff—the fear of loss and the desperate hope for victory—takes our attention away from the moment. Yes, winning "feels" great. And as coaches we are always striving to prepare our players so that they might find and experience success. But the elation that accompanies winning is transitory. The true joy is found in each moment, on the field, simply playing the game.

The true joy is being present.

LEARNING TO SIT WITH DISCOMFORT

Discomfort can take many forms. From grief to insecurity to fear and even to anxiety, we are, throughout the course of our daily lives, visited by a wide range of such states of mind.

Our typical response is to try and avoid these feelings. In fact, human beings are masters in the art of avoidance. Very few of us are taught during our childhood that difficult feelings are OK. Even fewer of us are encouraged to sit quietly and spaciously when we are feeling fearful, or insecure, or sad. This is quite problematic.

In order to live fully, we must commit to sitting with our discomfort. Let me begin with grief.

There is very little about grief that encourages us to just sit still. Grief can feel bottomless.

The poet Kahlil Gibran said of grief, "…Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears. And how

else can it be? The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain. Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven? And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives? When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy. When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight. Some of you say, 'Joy is greater than sorrow,' and others say, 'Nay, sorrow is the greater.' But I say unto you, they are inseparable. Together they come, and when one sits, alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed…" (*The Prophet*).

There were maybe two minutes left in the New England semi-final game against Kingswood, but the result was clear. We would lose. I was working as an assistant high school basketball coach, and this was the last game for several seniors on the team—kids who, for four years, had given their hearts and souls and bodies to the program. And kids who had

competed in the NEPSAC New England Basketball Tournament for three out of four years but who had never won. This team had been on a mission to win the "New England's" since the first day of practice all the way back in November. And now it was March, and the season was about to come to a deafeningly abrupt end.

Make no mistake: Kingswood was the better team. And with two minutes left, the game was over. It was time to take the seniors off of the floor for the last time. And as the younger players sprinted onto the court, and as Kingswood prepared to celebrate its first trip to the championship game, I gazed down the bench and saw five seniors doing everything in their power to keep from collapsing in despair.

At the conclusion of the game we all met at center court and shook hands, and then off to the locker room we jogged. In that room, for 15-20 minutes, all of the players sat in a circle and wept. I was not shocked by the depth of their pain. I was, however, amazed by their ability to sit in the pain, to be blown wide open by it, and to just weep.

Sitting with our pain, with our grief, is not something that we always do so well.

I remember watching a basketball coach in Massachusetts tell one of his players to stop crying, that their loss in the state tournament game was not worth the tears. I remember hearing my mother's friend tell my sister that her wails of despair at her grandmother's funeral were inappropriate, and that she (my sister) needed to stop crying.

We do not always do grief so well.

Pema Chödrön tells us, "Most of us do not take these situations as teachings. We automatically hate them. We run like crazy. We use all kinds of ways to escape—all addictions stem from this moment when we meet our edge and we just can't stand it. We feel we have to soften it, pad it with something, and we become addicted to whatever it is that seems to ease the pain." (*When Things Fall Apart*).

When we coach young people in the often highly-charged and intense competitive arena, we are purposefully asking them to take risks. We are asking them to risk

disappointment, risk despair. But are we willing to let them grieve?

Children who learn that grief is to be avoided often pursue, as adults, myriad unhealthy behaviors in an effort to run from their sorrow. How do we help the children with whom we work feel safe in fully and completely accepting the panoply of life's experiences, including grief?

First, we should be willing to examine our own response to grief. In quiet reflection we can sit with our sorrow. In doing so, as we gently observe ourselves and our resistances to grief, we may become increasingly patient and accepting. As the veil of fear lifts, our grief is clarified. We no longer fear grief. Our new openness becomes an ally in our journey toward wholeness.

Secondly, we talk to our children about risk, and about grief. We allow time for grieving. We sit, as the girls' basketball team did after losing the biggest game of their lives, and we allow ourselves the space to grieve.

"Do not surrender your grief so quickly. Let it cut more deeply. Let it ferment and season

you as few human or divine ingredients can." (Hafez of Persia).

These are indeed great words of wisdom, though we often seem to find it too hard to sit still and to simply experience our grief.

Grief is but one of myriad emotions with which we must become more intimately acquainted. Insecurity and fear are two more. Without awareness, and without a willingness to sit with our grief or fear or insecurity, we often end up coaching our kids from a place of ignorance. I should know.

I knew what was coming when the Athletic Director called me into his office. My defenses were up, and my mind was in full rehearsal mode. The wheels were spinning as I practiced my rebuttal to the accusations that I knew were coming.

The Athletic Director was going to inform me that I had failed in my job as head coach. I wanted desperately to counter each and every argument that he might offer. But I couldn't.

In 1989 I found myself in the challenging role of head coach for a ninth grade basketball team at an independent school just outside of Boston. Coaching was only a small part of my work at this school. I was also teaching several history classes, living in the dormitory, attending assemblies, and trying to fit into a culture that, while quite nurturing and supportive, felt rigid and artificial and remote to me.

In 1989 I was not a man in possession of a great deal of self-awareness. I thrived on life's dramas. I believed everything I thought. I was the center of my own universe.

The school felt artificial and rigid to me, but it was not about the school. The school was a fine school, and the staff and students were terrific. It was me. I did not know myself. I often acted on impulse, without any attempt at honest self-examination. I craved positive attention and found fault with those who criticized or critiqued my actions. And in the winter of 1989, I was given the ninth grade boys' basketball team to lead, to guide, to nurture. And I failed.

In 1989 at the Noble and Greenough School everyone was required to participate in the athletic program. And because the numbers of boys signing up for basketball were quite high, I ended up with a freshman team of some twenty-five players. I was already in way over my head.

Fear has always been a state of mind that has propelled me to act in ways that are inconsistent with my intellectual view of the world: fear of criticism, fear of damage to my ego, fear of not getting that pat on the back. These fears have, for as long as I can remember, been a constant companion for me—a companion that has, more often than I care to admit, "tricked" me into making poor and thoughtless decisions.

Perhaps a good coach—an adult who had worked hard toward becoming self-aware, an adult who knew what kinds of student behaviors tended to set him off or get under his skin, an adult who realized through years of self-examination that those adolescent behaviors to which he reacts strongly are about him and not necessarily about the players whom he

coaches—perhaps such a coach might have enjoyed great success with twenty-five adolescent would-be basketball players. I was not such a coach.

There is a school of thought in education that goes something like this: be really hard on the kids with whom you work from the start, because you can always ease up on them down the line. I'm not sure that I adhere to such thinking, though I am willing to admit that it certainly has potential merits. If one does adhere to such a philosophy, then the next question one must be willing to examine is what form should this "being hard" take? Should coaches yell at their players? Should punishment for rule-breaking, or apparent slacking-off, take the form of running sprints or doing push-ups? How does the coach know whether or not his sanctions are having the intended effect? Is a team, frightened into acquiescence, better for the experience? And, does this reflect well upon the coach?

I expected the kids on my team to behave, to learn everything I had to teach them, to be disciplined, to compete with sportsmanship and to represent the school honorably, to treat

each other kindly, to understand their individual roles but to be team players first and foremost, and to always work to the maximum of their ability. And when they didn't accede to all of my expectations, I lashed out and punished them. I yelled. And they ran. And I can say with utter conviction that the majority of players were no better for the experience.

In preparation for the season I read a couple of coaching books, and then assumed myself the expert. I decided that we would run something called a "flex" offense. When my team of twenty-five boys failed to embrace the flex offense, when they failed to execute the offense in a way that would make me, their coach, look smart and successful, I lashed out at them. I punished them. I blamed them. And when blaming the kids wasn't enough, I blamed the situation that the school had put me in. "Who could succeed under such impossible conditions?!" I rationalized.

I will not tire you with the litany of mistakes I made coaching this team, but the final straw, the thing that led me into the Athletic Director's office for my moment of censure, was

my behavior in our game against rival Milton Academy.

No, I didn't get a technical foul. (I waited until 1993 to get my first "T," while coaching middle school hoops at a small school in the California desert. But that's another story for another time.) No, I didn't scream at the kids. I gave up on them.

As the score of the game mounted against us, I quit. I made a joke out of the game. As the players laughed in embarrassment about the margin of impending defeat—which is of course a natural defense for youngsters to exhibit—I laughed too. And the parents who saw this, and the teachers who had traveled to the game to watch their students compete, were embarrassed for me; not because we lost the game, but because the supposed adult in the room was no more mature, no more reflective, than were the kids whom he was charged with leading.

And so when the Athletic Director called me into his office, I knew what was coming. He was kind and understanding, but

firm. I had let the kids, and the school, down. He was right.

I coached this group of ninth grade boys from a place of great insecurity. I feigned confidence and self-assuredness, and when challenged I blamed the children for our struggles and failures. I feared injury to my fragile ego, and pretended to be the expert and leader that I wasn't. In the end, of course, I fell flat on my face.

My sister uses an apt expression. She says, we have to be willing to "face plant," to take a total header right out in public for all to see, to not hide ourselves from life, in order to live fully. We have to have the courage to be honest, to be entirely aware of what is motivating our actions (or inactions), to not seek out any number of distractions as we become increasingly uncomfortable with things as they are.

There is, to be sure, nowhere to hide. We can hide our sorrow or our insecurity behind any number of veils, but in the end all of those masks melt away and reveal an even more atrophied human spirit.

In coaching the ninth grade boys' basketball team from a place of insecurity and fear, and by not possessing the ability to acknowledge my insecurity and thus to proceed from a place of honesty and compassion, I failed to nurture the spirit of these fine young men.

Awareness is a very powerful state of mind. In meditation practice for example, when our fear or sadness arises, we make the commitment to gently sit in our extreme discomfort and to indeed face plant, but not to run.

When we learn to sit with our discomfort, we often discover an openness and compassion for ourselves that helps us feel safe even in the face of our insecurities. We no longer need to protect our ego from perceived threats because we no longer fear those once dangerous and frightening emotions.

This is indeed the true essence of awareness.

WHAT IS REAL, IS TRUE

M. Scott Peck wrote, "…The third tool of discipline or technique of dealing with the pain of problem solving, which must be continually be employed if our lives are to be healthy and our spirits are to grow, is dedication to the truth. Superficially, this should be obvious, for truth is reality. That which is false is unreal. The more clearly we see the reality of the world, the better equipped we are to deal with the world. The less clearly we see the reality of the world—the more our minds are befuddled by falsehood, misperceptions and illusions—the less able we will be to determine correct courses of action and make wise decisions. Our view of reality is like a map with which to navigate the terrain of life. If the map is true and accurate, we will generally know where we are, and if we have decided where we want to go, we will generally know how to get there. If the map is false and inaccurate, we generally will be lost…." (*The Road Less Traveled*).

In Buddhist thought, dedication to reality is sought through the practice of mindfulness and awareness meditation. As we

build our meditation practice, the reality of our thought patterns, of our states of mind, becomes increasingly clear. We become able, over time, to step back from the melodrama of our thoughts and to observe our thoughts, and our beliefs, with a critical and objective and discerning eye.

Several years ago I found myself coaching a group of wonderful young people who were not great soccer players. These were high school students, most of whom only played soccer during the brief autumn season. None of the players were year round club players. While several were quite athletic, not one player on this team spent time daily honing her technical abilities.

During one training session—I believe it was a day after we played a very strong team in our league—several players came to me and asked why we didn't try to pass the ball more to each other. It was a fair question.

I explained to the athletes that the style of play that I was training this team to employ was very direct. I wanted them to play the ball over the midfield, in the air, and for us to try and use our speed and athleticism to win fifty-fifty

balls in the attacking third of the field. That is why I had not spent one minute of training working on possession.

As Scott Peck also points out, "…The less clearly we see the reality of the world—the more our minds are befuddled by falsehood, misperceptions and illusions—the less able we will be to determine correct courses of action and make wise decisions…" (*The Road Less Traveled*).

And so I recognized that my task in this situation was to, in a gentle and supportive way, show my team why I had chosen the style of play that we were employing. My goal was to help them see reality. And in this case the reality was that, while they were wonderful young people, and while I valued them for who they were and for what they brought to the team, they lacked the ability to keep possession of the ball.

In soccer, coaches create training environments that build upon certain technical or tactical considerations, and that culminate in situations that replicate game conditions. Time, space, speed of play, technical ability—all of these variables and more must be accounted for

when the coach develops a training session. In response to my players' query, I set up a "9 v. 4" training session on the topic of *possession*.

On the team of nine (the team attempting to maintain possession of the ball) I put our most accomplished soccer players, and on the team of four (the group trying to take the ball away), I put four of our fastest and most tenacious players. The offensive team, in order to score a point, had only to string together five passes. The defending team simply needed to dispossess the attackers of the ball and knock the ball into touch.

"Game on!" I shouted.

The team of nine never scored a point. They did not possess the technical ability—the skill—to control the ball while under pressure. They could not move the ball away from oncoming defenders, and they could not deliver properly weighted and accurate passes to their teammates, because they simply hadn't played enough soccer in their lives in order to hone the necessary skills. This was not a judgment on my part: it was an objective truth.

After about fifteen minutes I called the team together.

"You really are *great* kids, and I would not trade any one of you for a player who has more ability, more skill, or more experience. But I told you at the beginning of the season that I would be honest with you, and I am committed to showing you, and teaching you, what is real and true. The reality is you just don't have the skills to play possession soccer. And that is in no way a knock on your character. You are awesome kids, and great athletes. But none of you play soccer year round. Not one of you practices your soccer skills day in and day out, as many of the players on other teams do. And trust me, I'm not asking you to do that. But we have to acknowledge that which is real, and true. And the reality is that we cannot play possession soccer and compete in this league. We can organize in defending, we can get the ball forward quickly to our speediest players, and we can use our tremendous athleticism to create chances in the attacking third of the field. But if we try and pass the ball around, we will lose possession.

"How many of you here play a musical instrument? Maggie? What do you play? The piano? Beautiful. Am I correct in assuming that you practice the piano every day, and that you have been practicing the piano everyday for a very long time? Ten years, practicing every day?! Wow. I wish I had that kind of dedication. Well, soccer is really no different. If all of you had been practicing soccer every day for the past ten years, we'd be able to pass circles around our opponents. But you have not, and we cannot learn something in three months time that it takes years upon years of practice to hone. I really do hope that you hear me. I am not trying to bring you down. I am only trying to help you see what is true, so that together we can proceed in a direction that is based upon reality."

There will always be players, just as there will always be people in general, for whom grasping reality is difficult. These folks deserve our sympathy and kindness, as more often than not they have psychic wounds that make reality too scary or too intimidating to face. The majority of the young people with whom we work *will* be capable of recognizing what is real and true, and it is the coach who can act as the

bodhisattva in this eye-opening and enlightening journey.

The Dalai Lama teaches, "…Anything that contradicts experience and logic should be abandoned. The ultimate authority must always rest with the individual's own reason and critical analysis…"

In order to exercise this reason and critical analysis, we must possess the requisite toolset. Meditation is but one example. When practiced with consistency and careful attention, meditation provides the practitioner with tools that aid in the clarification of reality. You may choose to employ other tools in your journey toward awareness. But if awareness is the goal, some manner of self-examination must be the path.

In the winter of 1988 I was hired to coach the junior varsity boys' basketball team at a small art school in Weston, Massachusetts. The fact that the school even *had* a junior varsity basketball team was interesting, though I do not doubt that the children benefitted from participation in the program.

Athletes these were not. And at the junior varsity level, the players on my team, bless their hearts, could barely recognize a basketball, let alone dribble or pass or shoot one at the basket. Making matters even more interesting was the fact that we played a "varsity" schedule against eighth grade teams at some of the most competitive prep schools in the greater-Boston area.

It appeared as though it might be a long winter.

The reality, however, was crystal clear. Relative to our opponents we were such a terrible basketball team that it would have taken a deeply delusional mind not to acknowledge our athletic deficiencies. And since these youngsters *had* the ability to recognize the truth in our situation, and despite the fact that in ten games we only scored a total of forty points, good-spirits prevailed. The players tried hard, we had fun, and we enjoyed our time together.

Alan Watts said, "…Things are as they are. Looking out into the universe at night, we make no comparisons between right and wrong

stars, nor between well and badly arranged constellations…"

Losing a basketball game by a score of 96-4 is harsh. Neither I, nor any of the players on our team, thought otherwise. But no one climbed onto the bus after the game and complained that we should have won the game. The reality was clear. Our only disappointment was that it was perhaps too late to stop at The Wellesley House of Pizza on the way home for dinner.

COMMITTING TO THE TRUTH

The game was getting out of hand. I think we were down 0-4, and the players on my team looked tired and confused. As I stood on the sideline with our team's most accomplished player—Bonnie was an elite soccer player, having participated on various club and school teams since she was five years old—I felt sad for the players, but quite at peace with the result.

Our team was not a side replete with skilled soccer players. All things are relative, particularly in competitive sports. And relative to the other teams in our league, we did not match up very well. Most of the other teams in the league were, top to bottom, "rostered" by elite, year round soccer players. Ours was not. And so as Bonnie and I stood on the sideline during the second half of a game in which we trailed 0-4, Bonnie queried me in earnest: "What can we do? We are trying our hardest, but we can barely get the ball past midfield. And when we do manage to get the ball past midfield, we can never keep possession." Bonnie was right. We were thoroughly outmatched.

In this moment I shared with Bonnie something I had learned from a coach with whom I had worked many years prior.

During the first ten or so minutes of every game, I take time to objectively evaluate and rank the twenty-two players on the field.

M. Scott Peck observes, "…Human beings are poor examiners, subject to superstition, bias, prejudice, and a profound tendency to see what they want to see rather than what is really there…" (*The Road Less Traveled*).

I assess the twenty-two players on the field based upon three criteria: soccer athleticism, soccer skills, and soccer knowledge. Upon completing my evaluation, I spend the next several minutes choosing my starting eleven. I make a mental note of how many players from their team, versus how many players from our team, would comprise the starting eleven players. And on this day, after assessing the situation on the field, I shared my observations with Bonnie:

"Of the twenty-two players on the field during this game," I told her, "I would start,

based upon my observations, nine players from the opposing squad and two from our team." This, I explained, was in no way a value judgment. I was very clear with Bonnie that I would not trade any of our players for players on the other team, despite our deficiencies vis-à-vis the game of soccer. We were a team: a team that trained together and laughed together; a team that practiced together in the frigid gray of winter, enduring wind chills in the teens and hard-as-rock fields. We were a team. But my love for the players did not change the reality that, with regard to soccer, the other team was better. And in a game in which nine of the best eleven players on the field are on the other team, a score of 0-4 is actually a pretty good result.

Compassionate honesty allows us the opportunity to model our commitment to reality.

As a youth sports coach, I am constantly challenged to clarify fact from fiction for my players. There are often many forces arrayed against the truth: opinionated parents, gossipy players, arm-chair soccer critics, etc. But it is essential that I possess the willingness, and the compassion, to help my players reject illusion

and embrace reality. I can only do this, however, if I myself am clear as to the difference between the two.

Many years ago I had the good fortune of coaching an extremely competitive, and extremely exuberant, soccer athlete named Angie. Angie was the goalkeeper on a team that would eventually go on to win a league championship.

Angie was quite possibly the most complete athlete with whom I have ever worked. A goalkeeper by training, Angie could have played any position on the field. Angie had, as the overused metaphor goes, the reflexes of a cat. She stopped shots that no goalkeeper had any business stopping. Angie was also a fun-loving personality, and a generous member of our team.

But there was a troubled side to Angie as well.

Angie struggled with her grades in school. She had difficulty maintaining the discipline that is needed to balance the myriad demands that high school students encounter. More significantly, Angie's perceptions of the

dynamics and issues that impacted our team were at times not rooted in reality.

Angie had a very rigid view of the world. She was quite reluctant, when challenged, to accept ideas that perhaps contradicted her perceptions. This rigidity did not serve Angie well.

Angie and I are not all that different.

I have always been drawn to praise and averse to blame. The maps developed during my childhood were maps that saw me perceive my self-worth and esteem from external rather than intrinsic sources. When lauded for my efforts—whether on the athletic field or in the classroom or at the supper table—I felt secure and comfortable. When castigated for poor behavior, or critiqued by coaches, parents, teachers or even friends, I felt angry and empty.

These states of mind are not, of course, an entirely unique and out of the ordinary way for a child to perceive the world. Children who grow up in uncertain environments often lack the deep sense of security that comes from knowing, at a fundamental level, that they are "OK." My childhood was riddled with

uncertainty, and this was reflected in my perceptions and responses to outside forces. But as time went on, instead of challenging these perceptions and perhaps working on my outdated ways of seeing the world, I gravitated toward those things or people that patted me on the back, and rejected those things or people that threatened my sense of well-being. My increasing rigidity did not serve *me* well.

In the end, the individuals who challenged me and who took a genuine interest in my well-being and in my growth were, quite unfortunately, the ones I shunned because I incorrectly perceived their efforts as threats to my identity.

Angie did the same. She viewed my critiques of her play as assaults upon her character. She rejected my coaching. And I, in response, turned my back on her.

Angie and I were both victims of our own struggles toward becoming self-aware, mindful adults. But Angie was still a child, and I was her mentor. And my lack of awareness, my unwillingness to challenge my perceptions and beliefs and ways of seeing the world, led me to

act toward Angie in ways that were neither loving nor compassionate.

In committing to the truth, we make an honest effort to see things as they truly are. We try to open our hearts to those in our lives who might, through their observations and feedback, help us on our journeys. And we demonstrate our respect for the athletes whom we coach by always communicating openly and honestly with them.

MORE ABOUT RISK AND AWARENESS

Competition is replete with risks. Competition creates an environment in which each individual is urged to act in the face of myriad possible fears: fears of failure, rejection, embarrassment, and defeat. Competitive athletes who lack self-awareness may not be able to recognize how and in what ways they run from their fears. Coaches who lack self-awareness may not be capable of helping their players recognize these obstacles.

In college, I was neither fast enough nor talented enough to play on the soccer team. I did, however, enjoy sports, and I participated in both intramural athletics as well as on the school's competitive Ultimate Frisbee team.

At my school—a small liberal arts college in the greater-Boston area—the Frisbee team was comprised of a collection of admirable souls with below average athletic ability. We had a fantastic time. But relative to other teams in the area, we were bad. Because we were bad, the risks involved in attempting to reach for lofty goals were minimal. I was a very enthusiastic and competitive player on the team,

but I never had to risk serious disappointment or despair during the competitive season because the team never won any games. I could play the part of the hearty competitor, but there was no risk in the enterprise.

In 1982 I played intramural football on one of the top three teams in the league. The players took the competition for the championship very seriously. In the tournament semi-final, I feigned an injury so that I wouldn't have to risk playing in the game. I pretended to be hurt because the fear of failure, and the attendant withdrawal of affection with which I associated such a failure, was too much for me to face.

Every player whom we coach is unique. Some will arrive with an extraordinarily well-developed sense of self-worth. Some will possess great grace and self-knowledge. Some will hear stories such as the one I just told and shake their heads at the silliness of it all. But for some, stories like this will resonate for them. Perhaps they will glean a tiny morsel of understanding from the experiences that we share. And perhaps, in their own journey toward

awareness, they will find themselves able to face life's difficulties with greater courage and compassion.

COACHING WITH GRATITUDE

"…Whenever you hear that someone else has been successful, rejoice. Always practice rejoicing for others—whether your friend or your enemy. If you cannot practice rejoicing, no matter how long you live, you will not be happy…" (*Lama Zopa Rinpoche).*

Young soccer players have a penchant for personalizing competition. "I hate them!" they often say, referring to the other team. When I hear this I remind the players that without the other team there would be no game! We owe them our deepest gratitude, because if they hadn't shown up we'd be picking flowers and eating carrots.

I am a passionate Boston Red Sox fan. Being a Red Sox fan, you may wonder how I feel about the Yankees. Well, I must admit to not wanting teams from New York to win. As for the Yankees, however, I am glad they are around, and I am glad that they are good, because it makes the rivalry that much more fun.

I want the players whom I coach to compete to the very maximum of their ability. But I also want them to feel a sense of

camaraderie with, and gratitude toward, our opponent.

Gratitude and compassion, it is said, are close relatives. Showing gratitude toward another not only opens your heart to them, it also allows you the opportunity to view their situation from a place of patience and awareness.

I recall a tremendous teaching that I received early in my coaching career.

I was working with a very competitive Olympic Development soccer team, and we were competing in a very prestigious tournament at a college in New Jersey. During the first half of our first game of the tournament, my players appeared lost. Each decision seemed worse than the one before. I was growing angrier by the minute, and I was brooding.

Just then, the state coaching director came over and sat next to me on the bench.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Lousy." I responded. "We can't do anything right."

"Nothing?" He queried.

"Well if we ***are*** doing something right, I sure don't see it." I snapped in retort.

At this point, the director leaned over and whispered the following in my ear: "Find something that someone is doing right, and tell them so."

I stood up and watched for a moment more.

"Good idea, Jessica!" I yelled. "Well struck, Melissa!!"

With every word, my gratitude toward the players grew. By halftime, the game had turned around. We still may not have been playing to our potential, but our spirit was palpable, and the day was a success.

GOAL BOARDS

When we face the truth with compassion and kindness, reality can become a great ally.

When I teach history or coach youth sports, I want my players and students to have the opportunity to see things clearly. I want to help them challenge the possible internal dialogue that they may be experiencing. I want to act as a constant and compassionate "reality check" for them. One of the props that I use in this quest is the goal board.

The "goal board" was introduced to me by one of the greatest coaches, and human beings, with whom I have ever had the honor of working. Patti was the head basketball coach at The Rivers School, and, from 1994-1998, I was her assistant.

The goal board works like this: After each game of the season, a series of elements are reviewed by the coaches. These parts of the game—skills, tactics, effort, intensity, commitment—are recorded for each game. (Patti and I used smiley faces and frowns on our goal boards, a practice that I have continued to this day.) And so, for each category Patti and I

would either draw a smiley face, a frown, or perhaps a confused or angry face. And prior to our next practice we would review the goal board with the team.

The goal board is a gentle, loving, compassionate truth-teller. For example, a frown next to the "one vs. one" defending category allows the coaching staff the chance to discuss the team's lack of execution in the basic tenets of individual defending, while maintaining an unavoidable light-heartedness caused by the fact that the all-too-serious coach has drawn a "frowny face" on the board.

The goal board challenges individual misconceptions or unreal perceptions. The goal board dispels myth. The goal board exists as a physical manifestation of what is real and true.

Young soccer players often embrace and internalize false perceptions about their performance during competition. How many times has a player come off of the field, utterly convinced that she played terribly, and we as coaches are perplexed as we know, from our objective perch, that this athlete performed heroically during the match! The goal board

stands as a testament, in colorful markers and silly faces, to reality.

Time and again players whom I have coached have sat in team meetings and gazed at the goal board with puzzled looks on their faces: "But wait. We lost 0-4, and yet you coaches gave us smiley faces for team defending?! We don't get it."

"Great point! Look, the score of a soccer game is often a poor indicator of performance. The other coaches and I have been stressing team defending in recent training sessions. And you all have worked tirelessly on the basic ideas of group defending: pressuring the ball, providing cover for the first defender, keeping your defensive shape, tracking dangerous runs into the penalty area, and so forth. In yesterday's game, did Country Day score on us because they were able to break down our back four and get in one v. one with our goalkeeper? No, they didn't. And did Country Day score four goals because we lost our shape, or because we failed to cover for each other in the back??! No, they didn't. We lost 0-4 because of two deflected shots that no goalkeeper could ever stop, on a

penalty kick from an inadvertent and unlucky hand ball, and on a perfectly executed corner kick and finishing header. We, in fact, played fantastic team defense. Eleven players defended, and did so with awesome execution and great determination. The entire coaching staff and I could not have been happier with our team defending! The *reality* is that you did a wonderful job of defending as a team. You should be applauded, and you should be so pleased with your effort in that category."

Reality can be elusive, particularly for people not trained in self-examination and awareness. The goal board is a funny, light-hearted, reassuring truth-teller.

One more tale:

My first experience coaching elite club soccer was in 1996 when I was hired to train a newly-formed, U-11, girls' soccer team in the storied Greater Boston Bolts soccer club.

Everything is relative. In a vacuum, this was a talented group of incipient athletes and soccer players. Relative to our competition in the league, however, we were young (nine and ten year olds in a U-11 league), small (I mean,

tiny!), and lacked competitive experience. We were out-sized and over-matched with respect to our competition in the league. We managed, however, to find joy and success during the season. The goal board helped in this pursuit.

There is an old Buddhist teaching. Let me see if I can get it right: A man is running from a tiger. The tiger is on his heels. The man reaches a cliff. With the tiger gaining on him, the man leaps off of the cliff and grabs hold of the single branch protruding from the side of the escarpment. The fall will surely kill him. Above, the tiger licks its lips in anticipation of a good meal. The man notices a ripe berry hanging from the end of the branch. With one hand grasping the branch, the man reaches out with the other and picks the berry. He takes a bite. *How sweet it tastes!*

As one becomes more practiced in recognizing one's habits of mind, the drama of the mind loses some of its potency. And as the veil of melodrama lifts, as our perceptions clarify, reality comes increasingly into focus.

The reality facing my little Bolts team was clear. We were neither strong enough nor

fast enough to compete with the teams in our league. We were losing games by increasingly large margins. The kids were getting discouraged. I had to take action.

I first met with the parents. I showed them our new team goal board—a board which described several skills that their children were going to try and execute during the games. I told the parents that accomplishing any of these skills counted as a GOAL for us; and I didn't simply mean a goal, I meant a *goooaaaaaaaallllllll!!!!* Yes, the other team might ram the ball down our throats for sixty minutes; and, yes, the official score at the end of the game might be 0-15, but we weren't particularly concerned with the official score. It didn't mean that much to us. If we placed too much emphasis on the official score, we were missing the chance to help the players have a winning experience. More importantly, if we focused upon the official score of the match, we were attaching ourselves to a perception of reality that was untrue. We could not measure success in this way. We had to become clear about reality so that we could celebrate the little victories.

The majority of my efforts were spent with the players, reviewing our goals for the game, and reminding them, over and over, not to worry about the other team, and not to worry about the score, but just to try their hardest to execute the skills that we had worked on during practice.

We "won" our next game.

The score may have been 0-6 in favor of the other team, but our squad of pint-sized soccer stars were jumping up and down and shrieking with joy every time Cara completed a step-over move, or every time Rachel passed the ball successfully and accurately with the inside of her foot, or every time Lindsey shielded the ball from her opponent for three seconds.

The girls on the U-11 Bolts team embraced reality. They knew that they were out-matched. They recognized that there were bigger and faster girls on the other teams. But the U-11 Bolts players also saw that they were learning how to play soccer, that they were improving, and that in a couple of years they would be bigger and stronger and faster too.

As we focused upon the individual skills, the “little victories,” the kids learned to feel good about themselves and to feel good about soccer.

How sweet it tastes!

FOLLOWING THE RULES

I should never have let Blair practice that day. The school's policy—the school at which I was coach of a high school soccer team in pursuit of its first-ever New England Championship—was clear: if a student missed classes, for whatever reason, she could not participate in athletics that day. I knew the rule. In fact, I agreed with the rule. Sure I understood that there could always be extenuating circumstances, but that really wasn't my call. If anything, those were issues best handled by the Athletic Director or by the Dean of Students.

And so when Blair showed up for training at 3:15, and informed me that she had just arrived on campus after a day of not feeling so well, I should have gently informed her that she was totally welcome to watch us practice, but that she could not dress out.

But I was greedy. It was the end of the season, and a few more wins would hopefully give us a high seed in the NEPSAC Soccer Tournament. And Blair was one of our star players. A basketball player by passion, Blair was a lanky, athletic individual who possessed

an innate field sense and an uncanny capacity for finding the open spaces and for hitting the ball with power and accuracy at the opponent's net. We needed Blair. We needed her to be ready for our huge game against rival Bancroft. We needed Blair, and I knowingly broke the rules and let her practice on that day.

It's funny how insight visits us. Sometimes it's just a little uncomfortable feeling, like a sinking sensation in the pit of the stomach whenever a certain thought enters the mind. My sister Jane and I often describe it as a homesick feeling, a yearning anxiety, tainted with a hint of nausea and often characterized by lack of clarity and focus.

For ninety minutes of training, that uncomfortable sensation nagged at me. I tried to shake my head clear of it, but the darned thing would not relent. I knew I had blown it. I knew I had to make things right.

After training I met with Blair. I told her that I should not have let her practice. It was my fault. I knew that she was coming to practice not feeling her best, and that she was making the effort on behalf of her teammates. Blair was

sick, and she showed up for training nonetheless. The message she sent to her fellow players was clear. She wanted them to experience victory. She wanted to help them win. If anyone had let the team down, it was me.

As we boarded the bus the next day for our trip to Worcester, MA, I asked the girls to gather toward the front of the bus. I apologized to them, and to Blair, for having broken the rules. I told the team that the Athletic Director and the Dean of Students had decided to allow Blair the chance to play in the game, but that she would have to miss our next practice. I acknowledged that Blair was being punished for my bad choice. A sincere apology was the best I could offer.

Why did I let Blair practice? Was it because I was fearful of the conflict that might arise, either with Blair or with other players on the team, or perhaps even with her parents, if I chose to uphold the school policy? Was I unwilling to face the possible drama that a prohibition on training might have precipitated had I done the right thing? Was it because my ego could barely stand the possibility of

losing—or worse still, losing badly—to our arch-rival? Would the players lose faith in me, and in the process if we lost the game against Bancroft, lose hope in our quest for the league championship? Was I willing to cheat the rules because I was afraid that the players might abandon the mission, might abandon me?

"I made a mistake yesterday." I told the team. "Blair missed school. She wasn't feeling well. But in an act of real love for the rest of the team, she came to practice. But I knew that she had missed school, and the rules state that if you miss classes you cannot participate in athletic training or contests. I knew this, and I let Blair practice. I was wrong."

In a climactic scene in the Nick Nolte film *Blue Chips*, the head coach of a college basketball team admits to the world, during a post-game interview, that he cheated: "I've become what I despised. I've cheated my profession. I've cheated myself. I've cheated basketball." In the pursuit of victory, the coach circumvented college rules and paid players to attend his school. The film chronicles the coach's internal conflict as he bows to what

appear to be external pressures and agrees to let the wealthy boosters "buy" the services of three blue chip players.

But the real struggle for Coach Pete Bell is internal: the fear that he experiences in light of not winning enough games and sensing perhaps that his job is in jeopardy, the anger that visits him as he perceives himself blamed for the team's mediocre performance, the insecurity that haunts him as he watches other teams excel and sees his team falling from the ranks of the nation's top programs, and the threat to his ego as the pats on the back and congratulations become increasingly infrequent.

In the end, Coach Pete Bell resigns. He cannot, he says to his players, win this way.

The movie is instructive because it highlights just how prone we are to making poor decisions when we react without insight.

I have a good friend who is a principal at a school in Virginia. Prior to his work in schools, Jim spent several years as an assistant coach in a major Division One college football program. Jim tells the following story about the head coach:

"I was working with offensive linemen in my first year, and coach 'P' saw me teaching the players how to hook the defensive linemen and drag them down without the official seeing the hold. Coach 'P' gently took me aside after practice and told me that we don't teach our players how to break the rules."

In the world of soccer one often hears the term "gamesmanship" offhandedly tossed about. Gamesmanship in soccer takes many forms. When a foul is whistled, gamesmanship can take the shape of one or two opposing players immediately creating "the wall" directly in front of the ball, and only retreating to the requisite ten yard distance when the referee demands the space. Gamesmanship can also include tugs on jerseys, feigning injury as a way to "milk" the clock, or claiming possession on a throw-in when the player in fact knows that the ball went off of him.

Gamesmanship is universally accepted as part of the game. It is also a type of cheating.

When we choose to follow the rules, we are not doing so because rules are blindly meant to be followed. We follow the rules because if

we don't, if we cheat the system, we create secrets and falsehoods that compel us to act in defense of a lie, in defense of that which is untrue. And when we teach the players whom we coach to bend the rules, we perpetuate a system in which all participants, in order to remain competitive, feel compelled to do the same.

Mohandas Gandhi said, "There is no god higher than truth." If we believe this to be so, and if we truly want our children to embrace such a standard, we must act with great awareness and clarity surrounding our treatment of the rules of the game.

SYSTEMS OF PLAY

One of the great liabilities in not challenging our own views and perceptions of the world is that we often begin to see our truth as ***the*** truth.

During times of quiet reflection and rigorous self-examination, we often see that what we cling to as true is only true because we cling to it. When we become willing to let go of our rigid attachment to our perceptions, we may find myriad other possible truths.

Coaching soccer demands adaptability. We are, after all, not coaching a game, we are coaching people: individuals who arrive on our fields with a wide range of abilities, beliefs, and perceptions of their own.

Perhaps nowhere is this conflict more apparent than in our decision to employ what we in the soccer world refer to as "systems of play."

Soccer coaches are often unalterably committed to particular systems of play. Whether it's Manchester United's brilliance in the counter-attack, or Blackpool's creativity in the attacking third, we identify with something that we want to emulate. Perhaps we find the

flat-back four, and its attendant symphony of defensive organization, a joy to behold. Or maybe we marvel at the Dutch for their commitment to, and dexterous execution of, "total football."

Many years ago I had the opportunity to coach an under-18 team in the Spirit of Massachusetts soccer club—an elite club comprised of some of the top players from the greater-Boston area. The team boasted a number of fantastic players. I was hired by the club to bring this group together (after a somewhat tumultuous preceding year) and to develop a system of play for the team that would both promote the success of the team in league play as well as highlight (for college recruiters) the individual skills of the constituent athletes.

I failed in this endeavor.

At the point in my coaching career at which I took over this squad, I had become focused upon a style of play that included the employment of what we call a "target player." The target player, often employed in 4-5-1 or 3-4-3 systems of play, is an attacking player, often centrally positioned, who receives the ball with

her back to goal, and who subsequently either distributes the ball to the other players running "off of" her, or who combines with an attacking midfield player in an attempt to get in behind the other team's defense.

When skillfully executed, this is a beautiful system of play. But in my unreflectively self-centered desire to have these kids execute what I believed was the correct way to play soccer, I completely lost sight of reality. And the reality was that the players whom I was coaching on this Spirit of Massachusetts under-18 girls' team were not suited to this style of play.

The players on this team, and in particular the kids who played up top, were free spirits. They thrived when encouraged to use their intuition and athleticism to make runs in behind the opposing side's backs. And our midfield was comprised predominantly of players who did well "one v. one," but who lacked the technical speed necessary to succeed in a possession-oriented scheme.

Don't get me wrong: these were excellent soccer players. They simply were not

players who did well in a system that demanded constant repetition and attention to detail.

Regardless of these realities, and despite the fact that we were losing games and that fewer and fewer kids seemed to smile during training sessions, I remained firmly committed to a system in which we built the attack on the ground and through a target player. I even recall talking to my assistant coach during one training session and essentially saying that I'd be darned if I was going to change my style of play just because the players weren't getting it.

In refusing to acknowledge my choice to train this team in an ill-conceived system of play, I demonstrated a lack of wisdom that ended up having a detrimental impact on the team. I could not see it. I refused to see it. I wanted the other coaches in the league to think that I was a "good" coach, and playing with a target player looked like "good" soccer. But my dedication to ego ended up creating a sour experience for several players on the team.

Experiences like this one have taught me a great deal. I have come to recognize that when I become fixated upon an idea, and when I

lack self-awareness with regard to that idea, I am apt to act based upon ego rather than upon what is best for the players. I am likely to pursue a pat on the back from my coaching peers for attempting to play beautiful soccer, rather than employing a style that fits the personality of the team. When I act based upon *my* needs, I risk making decisions like I did with the Spirit of Massachusetts team: decisions rooted in insecurity, pursued illogically, and of course destined to fail.

As we coach our teams, we should commit ourselves to continuous and rigorous self-examination. We must repeatedly ask questions such as, "Am I doing this in the best interest of the kids, or is something else influencing my thinking?" We must be steadfast in our pursuit of self-awareness, as only through our own willingness to examine and reexamine both our intentions and our perceptions can we ultimately do our best work on behalf of the children with whom we work.

CLARITY AND SIMPLICITY

One of the mantras repeated time and time again at our national soccer coaching schools is a belief in the importance of simplicity. Coaches are continuously reminded to stick to only a very few teaching points per training session. The belief is that too many instructions, too much direction, and players become overly-saturated with information. There is a lot of rigorous research on brain science to support such pedagogy.

On the soccer field, keeping it simple, or "playing simply", can produce some quite successful soccer. And playing simply can take a number of different forms, including playing the ball the way you are facing, keeping the ball on the ground, playing safely in the back, etc.

But let's take a moment and look at the issue of simplicity from another perspective.

Clarity is a nourishing meal built from simple ingredients. An athlete who understands her strengths and weaknesses, who is clear as to her potential and limitations, whose self-awareness is nurtured and cultivated through attention and honesty, is an athlete who has a far

greater chance of responding gracefully to the stress of the competitive environment. Thus clarity, when based upon a foundation of self-knowledge, is very empowering.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to coach an under-13 Olympic Development Program team in the summer of 1998. These were the most competitive, the most accomplished, and the most driven female soccer players in the state of Massachusetts.

The culmination of months of indoor and outdoor training was an event known as regional camp.

At regional camp, players are thrust into a competitive arena that includes hundreds of extraordinarily talented players. The format is grueling. Players are trained by a variety of different coaches, all under the watchful and critical eye of the twenty or so regional staff coaches—individuals who are charged with identifying the best eighteen players from the pool.

The players on my team were superstars. They were the top players on their already elite club teams. Most had been involved in

competitive soccer since the quite tender age of seven or younger. These girls were tough, hardened, battle-scarred warriors. They were also insecure, fearful, nervous, self-conscious, homesick kids.

At regional training, players who have always been told that they were the best, and in fact players who have always *been* the best, are now no longer the best. And while that reality quickly becomes apparent to the objective and critical eyes of the regional staff coaches, this is a reality that is quite alien to many of the athletes in attendance.

Reality can be daunting. And many players at regional camp end up employing any number of self-protecting strategies in a futile and ultimately self-defeating attempt to either reject that reality, or to desperately try and alter that reality. Some players find exogenous forces to blame: blame the refs, blame the staff coaches, blame the weather, blame the food, blame their parents—blame anything they can in an effort to minimize the pain of potentially having to face the truth; that they are not as good as those against whom they are competing.

The successful coach does not simply train the technical and tactical elements of the game. The successful coach imbues his charges with as much clarity as is possible—clarity about the game, clarity about their strengths and weaknesses, and clarity about the process unfolding during the four challenging days spent at camp. It is up to the coach to gently help his players remain optimistic and enthusiastic while simultaneously helping them remain firmly rooted in reality. And this must all be done with the utmost compassion and tenderness, as these are children, and the last thing we want to do is hurt them in our effort to keep them planted in reality.

One of the players on my team, a girl named Carrie, was a wonderful soccer player. She was athletic, strong, and possessed a refined touch around the goal. But, in comparison to the other two hundred or so players at the camp, Carrie simply did not stand a chance. At Region One Olympic Development camp, Carrie was slow, made poor decisions, gave up possession far too easily, and looked quite overwhelmed by the experience. On a team of eighteen Massachusetts state-level players, Carrie was

perhaps number eighteen. Within this environment, that was reality.

But Carrie had also only just completed the eighth grade! She was on her way, in a brief month or two, to the beginning of a four year career as a starting forward on her varsity high school team—a team that, because of her excellence, competed during her junior year for the state championship.

Environment is everything. Relative to her peers at regional camp, Carrie was a "failure." Relative to her peers in the world of high school soccer, Carrie was a superstar. I spent a great deal of time talking to Carrie, helping her understand the reality of things. I did so in the most loving and compassionate way I could. I wanted Carrie to know the truth, and to also know that she was awesome and wonderful and still a soccer superstar.

Carrie ended up making the best of regional camp. She smiled a lot. She learned a lot. When the pool of eighteen was selected, and when she didn't make the squad, Carrie understood why.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Youth sports coaches are a lucky bunch. We have a truly fantastic job!

I believe that we owe it to the young people whom we coach to do our very best work on their behalf.

In willingly opening ourselves to a process of rigorous self-examination and honest reflection, we become more likely to coach young people with awareness, wisdom and compassion.

Thank you for considering my thoughts.

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Editorial Note: The names of the players who appear in this book are not their real names.