

Part Two: The Problem of Painting With Large Brushes to Make a Baseball Team

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Once the career path of public school teaching and coaching at the high school level was my selection, the need to live life on a budget becomes evident. Stock options are not accumulated because you had a good year teaching. You get cookies and coffee at the end of the year. For most of my coaching career, the added weeks of playoff baseball that extended my season meant free overtime as my monetary payday! As a result, as a homeowner, many of the jobs others can hire out to improve a home needed to be done by me. One of those was interior and exterior house painting.

As usual, I sought out experienced painters to help mentor me so my house did not look like a grade school art project. Different brushes for different tasks are required. Cutting edges to merge complementary colors required narrower, angled edged brushes. Trying to do a good job with too large a brush was simply impossible. The better I got at painting, the more I understood about the process, the more connections I made with good painting and good coaching. Effectiveness depended upon blending and planning for different challenges, not coming up with one easy technique that acted as if all paints and all colors could be dealt with using one easy process. Good painting and good coaching simply require more than a big brush. Nuance working with individual human beings is as essential to a coach as nuance handling detailed brushes in painting.

Baseball has no one magic formula key to success. One size never will fit all people. Players and coaches come in all shapes and sizes. Some are introverts and some are extroverts. Some can lead by being excellent speakers, others lead by quiet example. Some players help their team by having exceptional physical size, power and arm strength. Others help their team win by mastering subtle skills like framing pitches elegantly to make close pitches look like strikes to an umpire as a catcher. Others read pitchers and get great jumps when trying to steal. The game offers ways for many types of players to enjoy success. It is essential to develop good standards and structure within baseball programs. Big brushes have their purposes. But to really get players to grow and flourish, the subtle and not so subtle differences between individual human beings need to be noticed and addressed. The larger principles of hitting and throwing and fielding need to be applied in such a way that subtle style differences can emerge with each player to become the best they are capable of being. Such is true of every human being trying to develop themselves in any area of life. No federal law (or any coaches philosophy) ever will achieve its intended effect until the hearts and minds of each individual internalize and live out the principles being “mandated”. Here are some thoughts of how to use smaller brushes to coach better.

Black and Whiting

We really don't need to learn that some things are good and other things are not good, that perspective just comes naturally. Striking out with the bases loaded with the game tied is bad. Hitting a baseball over the heads of an outfielder and getting a home run to win a game was good. We grow up learning things we do not like and try to avoid, and other things we do like and want to keep doing. A black and white perspective emerges for us all. It just happens as a result of life. This sets us up to evaluate life from the limited menu it offers. Sometimes it is an accurate way to evaluate our experiences. Sometimes it is extremely limited and is an example of the danger of painting with two big brushes: good or bad

I'm not sure what you think of political ads. They are for me awful and predictable. Begin by portraying a human being running for office in a cartoonish manner. They are either a super hero or a super villain. I asked my players to make a political ad of themselves. It

included the ten worst things they have ever said, done or thought. We imagined the statements or actions had been captured on film, and the thoughts were narrated by a famous voice. Maybe Morgan Freeman. Then hand pick a picture that would freeze over the film's ending narrative that makes them look like one of America's most wanted. Then I asked each player to describe how they would feel at the end of the premier. Just imagine the embarrassment. Then each player was given the opportunity to redeem themselves. This second film was a collection of the ten best things they had ever said, done or thought. Let's roll that into a beautifully sequenced presentation with lovely music playing in the background. As it moved toward conclusion, include a lovely picture of you at your best, maybe air brushing any imperfections to embellish your appearance to help you look like a model or movie personality. Now run that film and write how you feel. Since we all look like a cross between Gandhi and Mother Theresa, probably pretty good. Truth be told, the worst people in human history could put something like this together and come out looking very good to all who watched the film.

Why is this exercise important for anyone? It levels the playing field. Every baseball player could splice together their ten worst errors and at bats each season. This lowlight movie would look awful. Every baseball player could splice their best plays and at bats every season and they would look like an all league player. Both films are accurate. We are capable of being awful and excellent. Sometimes, in the same game. Every player on the team is in the same boat. Reducing human beings or life experiences into "good" or "bad" bins completely misrepresents reality. Smaller brushes are needed to include essential detail. Bad things can end up helping create good outcomes. We can learn and grow because of them. Good things can long term end up hurting us. We can become dependent upon positive life experiences to make us happy, and incapable of dealing with life's challenges. Black and white is all too often a distorted lens to view life as it is.

Marginalizing outside our lines

Make no mistake about it, on any baseball team some players have more talent than others. Everyone is not equally endowed with good arms and speed and power. Some players know situational baseball so well that they know just where to throw a ball in different situations to make the right play. Some players adjust their depth depending on the speed or power of players that they recognize while playing defense because they have a deep understanding of the game. Some players notice pitchers release points and can pick what pitch is thrown as the ball is being released. Coaches must recognize talent and create a lineup where the best athletes play "up the middle" where most plays are made. Also, the batting order reflects who hits the ball hardest most often (the 3rd hitter), who is fastest with a good on base percentage (the lead off hitter), and who has the most power with a good average (the clean up hitter). Talent varies on every team from one player to another. It is essential to make sure that all players understand that, at the highest levels of baseball, "best players play".

Naturally, this can cause problems. Players with less talent can get jealous and become defensive about their "lesser role". They can see it as unfair and disrespectful. It can lead to accusations that the coach is "playing favorites". Once it reaches this level, players can actually hope those playing more make mistakes, fail and then maybe that lets them play more. This is a team heading for dysfunction and under achieving! Parents can become so alienated they pull their children off the team or transfer to another school. Gifted players can easily feel superior when they recognize they are "better" than others. After all, the team would be so much better if it was only comprised of equally gifted players. Marginalizing is placing others outside the parameters of acceptable or "good enough" to be considered equal with me or mine. It can become common practice on baseball teams, just like it happens regularly in our culture. It must be acknowledged and eliminated for success in baseball.

Without effective training, marginalization just happens. Insecure people do it so they feel better about themselves by making others less. It diverts attention away from our mistakes if we can get people looking at the mistakes of “those other people”. Blame is averted as well, because the problem is “them”. Marginalization helps self esteem; I’m blessed to be better than “those people”! This is an oft repeated pattern of thought. Create groupings. Rate the groups. Lack of preference becomes prejudice against “lesser people”. Marginalization has now occurred. The next step is contempt toward all in that group. Contempt means some groups are not worthy of respectful behavior. Hurting them emotionally or physically is now justifiable. Big brushes have blurred the lines of human decency and mankind’s inhumanity to mankind. In the long run, this type of thinking makes everyone diminished whenever it happens. False pride has never helped anyone develop the character needed to be a trustworthy person. Or a reliable baseball team mate. Every effort must be made to nip this in the bud. What follows were our baseball standards. Notice differences. Find the value of all people and notice good details about them. Marginalize no one! Every person and every role on our team matters. That is how our baseball team rolls! That is a healthy culture.

The Danger of Picking Sides

Feeling alone is not good in baseball. It is easy to sort of wind ourselves into a shell when we have not gotten a hit in several games or we have been rocked as a pitcher a couple times in a row or we are on a losing streak. It’s personal! If you care about the job you do, it is never easy to stink it up! And during a long season, bad stretches happen. When things go wrong, we often seek solace. An easy way to feel better in bad times is to join a faction that takes the pressure off and offers you support and sympathy. Our need for connecting with others combines with our preferences and we become part of a group.

In baseball, during bad patches teams can splinter. One group can become disenchanted with the coach, and all the individual and collective woes of a team are because of coaching deficiencies. Joining this side now makes an individual player safe from failure, and all the responsibility for poor play can be dumped upon the person in charge. Another group expresses loyalty to the coach, and believes every player needs to be responsible for their own part of playing poorly and respond with effort to improve. Every day, every season, every year these factions arise. Such polarized factions can tear a team apart. Just looking at the United States political landscape today shows how pointless and ineffective this is!

What is needed is for everyone to own problems and everyone to pull together to solve them. Getting through slumps is a joint proposition. The coach must own the fact that when members of the team are struggling, his instruction is not effective for that player and adjustments are needed to help make people better than they are right now. Adapt and adjust and improvise is a term used in the military when it is essential to just grind it out in order to get a desired outcome. Any thinking that “this has always worked; something is wrong with these players” is not quality teaching or problem solving. It removes responsibility from leadership and makes scapegoats of players. At the same time, players must see how essential it is for them to work to identify individual problems and make the changes needed mentally and physically to get better. The game seems to find those who are struggling when the game is on the line. Factions fighting turf wars trying to justify themselves at the expense of others cannot be helpful. Those others are people on your own team. “Just right” responsibility from all members of the team while working together is the only way to get problems solved. If we want to make any group work well together, grabbing one brush with the color of blame and covering all those who are not on our side makes for a poor looking picture. It excludes all the detail needed to make a baseball team worthwhile and of lasting value.