

Life Lessons From Baseball: Dave Gasser

Part Four: Ideas About Making Improvements and Problem Solving that Actually Help

It seems reasonable to think that people want to improve themselves over time. And when problems arrive, we want them to go away and stay away. Those wishes are natural and healthy. Unfortunately, we don't come into this world with a blueprint of how "naturally" to accomplish those desires. Baseball can help with that. Ways to improve and solve problems are inherent within the context of playing good baseball as a team. We want to have well developed skills that hold up under pressure and public scrutiny. As we move up into better and better competitive levels of play, the job just continues to get harder and what we know and can do is not enough for the challenges we face. Now what? First, we must admit we need work and help. Then, we have to look at the habits of mind and body that are blocking us from performing better. It is essential to remove these roadblocks to improve, for only when they are gone can the adjustments and new habits needed to succeed have the space to grow and develop. Last article dealt with several of those challenges.

Our efforts to solve problems need to be monitored. Sometimes, they can create new problems that are worse than the old ones. I can remember a player that did not use their lower body as a hitter; they relied on their upper body and hands and arms to do all the work. As a result, a potential power hitter was barely hitting singles. I studied hard on a theory of hitting that began with a foot movement that could help unlock the back leg and then turn the hips in a faster manner. It sounded great! Unfortunately, I only knew part of this hitting philosophy. As I helped my player, he went from making solid contact consistently to swinging and missing constantly. He looked like two people trying to dance with themselves, both trying to lead. His hips were pulling his head off the ball and then his upper body tried to take over with the foundation beneath him sliding. I needed to teach how and when the hands engaged in coordination with the lower body. Parts of good ideas mixed together with bad habits are not the ticket to success.

No matter how good an idea or solution is, if the roadblocks have not been removed before you try it, a small mess can become an even bigger mess. Farming is a good analogy to working at baseball. If you don't prepare the soil and pull the weeds, your wonderful crop installed perfectly is now a mess, requiring that you pull weeds amidst the crop you want to harvest. It would have been best if you pulled the weeds while they stood alone before trying to plant anything. Once that has been done, the best we can do now is prepare the ground and make sure it is fertilized and ready to receive the seeds of new ideas. We want to build on well established soil developed over time minus the weeds. Real healthy growth is now ready to happen.

10 Reasons.....

Challenges of every kind happen daily with a baseball team. Some of them can be anticipated and some just arrive with no warning. I remember a pre game infield my first high school year coaching. I hit a high fly ball to my centerfielder. He moved well, got under the ball, then looked down suddenly and almost had the ball hit him on top of the head. Not a good result! As he came into the dugout when we finished, I asked him what needed to improve so routine flies ended up in his glove and not on top of his baseball hat. He opened his glove and proudly showed me the body of a dead mole. He said he felt it coming up to the grounds surface as the ball was in the air, and he figured it was more important to kill the mole digging up our field than catch the fly coming to him. It is hard to anticipate that one! Each day of our life small or large "tests" will present themselves.

Success in baseball requires having an approach to challenges that leads to overcoming them well. The legendary Bill Russell was asked once why his teams had won so many championships. He has no peers with success in sports. His San Francisco University teams won two consecutive national titles with him as their leader. The Boston Celtics won an unprecedented eleven NBA titles. This was his answer: I try to think of ten reasons why I can do something. Most people are thinking of reasons why they can't. This is a different perspective of the question: is the glass half full or half empty? The answer is both. Seemingly, Bill Russell is pointing us toward the advantages of focusing on the half full part of our lives, and using our strengths to accomplish challenges as best we can.

Overcoming challenges begins with us "priming" ourselves toward constructive action. That is the only way forward. If our minds are considering why we can do something, what we need to do begins to appear. This gives us our course of action moving toward what is possible. This gives human beings a reason to work with some enthusiasm instead of just going through the motions. Then and only then can substantial challenges be overcome and goals get accomplished. It is tragic in our culture how many students, how many employees, how many leaders are not giving enough effort to get really good results. They are quick to tell you why they cannot work any harder and why difficult challenges are too tough to overcome. If we begin with the reasons why we can do something, good things become possible. Life's possibilities must be seen and then seized by our energy and action.

How can I help you best learn right now?

Most successful baseball programs are constantly striving to improve. Upgrading is always possible. Making some improvements on your playing field and practice facilities and equipment. Making sure the uniforms fit and help players have pride in their appearance on the field. Yearly, clinics both locally and nationally allow coaches to find out the absolute latest ideas about how to coach the fundamental aspects of the game consistent with the newest ideas. Trainers offer the best ways to help your players improve strength and flexibility and foot quickness that are constantly evolving. Also, as video technology advances, more and more opportunities are provided to use technology during and after practice and games to help players see what is both good and challenging about their performance to help develop the best ways moving forward to spend time effectively to get better.

As new ideas unfold for the coach, new teaching challenges emerge. Teaching really effectively is very difficult. All too often, efforts are made to teach learners and very little gets learned. Just reflect upon your high school experiences. Of the ten most memorable experiences you had in high school, how many of them are essential lessons learned in the classroom? All too often, the teacher is "performing" for their students as they observe in a passive and semi-disconnected way. At worst, students are not even aware of what the teacher is saying or doing. Most of us remember social experiences and people, and very few homework assignments or teacher created lesson plans. We remember specific teachers only to the extent that they connected to us as human beings who cared. All too often, baseball practices come and go like school lessons, and certain activities are performed as a necessary pre-requisite to get to our next game. Coaches want the time spent in practice to really help their players, but players often do not directly connect the coaches' ideas and activities to their improved performance in games. Long term learning does not always result from practice.

Teaching is the art of connecting teacher and student to learning and improving something that matters to them both. Once a young person finds a subject meaningful, half the battle is won. The second half of the challenge is delivering new information in such a way that it is clearly understandable and usable to another human being. The best teacher and coach is unable to present new information in a way that completely clicks for all learners. It's just not possible. The best examples a teacher develops only click with some students. Every

learner is at a different place developmentally and experientially. A coach needs to prepare as well as they can, AND, within each practice, it is essential to ask each player “is this working for you?” and “can you tell me what is not clear about what we are doing?” This connects the learner to instruction. Finally, when a person is really having trouble with some part of the game, and it is obvious that the programmed instruction is not helping them in their struggles hitting or fielding or pitching, it is essential to admit we can’t fix it alone. We need help. The struggling player holds the key. Ask the question “how can I help you best learn and improve right now?” This respectful question connects the learner with the process. Coaches must teach the value of what they are trying to accomplish and meaningfully connect with those they want to influence. Otherwise, all they are doing is forcing others to follow them and do “stuff”, using their authority as a hammer. With that approach, results don’t have lasting value.

Humor

Some of the funniest things I’ve ever heard have come out of a baseball dugout. One game I was sitting outside the dugout (not the greatest idea) calling pitches. The hitter turned on an inside hanging curve and hit the ball right at me. All I had time to do was drop my head. The ball hit my skull and took off. I looked up to find it and realized our shortstop was settling under a ball high in the air and caught it. One of our players asked in amazement: “Coach, how hard is your head? Is that an out?” The answers in order: HARD! Not an out. As I reflect back on the many baseball teams I’ve been associated with as a player and coach, one consistent principle is noticeable. The teams that laughed the most during the season seemed to get the best results. Why is that?

The things that we do for fun seem to allow us to relax enough to perform well. When baseball is approached as a job, something very serious that requires grim effort, something essential goes missing. Baseball is a game. It is played for the enjoyment of both participants and spectators. This truth is easily forgotten when things get too serious. Parents seem to lose their minds when the game is approached as a “do or die” performance. They scream at volunteer umpires and children who make a mistake, and seem to want to hire a hit man to take out a coach who does not play their child enough or does not treat them in exactly the manner they desire. Coaches seem to lose their minds as well. Poor performances by children playing the game can make them whale at their players and umpires and opponents and fans, all the while looking as if they are having a root canal without an anesthetic. Players can act out Greek tragedies should they strike out, throwing helmets and bats and punching out the back of a wooden dugout. I’ve seen it all! Needless to say, when the game is taken this seriously, human relationships are as steady as trying to walk on eggs. People seem to blow up at a moments notice.

Laughter is the anecdote to taking things too seriously. As soon as we laugh, things get lighter around us. The ridiculousness of making something more important than it is becomes evident. That sets us up for the beauty of satire. All you have to do in a dugout is exaggerate the every day things in life that we tend to over react to and you become a fine comedian . An opposing pitcher came early to scout our batting practice during a summer game. He took extensive notes about each of our hitters in a very nice looking notebook. Even though it was very warm, he had a towel around his neck and he wore his warmup jacket during the process. Evidently he had been coached to keep his arm warm before the game. I’ve never seen such a serious pre game approach. In the first inning, he did not record an out. Eleven straight hitters got base hits. He left the game with nine runs scored and two runners on base, no outs. As he walked off the field, he was trying to stare our bench down with a glare, perhaps to intimidate us. One of our bench players asked him, “how did that notebook work out for you? I think your ERA today is infinite.” Now don’t get me wrong, I told the player to knock it off and let the team know we don’t say anything to an opponent that does not reflect respect for them. But inside, it was one of the best lines I’d ever heard! I was trying not to crack up the rest of

the game. It was a classic example of how taking ourselves too seriously is never very healthy. I tell corny “knock knock” jokes to players getting overly intense during games. I call it getting “puckered up”. Once they laugh they can play. Humor keeps things in perspective, and once we can laugh at ourselves we are in the best possible place to get along with others. Laughter makes baseball enjoyable while making life long friends.

I hope you’ve benefited from a few glimpses of the lessons the game of baseball has taught me. Play ball!