

Life Lessons From Baseball: Dave Gasser

Part Three: Roadblocks to Making Improvements and Problem Solving

Americans are encouraged to dream big. This is the land of opportunity. Don't settle. Pursue your dreams and everything is possible. Baseball success often begins with big dreams. Dreams of winning championships and hoisting a trophy. Dreams of developing and playing beyond high school, and then maybe getting drafted and having a chance of making it to the major league. "Some things have to be seen to be believed" offers U2 in one of their signature songs. It's true. At the end of every pre-season, our entire varsity team and coaching staff would sit in our dugout at night, looking out at the field. Then I would ask the question "what would it mean to you to see our team playing a state playoff game on this field in front of your parents and our community?" I wanted to generate hope, and inspire players to see what was possible if we worked hard and worked together. Dreaming big can be a wonderful starting point for a league season and beyond. Yet, many people fall short of making their dreams a reality. Why does that happen?

The inspiration must lead to clearly assessing what it will take to accomplish that dream. The cost must be counted, ahead of time. If not, the dream will get ruined by the challenges ahead that were not clearly seen, anticipated and accepted. The bigger you dream, the more significant the obstacles and roadblocks ahead. Dozens and dozens of teams want to be in a state playoff game. Most teams won't qualify. Those who do will need to be highly skilled in all aspects of the game. They must be able to play under pressure without losing their skills. They must play together and not create a lot of drama internally. These are non negotiable. Roadblocks stand in the way and deny most teams the chance to attain their dream, just as they stand in the way of all other dreams we have for our lives.

If problem solving was easy, our dreams would all come true. Unfortunately, if you open your eyes and look around in the 21st century, that is not the case. Many dreams end in disillusionment. The step where we acknowledge roadblocks that challenge the accomplishment of dreams, and then learn how to overcome them seems to be missing and poorly modeled in our culture. Those in charge spend a great deal of time explaining why problems exist, then quickly move on to make clear that they are not responsible for them. Often, "those other people" are the causes, and they are also the reason that they don't go away. Such dialog improves nothing and often makes problems worse. Baseball coaching is only effective when problems are acknowledged. Then, the changes needed to improve a player or the team are addressed, followed by the work necessary to develop new skills. Nothing less works. Long term good solutions must identify and overcome the challenges ahead before beginning to plot a course that can land us in a place where our dreams can have a chance to become reality. Coaching baseball well is not easy; here are some key roadblocks.

Stinking thinking

Before we can make improvements or any positive changes, it helps if we recognize that some of our habitual thoughts are not helpful. I call these thoughts "stinking thinking". We don't choose them, they just occur naturally under pressure. Consider the dialog in your mind immediately after you have made a mistake. Baseball has many that are found in life outside the game. Here comes statements of self condemnation like "you always choke" or "I'm such a dummy" or "I never come through". Here come excuses like "the umps always screw me" or "this field is messed up and full of bad hops" or "how can I play when my coach/team mates don't trust me?" Here come the give up statements like "I might as well quit this", or "why am I making such a big deal about baseball, it really doesn't matter at all". Stinking thinking is just part of the human condition.

The problem with it is it can take over and destroy any chance of learning from mistakes. If we try to ignore it, we fail. The thoughts can and will reoccur. If we try to fight against them, they win. The harder we fight against them, the more they intensify and control the focus within our minds. The same problem occurs if we say they are wrong and try to plead our case within our minds. Our distracted brain is still stuck in verbal warfare dominated by our stinking thinking. Here is one of my that constantly plagues me. Something happens that seems very unfair. I'm getting pulled over for a ticket while going the same speed as all the cars around me. I don't get a job that I was highly qualified for and someone else who had insider connections gets it instead. I'm forced to pay for an automobile repair that ends up not working and I have to pay a second time to get the work done properly. A friend or loved one gets diagnosed with a serious illness. If something is declared unfair by human beings, the victim narrative just automatically begins to play in the human brain. "Why do these sorts of things always happen to me? Others don't seem to deal with this sort of stuff." Or "I guess I'm being punished for not being a good enough person". Stinking thinking can freeze us in our life and cut off the energy needed to grow and improve.

For corrections and any learning to happen, we need room in our heads to think about better ways to do things. Once negative thoughts occur, we can't undo them. Stinking thinking pops up at times. So be it. We can replace fighting them and being defensive or pretending they do not exist by simply noticing them. Hundreds of times my head has announced "I stink and I'm a mess up" after a mistake. Well, there it is again. I can see it for what it is. Nothing more than some automatic thoughts that pop into my head, unwanted. Now, I'm going to take a few breaths and focus on what I am doing or who I'm with. All of a sudden, it has lost its power to keep me from moving forward. It becomes something I notice that triggers thoughts that can allow me to refocus on the task at hand. The essential thing is to name stinking thinking as a roadblock or else we can't get past it. It will keep its power to mess with our thoughts and behavior.

Quick fixes aren't

Baseball problems are not very easy to solve. The easy part is finding the things that are not going well. If your pitching staff is giving up a lot of runs, most everyone notices. Here come the "helpful suggestions". They almost always start with "all you have to do is....." All you have to do is throw more first pitch strikes and get ahead of hitters. All you have to do is get control of your second pitch so the hitter is not just looking for the fastball. If hitters are struggling, drum roll please, here come the quick fixes. All your hitters have to do is get more aggressive. All hitters have to do is be more selective at the plate. All hitters have to do is hit the ball to the opposite field more often.

Things would never go wrong if quick fixes worked. The simple "all you have to do" answers to problems have been offered since the beginning of time, yet our problems are alive and well and seem to thrive in the 21st century. The problem with the quick fixes is that the seemingly easy adjustment is never easy to do. It is always more nuanced and complicated than it seems at first look if you really understand the problem. "Just" is a tip off word that indicates the problem is going to get oversimplified. "Just" throw first pitch strikes. Since when is the pitcher trying to throw ball one on the first pitch? It is very challenging to throw a ball in competition over 60 feet exactly where you are aiming. It will never happen all the time. And if you take something off the first pitch and throw it down the middle of the plate, hitters crush those pitches. Opps. Controlling multiple pitches takes a lot of experience and good instruction. Controlling off speed pitches takes a level of confidence and maturity many pitchers never develop. And pressure situations only add to the degree of difficulty of "just" developing mastery of a second pitch. Hitters getting more aggressive can do more harm than good, easily. They can swing at bad pitches or swing so hard they lose control of their heads

and swing and miss more often. Hitting the ball hard to the opposite field is highly advanced hitting and takes hundreds of hours to master.

Our culture is not patient. We want things to change, and change right now! Good grief, if our internet speed does not go at the speed of light we get highly frustrated waiting a few extra seconds to get into a website. Baseball cannot accommodate such thinking. No wonder youth participation numbers are dramatically going down. The skills are hard and take time to develop. The game requires anticipation and understanding of multiple situations to know where to throw the ball on any given play or the right thing to do depending on how many outs and who is up and what the score is. Baseball growth requires honestly approaching a challenge, doing the work without rushing the work, and trusting the process! Results will get better, and a good result is worth waiting for! The long play is the way!

The false ceiling

A genuine coaching challenge is working with players who have predetermined how good they are. They have set the bar too low. They have only seen how well they can play with the skill level and experience they possess; they cannot see how much better they can become with refined skills created by good training and more experience using them. Also, they understand their game through the lens of their weak areas hindering them; they have no idea how some of those weaknesses can be improved and not hinder their games as much as they develop. Until the ceiling is raised and they experience the enjoyment of an improved game, it is not possible to see themselves as capable enough to be a good player on a team that benefits from their ability to perform well.

That is the job of a coach or teacher or life mentor. Once we earn a person's trust, we can begin to overcome the challenge of "the false ceiling". This is not a quick fix. It requires that a relationship is established that slowly but surely works on one thing and demonstrates measured improvement. Here is a concrete example. Many players cannot hit the ball that well to the opposite field. Standing at home plate with a ball on the outside corner on a batting tee, we determine our starting point. How far can a player hit a ball as a right handed hitter to right field, or a left handed hitter to left field. Most roll over the ball on contact and hit ground balls. Goal one is hitting a line drive that gets to the outfield grass. Instruction is offered that helps this occur. Encouragement is offered for any improvement. Eventually it happens. Then, work to hit the ball harder and further and move the spot into the outfield. Eventually, you can look at your player and ask him how much better he has become hitting line drives. You can ask him who has made that improvement? Owning success and growth is very satisfying. It is not cockiness, it is the development of self competence. Then you can ask what is the next thing you'd like to improve. Suddenly, they have learned to focus on improvement and not their limitations. Confidence in the working relationship between coach and player is developing. Trust and the enjoyment of working together grows.

All of us have developed false ceilings in our life. Left unattended, they limit our growth and sense of competence for our entire lives. We all need people who believe in our ability to improve and have the knowledge and concern to help us grow. These are the people who make life better for others. Criticism alone does nothing but guarantee that everyone's false ceilings stay low, or at worst move lower. Nothing is worse than feeling stuck without any hope of moving forward. In the same manner, offering someone compliments for a "nice try" when they lack skills is equally flawed if nothing is done afterward to grow their skill level. All potential withers and improvement is stunted. If leaders are not growers, they do more harm than good. Low expectations need to be helpfully addressed before they become permanent limitations. Then, if good instruction follows, growth can happen.