

Some Great Life Lessons From Baseball

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The great value I found being involved in playing and coaching baseball was not chosen as much as it was “pre ordained. My father was a performer and musician as a young man. My mother hated PE and had no interest whatsoever in being involved in athletics. But my mom’s dad, Grandpa Zwald, loved the game. He would watch the “game of the week” on Saturday with play by play offered by Pee Wee Reese and commentary by Dizzy Dean. I’d watch because it was on and he would make comments about what was happening and why things happened. Gramps would also slide me copies of “The Sporting News” and let me take them home to read. Once for a birthday gift he got me a baseball uniform. In hindsight, this was not a very subtle effort to get someone in his family interested in the game he loved. It worked.

The Little League field was down the street four blocks. My growing up days included many of the scenes from the movie “Sandlot” with my free time with neighborhood kids all the while waiting to put on the uniform and play. I read baseball fiction books and biographies, and dreamed of being a big leaguer and being a World Series hero. When one of my best friends brother made it to the major leagues, Rick Wise, it just confirmed it was possible. When his team won the state championship in Oregon at the high school I was going to attend, it began my dream of doing the same when I was a senior. As a medium sized human, many of my team mates were professional sized and skilled players. My junior year we won the state championship. My junior summer we won the American Legion World Series in 1969. One of the rewards for that accomplishment was attending the first two games of the 69’ World Series in Baltimore. Something became very clear after that summer; I was never going to play in the major leagues. I saw first hand the type of player scouts drafted. Oh my, they were bigger, faster and stronger and hit the ball much farther than I could ever achieve. That did not make winning the state championship any less rewarding my senior year. Rick Wise’s brother, my grade school buddy, pitched a shutout. I was his catcher. It just put a nice goodbye on my playing career. By the way, my grandpa watched the game. It lead me to an over forty year career teaching and coaching, not the Big Leagues.

Now that this career has ended, it is obvious that the game has taught me some very important things. These lessons are valuable enough to share with others, which prompts me to write them in this book. They will be offered in short segments, much like I would share them with my players or fellow coaches at a clinic. They help form a mosaic of the wisdom found in the game of baseball. It will be up to you to put the inter related pieces together in a way that is meaningful to you, given your life experiences and your established perspective. As you read, some common and reoccurring threads will become evident. My life in baseball started with gramps watching the game of the week. Every year I played I tried to improve. Every year I coached, I went to clinics and talked with peers and tried to get better. The game just kept teaching me important life lessons. It is my hope that you enjoy these ideas offered to benefit you and those you care about

Ready or Not, Here Comes Failure

What a game! The classic example of just how much failure happens in baseball is that a batter hitting 300 is considered outstanding at the major league level. In the last few years successful hitting stats have been lowered, like so many other standards during my lifetime. 250 hitters, successful 25% of the time, are paid millions! Oh my. I’m not going to a dentist with that rate of success voluntarily. If a professional coach wins 100 games they are manager of the year. They still lost 62 times. And if they don’t go on to win the World Series, and the

odds are not with the team having the seasons best record winning it all, their season is deemed a failure. Then the team that wins the World Series is considered the favorite the next year, which almost never happens. The fans are disappointed. The game is not designed for consistent success on a daily or yearly basis. It is a roller coaster ride.

The game has always been like this. Failure is inevitable. Now, in the 21st Century, this reality creates more challenges than ever. Fewer and fewer people are equipped to handle failure. Individuals from birth are deemed “great” and “champions” and “all stars”. Failure and mistakes need to be caused by the ineptitude of others, who can be blamed for the poor outcome leaving me or my child or my friends child blameless. Just to make sure that failure is rightfully acknowledged, social media can now be utilized to clarify the errors of others as the problem. During my baseball career, I’ve witnessed the average tenure of a high school coach move from decades to 3 or 4 years. When lofty expectations are not met, surely this team of all stars deserves better than the coach that did not maximize the fine talent assembled. And if a player is unsuccessful, greener pastures are easily found. Just change high schools or enter the transfer portals in college athletics.

This is a problem. What is learned by such an approach to failure? Those who stay in this game despite the challenges it presents cannot help but learn some valuable lessons about life. Career survival depends on gaining a healthy perspective toward failure. It does not bode well that fewer and fewer American children are staying with this game. Let’s look at some lessons that begin to uncover the value baseball offers to all who play it long enough to learn them. These are very important “gifts” of learning to deal with failure.

Breathe

Failure is rarely a goal. Few wake up in the morning, get out of bed and dream of failing to make their day a delight. When players and spectators and coaches show up at the ballpark to play a game, the goal is not to play poorly as an individual or lose as a team. Often, when a win is possible and mistakes snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, the losers slink off the field feeling very disappointed. Failure individually usually leads to negative emotions. After all, the mistakes are made publicly in baseball. In practice, booted ground balls or throws that end up over the top of a fence or swings and misses or pop up fly balls on a pitch you could hit hard or swinging at balls that bounce in front of the plate are certainly noticed by coaches and team members. Given “the law of human nature”, some comments generally follow really noticeable mistakes that are heard by others. During games, fans in the stands that can include friends and family members get to witness your failings, and they might join in the chorus of comments. These “critiques” are not always easy to accept.

Frustration, embarrassment, humiliation and anger just sort of naturally arise inside a player or coach during the game. These emotions immediately tighten up muscles and shorten breathing. The lack of oxygen sets off a chain reaction. Lack of oxygen inhibits the body from moving with any fluidity. Muscles tighten even more. The mind notices this “seizing up” of muscles and tendons and increases the alarm that things are not working as they should. This shortens breathing even more. The mind, to see well and think well, needs oxygen. As its supply gets limited, vision decreases and the mind can’t work properly. This is why the wheels fall off players all too often during a game, and one mistake seems to lead to another and another and a good player starts to play like they’ve never played before.

The first defense against this horrible cycle is breathing after any mistake, making sure that negative emotions do not hijack your game. Plenty of oxygen allows muscles to remain fluid, vision to remain clear, and the mind to continue to work well and put things into a manageable perspective. In through the nose expanding the diaphragm, out through the mouth relaxing the stomach back into the core. Several of these give each one of us the

chance to keep failure from spiraling us out of control. Breathing is a necessity. Doing it under pressure allows us to make meaningful adjustments that are not possible without enough air! Unfortunately, this is not a natural reaction. Until you learn it, pressure has its way with us. I took a sports psychology class, and its main focus was on teaching players the discipline of breathing under pressure. Such breathing is a lesson that failure offers to help us perform better next time. This works for the pressures of work or family life and interactions with other people that challenge us just as well as sports.

AVCE: The Habit of Using Failure After it Happens for Focus

The first baseball clinic I ever attended was taught by Dr Bill Harrison, an ex professional pitcher who became an eye doctor. He explained how to be proactive to prepare for a positive performance. The best thing about his process is that it can easily become a habit and an unconscious reaction. Once established, it becomes an effective way to process a mistake and turn it into a visual picture of doing something right. All too often in my life, mistakes created a visual picture in my mind of my error and set me up to fail again and again. What a miserable movie to view! Seeing precedes doing, and that is either a helpful thing or a hurtful thing.

The process is a sequence best learned as the acronym AVCE. A is for **Analyze**. Before making a pitch or trying to hit a baseball or before a pitch as a defensive player, analyze the situation. As a pitcher, what is the count and how many outs and who is the hitter and what is the score and what inning is it. Given that, what pitch do I throw and where? As a defensive player, how many outs and who is the hitter and are their baserunners and what is the score. Given that, what do I do with a grounder or a line drive or a pop up or a bunt? After you analyze, take a couple good breaths. This gives the brain what it needs to keep working. The V is for **Visualize**. See yourself making the pitch or the play exactly as you've prepared to do it. In case of having failed the previous pitch, analyze the mistake and **make the correction** and then see yourself performing exactly the way you have done it before, successfully. The correction has now replaced the mistake in your mind! Now breathe again and enjoy the correction you can make. C is for **Center**. This means focus your eyes exactly where they need to be. You are not thinking any more. You are just looking at the spot that helps you perform the way you have visualized. As a pitcher you are looking at the catchers target. As a hitter you are moving your eyes to the spot where the pitcher releases the ball. As a defensive player you are looking at the very front of the strike zone to see the ball coming off the hitters bat. E is for **Execute**. That is the unthinking, natural reaction that happens. Excellent performance is destroyed by overthinking and overanalyzing when you are trying to do something you are capable of doing. Your busy mind has hijacked the focus needed to relax and perform. So just see and react. Enjoy!

AVCE works in life. Just consider all the situations in life that we could improve if we used this "order of operations". Analyze the situation gives us a context to perform well. What is the job I'm interviewing for and where is it held and who is interviewing me and what are the expected questions. When isn't analyzing first helpful? Then breathe before visualizing because it is often stressful just thinking about important things in life. Visualizing exactly the way we want to handle situations is far better than all those "what could go wrong" movies that play in our head and make us miserable and fearful of failing. Given that they just pop into our heads unwanted at times, don't make a big deal about them. Just notice another crummy movie is starting, focus on your breathing and let it pass. Move on. Now,, center your eyes where they belong, on the interviewer or our students or wherever performance requires. Then, let the visualization get replayed in your life. Since we are prepared, why not just enjoy the best result we anticipate? That is the best we can do! It is a productive and worthwhile

habit to develop. Thanks to failing without this discipline, we can appreciate how it can help us moving forward.

What will follow over the next few months are more lessons from the game of baseball that, once learned, can help us navigate our life in ways that help us be more content with our lives. Wouldn't that help all of us!