



## **Lessons Learned From Others and Experience**

There are two basic ways that we learn things in life; through experience or from the lessons passed on to us by others. This could be through a conversation, by reading or watching a TV or a movie/ DVD. There is no question that the most meaningful and powerful lessons are the ones learned from direct experience. Especially if we take the time to reflect on the process we used to achieve the outcome. The problem with experiential learning is that we do not have enough time in our life to experience everything in order to learn about it. Also, some lessons only get taught once. You do not get a second chance or can be permanently scared from the experience. I used the example with my students that it was a bad idea to lie down in the middle of a dark road late at night. You can learn from me giving you this advice or you can try to learn from the experience. They could easily see that the experiential lesson would be too painful or permanent. It is easy to accept advice when the lesson is this harsh. Uncertainty on learning from other comes when we know the experience may not be harsh. I have always believed that it is better to combine both methods.

When I qualified for my first provincial championship as a young inexperienced coach I sought the advice of the most experienced coach in the province. I had no experience in coaching in a provincial championship. I asked him if I could take him out to supper and pick his brain about coaching at a provincial championship. He agreed and candidly shared with me many thoughts on how to be successful in the “Big Game”. My definition of the “Big Game” is the one you arrive at in your season that if you lose you go home, if you win you move on. What I want to share with you are my top ten lessons I have from coaching in the “Big Game”. They are a combination of the ones Coach Keith MacKenzie passed on to me, the ones I gained from my many conversations and reading with coaches over the years and finally the ones I learned from competing in “Big Games” in football, basketball, and track.

- 1. You cannot prepare for the “Big Game” the day before the “Big Game”**  
The habits and routines that you start to develop at the very first session of the seasons are the ones that will make and break you in the “Big Game”. When in high pressure situations, like the “Big Game”, you and your players will choose your comfort zone. Drawing up plays in the sand, using some pre- game pep talk, asking players to execute a skill they have never mastered will not cut it.
- 2. Play to your strengths**  
As a coach we are always working with players to develop their weaknesses. In order to improve the player must continue to grow. At some point you need to convince the player to play to his/her strength. The best example is shot selection. You know a player must develop his/her outside shot to improve. The “Big Game”, is not the time to start working on this weakness. Confidence to do this had to be demonstrated in practice and previous games. On the other hand players need to take their shot when it appears. I have always told players that a shot in

basketball is not their shot, but the teams shot. You are expected to take the shots we know you can make. We will never be upset with you shooting your shot, even if it misses. Every player must have a shot. In today's game you cannot put players on the floor that cannot score. Defence is too good if allowed to cheat off one or two players.

### 3. No Excuses

This starts when you receive your draw for the final tournament. Too often I see coaches complain to their players or worse, do it in public about how they have been robbed by being given such a difficult schedule. To me you are building in an excuse for failure. No matter what the schedule tells your players how lucky you are to receive such a great schedule. Start to build in them the picture of how it will all unfold. **Build dreams**. When times get tough in the "Big Game", will you continue to fight and strive to play as a team or will you give in? If the excuse is already in place it is easier to quit. I have seen this happen so many times at all levels. Coaches warn their players that it is going to be hot or noisy in the gym. Soon as the players feel the first drop of sweat or hear the first trumpet play they start to play mind games with themselves. They miss the first shot and think it must be the heat or the noise. They lose control of their own actions and give it over to something they cannot control. The key is too in developing a **distraction control plan**. The earlier this is developed the better it will be since you can use it at all games as a way to practice the plan.

I would sit with my team and brainstorm all possible things that could affect our performance. Some may sound silly to you, but you must honor their suggestions. We would then divide the list to things we could control or not control. The key was we developed an action plan for each and every item on the list. My job as the coach was to create situations where these distractions may occur. Also I would store up examples from the season where the players had successfully overcome these distractions. An example might be that a key player picks up three fouls in the first half. I would remind the team and player that we have been here before. In a previous game the player had sat for awhile and we were successful because we did not panic and stayed with the game plan. Other players had to step up and look for their shots.

### 4. Enjoy the day

On a trip to a football championship game one time our bus broke down half way to Halifax. My assistant coaches were very anxious. "We are going to be late; we won't get a proper warm up." They were spewing forth every possible negative factor or consequence of this unfortunate incident that was really beyond our control. The players on the other hand were very relaxed. They had remembered what I had taught and reminded them of the night before. Enjoy the day!

I wanted them to get a good sleep, awaken and have a great breakfast. Enjoy the taste of the food. Enjoy the time you spend with your mom and dad before heading off to the school. Enjoy the ride to the game with your teammates. Enjoy

the experience of putting on the uniform, for many the last time in their career. Enjoy the feeling of running out on the field before a large crowd. What I was doing was getting the players to *play in the moment*. Being present is a very important concept in any endeavor in life. To sit around all day thinking about the “Big Game” is very draining. Yes, there were times we want to think about the game, but this is part of our planned routine (see below). I don’t know where I heard it first, but I always believed in the idea:

*Learn from the past*

*Prepare for the future*

*Play in the present*

By getting the players to focus on each moment of the entire game I found that it carried over to the game. We never got caught up in watching the scoreboard. We were able to focus on the process and not the outcome.

So, seating in the parking lot of the Irving Big Stop in Enfield, Nova Scotia 60 players and I had story time. I told them thrilling stories of past games and past heroic players. Some were actually disappointed when the new bus came to take us to the field.

## **5. Plan A vs. B**

You must have a game plan. This is playing to your strengths or plan A. Every player and coach needs to know **what** this is; it cannot reside only in the mind of the head coach. Players need to know **how** they can demonstrate plan A.

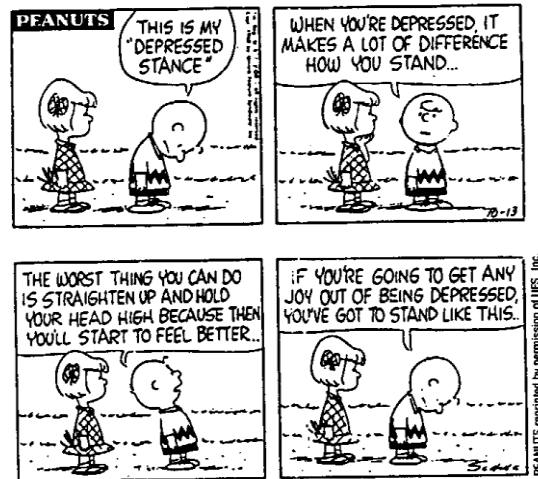
A great coach or athlete though needs a plan B. What do you do when things go wrong? This is putting your distraction plan in action. Can you actually apply what you said you are going to do? It fascinated me listening to the debriefs of athletes and coaches coming home from Beijing. Very often the poor performance was the result of not being able to go to plan B when problems occurred. Often it is was the coach who forgot plan B or went to plan C which was never discussed or practiced.

## **6. Emotional control**

I heard Chris Evert, the great female tennis player, being interviewed one time. She said that she had won championships when physically she was on her game, but not mentally sharp. She also won matches when she was under the weather physically, but mentally just right. She never won when emotionally she lost her control. This has been a credo of mine ever since. Emotions are a delicate thing to play with. The Goldilocks Effect is crucial to your success. Too little and your not “up” for the game, too much and you lose focus. Player need to know what is “just right” for them. This again is something that needs to be practiced throughout the entire year.

I am very diligent in looking for “Charlie Browns”. These are the players who say; “Whoa is me, I just missed a shot.” They hang their head and show a dejected expression. We now have a generation of players who want to celebrate for making routine plays. I always liked the idea that when you score act like it is

what you expected to do not some once in a lifetime experience. Even if you are upset you need to *fake it until you make it*. By pretending you are positive you eventually will. It is the reverse of this little cartoon that I have always enjoyed.



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You also have to let sleeping dogs lie. Too often players do things to the opponent that wakes the sleeping giant. They will trash talk or taunt an opponent. This can backfire if it puts the opponent in the just right stage of emotional control. I still remember a player saying before a Big Game, "I want you", at the jump circle. Well she got her, as the player had a career game. My greatest friend and rival in coaching was famous for trying to get me to make a casual statement before a game that she could then turn into a fiery locker room pep talk about how coach M<sup>ac</sup>Kay already thought he had the game won or he did not respect a certain player. By the end I am sure she just made them up because I had probably supplied her with enough ammo to last a lifetime.

We must also be in tune to the emotions of the people within the player's circle of influence. I have seen assistant coaches, student managers, trainers and parents have a huge impact on the "Big Game" by losing it at the wrong time and place. Look for little warning signs as the season goes on. If you do not deal with it early, the "Big Game" is too late.

Finally, and most important of all emotional control is not just the players. It is us, the coaches. I knew that my poor emotional control could do more to upset my team than any signal factor. The best advice that Keith MacKenzie ever gave me in coaching was...

## 7. Be their friend

Early in the year I could be the bear. I would a perfectionist demanding that they focused on doing the little things right. I would use the pine slide. If you made a

mistake, like missing a box out, you were going to get a sub. Being the bear in the “Big Game” did not work. There is already pressure placed on performance. You create hesitant players who are constantly looking over their shoulder. The focus is on coach not on playing. This may work in the short term or in no pressure filled games, but very rarely in the ones that count. I was always very positive and encouraging. I would try not to sub players for mistakes. Especially if I knew they needed to play at some later time. I would be very upbeat in timeouts saying things like; “This is just like we thought it was going to be.” “Isn’t this fun!!” “I love this.!!” “I am glad the other team is playing well so we get a chance to show what we are made of.”

Off the court we need to let go of games after we have completed our debrief. Making players think about the game for hours and hours is too emotional draining. In my misplaced youth as a coach I remember stopping the bus on a ride home and getting after the players because they were laughing after a loss. You must understand that this was after driving in complete silence for an hour. The embarrassing part was when a parent who was following the bus politely tapped on the door and asked if everything was alright. No it wasn’t. I was the problem. I was humbled and learned from that experience. Once we leave the locker room we need to let it go.

You will always have some game in your strive to become a champion where you have to win ugly. You win, but you struggled to do so. Maybe it was a team you have previously beaten. The key is to forget it. Don’t dwell and over analyze it. Move on.

## **8. Routines**

In one of my previous blogs I talked about the funnel and routines. I cannot emphasize the importance of establishing positive routines early on in the season. Every game is a chance to practice your routines. Once you get to the “Big Game” you have it down pat. You need to plan meals, practice, meetings, travel to and from the gym (take into account rush hour), and down time. Players need to know what activities help and hurt performance.

## **9. Tournament Hotel**

One of the most important points is the effective use of down time. If you are lucky enough to travel and stay overnight with your team when you compete for a championship you need to address this issue. Your choice of hotel and your rooming list is very important. All year, with my teams, we roomed with the idea of getting to know each other. I wanted the seniors to teach the younger players what was expected when we traveled. Rooms were for rest. Not a place to socialize with strangers. When the time came for provincials, this changed. First of all I wanted everyone to have their own bed. A good night sleep was important. We would raise the money to ensure this would happen. Second, they roomed with people that were compatible. I think it was Casey Stengel who said that a coaches job was to keep those players who play well and support the coach away

from the ones who complain. Third, I tried to find a hotel that could guarantee quiet and had security. I wanted the rooms together on the same floor. When you get the cheapest hotel you sometimes get what you pay for. This is your home away from home. Fourth, I wanted good meals close by. If there was a restaurant I would have them prepare meals a head of time so we could eat on schedule. Nothing worse than waiting for a meal and you know you should be leaving for the gym. Finally I always let them know if they wanted to talk I was available. You never knew when stress would take hold. I can remember one of the best players I ever coached breaking down the night before the championship game. The pressure to perform was too much. After an hour of letting her unload she was fine. Be available. It is not about you it is about them.

#### **10. Nervous vs. anxious**

On the eve of a “Big Game” coach Dave Nutbrown was asked if he was nervous. His answer has stuck with me all these years. I paraphrase;

*No, I am not nervous. Nervous means you are not prepared. I am anxious. Anxious means you have the butterflies of anticipation. You just can't wait to play.*

The old Celtic teams of the Red Aurbach era knew when Bill Russell was ready to play; they heard him throwing up in the washroom before the game.

If you have

- Prepared
- Developed a solid plan A and B
- Practiced your positive routines.
- Made proper use of downtime.

All you have to do now is go and play the game. Play for the moment and enjoy every second. No matter what happens we will end the season in tears of joy. Joy in having achieved our dreams or tears from having done everything possible to play our best. This is the last day that this group will compete together. Let's make it special.