

CHAPTER 4

Respect for Teammates and Team



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The view that we fulfill ourselves with and through others, that we become who we can be through those involvements, is as old as the Dionysian ecstasy, as enduring as the phenomenon of nationalism, and as recent as a contemporary coach's exhortation to his players in behalf of teamwork.

—Drew A. Hyland, *Philosophy of Sport*

It's amazing how much can be accomplished if no one cares who gets the credit.

—John Wooden

Teammates, not only opponents, compete with each other. Teammates compete with each other to make the starting lineup, to be chosen MVP of the team, to be popular with the team or the coach, to be high scorer for the game or for the season. If winning matters, teammates are necessary, and cooperation with teammates is practical; but respect for teammates is more than cooperation.

Ultimately, the most important reasons for respecting teammates are ethical, not merely practical, at least not practical in any obvious sense. I must be thankful for good teammates for the same reason I am thankful for good opponents. If participation in a team sport is a valuable experience, then my teammates make it possible for me to have that experience. No opponents, no game; likewise, no teammates, no team. And, in addition to what I get out of it, I should admire and respect human excellence anywhere I find it. Just as I respect the efforts to excel and the achievements of my opponents, I should respect my teammates' efforts and achievements.

In that sense, respect for teammates is not simply about winning. But an experienced coach knows that a great team requires—even as a pure practicality of winning—a bond among its players that involves deep respect, not merely cooperation. Respect for teammates, like respect for opponents, has to do with how we treat other human beings, win or lose; but respect for teammates also has to do with the nature of a team and of a team effort to win. Being part of a team when the team truly becomes a team, when the team “gels,” is one of the great experiences of athletics. It's wonderful to witness it, and it's almost magical to be a part of it. When grudging cooperation—the honor-among-thieves version of teamwork—turns into genuine respect, the results often exceed everyone's expectations.

And, although a team gelling is in part a thing of luck and circumstance—that is, you can't force it—it doesn't happen without hard work. It doesn't happen without good thinking. And it doesn't happen without developing the *habit of respect*. Indeed, it must become a part of every practice, every team meeting, every game, every celebration, every athletic banquet.

TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- Is it possible for a coach to overemphasize the importance of “the team”? Are there any possible dangers in stressing the values of the team as opposed to values more closely related to individual achievement?
 - Is respect for teammates and team the same thing as loyalty to the team? Is there a limit to how much loyalty to the team a coach can demand?
 - How do you balance respect for the team with the need for individual creativity and spontaneity?
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WHY RESPECT TEAMMATES AND TEAM?

To understand respect for teammates and team, we have to understand the nature of a team effort. What is a team? A team is a group of individuals who agree to cooperate in order to achieve something *as a team*. In athletic competition, the individuals cooperate so that the team can win. To a great extent, that simply means that each individual tries his or her best. If I'm taking a three-point shot, I do my best to make it. Every basket I make is added to the score of the team. If I can steal the ball, get a rebound, or make a good pass, that contributes to the effort of the team. On this line of reasoning, if we then add up all of the individual efforts of the team members, we get the total team effort, just as you add up all of the baskets the individuals on a basketball team make during a game to get the team score. And if we turn to team competitions in individual sports, such as tennis, golf, or archery, it seems even more reasonable to say the team effort consists of the sum of the individual efforts.

Let's look first at the team version of an individual sport in which it may be harder to understand what a team effort might consist of. Consider, for example, team tennis, that is, tennis competition in which two teams compete against one another as teams (as opposed to

individuals representing their schools as individuals in a district, regional, or state tournament). If one school plays another in a dual match, that means that the school that wins the most individual matches wins the dual match. If the format is six singles matches and three doubles matches, the school that wins five or more of these matches wins the dual match. Obviously, teamwork is involved in doubles. But leaving that aside for now, the “team” effort, on first examination, means nothing more than how well the singles players and doubles teams play their individual matches. The team effort is equal to the sum of the individual efforts. If our numbers two, four, and six singles players win their matches and our numbers two and three doubles teams win their matches, our team wins five of the nine individual matches and therefore wins the dual match. Simple math. . . .

Or is it? What if the two senior girls on the number one doubles team, knowing that the number three doubles match was the one that could go either way, had worked with their teammates on the number three team all week in practice, preparing them for the match? What if the number three singles player after losing her match went over to the number one player, who’s sulking in the team van after losing a close match, and tells her they need to get over to the number six singles match to give their teammate some support? What if one of the lower players, who never gets to play a match but can outrun the number one player, lines up all year long next to the number one player during running drills, challenging her to keep up? If these sorts of things happen routinely, becoming a part of the team’s makeup, if players do these sorts of things because they feel a commitment to the team, not merely to themselves individually, the effects do begin to “add up.” Actually, they don’t simply add up; they increase geometrically.

As part of a team effort in the fullest sense of the word, individuals become capable of more than they are capable of individually; and the team becomes capable of more than the sum of what the individuals on the team are capable of individually. Now apply it to a team sport, such as basketball, baseball, soccer, volleyball, or football, and this phenomenon becomes even more obvious; but the principle is the same. As the old saying has it, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. When a team truly becomes a team, in fact, it becomes impossible to speak of summing up at all. We talk of chemistry, of gelling, of everything coming together. We talk of intangibles—we even talk about a kind of “magic.”

TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- Have you ever had a firsthand experience, as a coach or as a player, of a team coming together in a magical way? Why did it happen? What factors were involved? Try to be specific.
 - Is there such a thing as the negative version of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts? Can animosity, jealousy, and other divisive attitudes among players increase geometrically?
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SHOWING RESPECT FOR TEAMMATES AND TEAM

How does this magic come about? There are no guarantees, but it requires the genuine respect of the team members for each other and for the team. If I understand the nature of a team, then I recognize I have an obligation as a team member to respect my teammates and my team. What does this require? As a member of a team, I have a responsibility to play the game and to behave on and off the court in such a way as to contribute to the team's effort to win, that is, to contribute to the team's effort to play the game as well as it can. *My excellence as a team athlete, like my excellence as a human being, should make my teammates more excellent.* We'll have more to say in the last chapter about the use of sport metaphors to describe life, but suffice it to say here that if I am courageous, self-controlled, and just (to use the cardinal virtues of the classical world) and if I have good judgment in my application of these character traits, my excellence will contribute to my fellow humans. If you look at the stats of, say, Larry Bird, it's obvious he was one of the all-time greats on the basketball court; but, much more importantly, when he was on the court his teammates were better because of his presence. And as his presence made them better, he in turn drew from their higher level of spirit and play. You can't calculate it, but you can feel it: That's why we call it "magic."

Being Truthful About Abilities and Playing a Role

In order to make this kind of contribution to a team effort, players and coaches must be truthful about individual abilities and weaknesses. Everyone would love to be the high scorer, have the ball 90 percent of the time, hit cleanup, play quarterback instead of center, "kill" the ball instead of set it. But some people are better shooters than others. Some people can hit a baseball a country mile, and some can barely get it out

of the infield. Some people can run like the wind and catch a football if they can touch it, and some can't run like the wind but can knock down a building if it's willing to get right in front of them. Some people were born tall and strong and can soar above the net, and some are short but have great touch.

"Playing a role" is of the essence of team sports. In some sports the roles are more clearly defined by position; in others, the roles require more judgment and honesty about abilities and limits. If I can set picks and rebound, but I can't dribble or shoot too well, I won't be the next Michael Jordan, but I might be the next Bill Russell. Or I might only be a journeyman high school basketball player making my best contribution to a team's effort to win a 1A district championship. My obligation as a team player is to figure out how my abilities fit into the team's complex set of talents and weaknesses. This includes the best use of my athletic abilities and skills *and* the contributions of my personality, spirit, intelligence, dedication—all the intangibles of character that can enable my teammates and my team to become better.

Making Individual Sacrifices and Playing a Role

In some situations, the normal roles may reverse, as Scottie Pippen apparently failed to understand in the 1994 NBA playoffs, when he refused to go back into the game because the coach decided someone else would take the final shot. The coach figured the other team would be looking for Pippen to take the shot, and he decided to use the star as a decoy—an old ploy that requires the star to understand that his role as a team member is to contribute in each situation whatever will best enable the team to win the game. Maybe Pippen wasn't being selfish; maybe he truly felt that he would hit the last shot and that his taking it was the best chance of winning the game. Should he have tried to quickly convey this feeling in the huddle without disrupting the concentration of the team? Maybe. Refusing to go back in the game didn't convey it, nor did it convey his willingness to put his own interest in stardom behind the interests of the team. Now imagine what the guy who's going to take the shot feels like, when his teammate refuses to go in the game with him? As it turned out Toni Kukoc made the shot, and the team won. A moral victory? Not really.

Respect for the team often involves some form of individual sacrifice. It's interesting that the term "sacrifice" is even used in baseball and softball as a technical term. In certain situations, an individual must sacrifice the opportunity to hit in order to advance a base runner by bunting. In virtually every sport, players are asked to assume roles, in either a specific situation, a game, or even an entire season—not just because they have no other abilities, but because the team needs them

to play those roles. That requires a greater interest in team success than individual performance or statistics. When we say someone is a “team player,” we are referring to a character trait: unselfishness. An unselfish player, like an unselfish person, can see the larger picture. In contrast, selfish players think about their own success when they should be thinking about the team’s success. In this sense, selfish players do not respect their teams, nor the sacrifices that their teammates may be making on behalf of the team effort.

Emphasizing the Little Things

At the end of a contest, most players and fans remember who scored the most points, who ran for the touchdowns, who hit the home run, who had the most kills, or who kicked in the winning goal. But in every game there are players who do the “little things” that usually go unnoticed by fans and are rarely mentioned in the newspapers. And these little things are what make possible the “big things” that do get mentioned in the newspapers. These little things are essential for team success, and they should be pointed out and praised by coaches. Such praise reinforces the value of team contributions and the bonds that hold the team together and make success possible.

TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- In the team meeting after a game, do you mention the little things that were positive?
 - Think of the most glamorous part of your sport—scoring in basketball, throwing a touchdown pass in football, spiking the ball in volleyball. Then describe all of the little things that make it possible.
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Coaching and Intrasquad Competition

From a coaching standpoint, respect for teammates and team means that competition among teammates—for starting roles, more playing time, top stats—must always serve the efforts of a team to be a team. Good competition among teammates can contribute to a team effort, but it must be done with that in mind. If two quarterbacks are competing for the starting position, that competition can push both of them to excel; but, beneath the competition, their efforts must be understood as a contribution to the team effort. Of course, this kind of competition can be exploited. But if it’s nothing but manipulation for the sake of winning, it will often backfire in the long run, and, even if

it doesn't backfire, it shows that those involved misconstrue the nature of the team. If the team wins and all of the teammates have nothing but contempt for each other because of a coach's ruthless manipulation of intrasquad rivalries, it wasn't really a team that won; it was the coach. Some victories really are hollow.

TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- We asked you in chapter 1 if you would promote animosity between two teammates to motivate them. How would you answer that question now?
 - What kinds of things can you do to make sure that competition among teammates is "healthy"?
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Team Rules and Team Unity

In the end, team spirit is just that: a spirit. It cannot be manufactured or decreed. But team rules and customs can promote team spirit and team unity. The point of the rules must be clear, namely, to promote the idea that everyone on the team is a part of the team effort and that the efforts of everyone on the team must be directed toward the success of the team. For example, on virtually every team, a rule requiring players to attend all practices and show up on time is essential. Of course, the development of particular rules and customs for a particular team requires good judgment, but such judgments need to be made in light of the principle of respect for teammates and team. Arbitrary rules might create uniform team submission, but not team spirit. In each sport there are many well-known team rules that almost always make sense, but particular teams often call for remarkable creativity in devising team rules that will actually promote team spirit and unity.

And, of course, just as important as coming up with team rules is their use. Nothing destroys team unity more than an unequal application of team rules by coaches or unequal responses to them by players. Players are quick to sense when coaches have favorites or play favorites. If you're more strict, demanding, positive, or lenient with some players than others, the others will pick up on it—and resent it. And if some players take advantage of a perceived "special relationship" with the coach, the bonds that hold teammates together begin to break down. When you give special treatment to the star and when the star takes advantage of this special treatment, such unfairness ultimately is an expression of disrespect for the other players and for the team itself. A team effort requires that even though the members of the team differ in athletic ability, their

responsibility to the team is equal. Greater ability does not mean less moral responsibility to the team; if anything, it means more.

TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- Suppose you have a rule that any player who misses a practice without clearing it with you in advance will be suspended for one game. If your star player violated this rule just before the most important game of the season, would you be willing to enforce the penalty even if it meant that you would lose the game?
 - Should you consult with your players before establishing team rules? That is, should you ask players to contribute suggestions concerning team rules and penalties?
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WRAP-UP

Generally speaking, respect for teammates and team requires a truthful assessment of abilities. In that sense, a team effort requires that individuals sacrifice only their delusions of grandeur. But sometimes individuals may even have to hold back even though they have the ability. Respect for teammates and team requires that the individuals give their best, but it also requires the sacrifice of purely selfish interests for the sake of a greater good. In the end, though, the individuals get something back. They give strength to their teammates, but they draw strength from them. If they're lucky, they have the experience of participating in a whole that's greater than the sum of the parts. It's special; it's magical. It's hard to explain, but it's a powerful and enlightening experience. You can't guarantee it, manufacture it, force it, but you can provide an opportunity for it, and you can cultivate the character traits that contribute to it. The athlete who understands and develops this aspect of the virtue of sportsmanship will have to contend with teammates who haven't and won't, just as athletes who cultivate respect for opponents will have to deal with opponents who are disrespectful, but the principle still holds true even when the magic isn't happening. And the magic doesn't happen without the principle of respect for teammates and team. Sometimes virtue is quickly and obviously rewarded; always it is its own reward. That is, it's better to have it than not to have it. And more often than not, in a team situation respect for teammates and team, if not directly rewarded, starts to catch on. The high moral ground can be a lonely place, but sometimes it attracts good company.