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Winning Isn't Everything
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We love winners. It's been over 20 years since the Houston Rockets won back to back NBA titles, but at least those of us who have been in Houston awhile remember them well. Clyde Drexler driving the lane, Hakeem Olajuwon hitting a turning around jumper on the baseline. And until another major sports team in Houston wins a title, the 1994-5 Rockets will be who the city looks to as Houston's sports greats. We might look back at a solid Oilers team, or perhaps the Astros' run to the 2005 World series, but we don't look back at them with the same reverence as those who brought home the championship.

Our admiration of winners is not limited to sports, of course. We remember who the presidents were, not who they ran against. We can't help but recognize Apple, but have forgotten about Compaq. My kids don't even recognize the brand name Kodak anymore. Digital won and film lost, and we simply don't remember losers for very long. Vince Lombardi, the great football coach (and we call him great precisely because he won) is oft remembered saying, "Winning isn't everything. It is the only thing." And our elevation of winners long past their victories seems to validate his words.

But then comes along a story or two or three that remind us that maybe winning isn't the only thing. Maybe there is something even more important than winning.

Cheering for the Wrong Team¹

In Texas, football is king among high school sports. Teams, often have massive followings, who cheer their every move and even mock the competition. That's what made the scene up in North Texas rather odd.

The game featured two teams, Grapevine Faith and Gainesville State School. As is typical, the teams would run onto the field prior to the first quarter. But this time something was very different. When it came time for the Gainesville team to run onto the field, they did not have much of a fan base so fans from Grapevine Faith came onto the field to create a human tunnel. And when they ran through the tunnel, they were cheered for by name. The Grapevine Faith followers even yelled out to

the Gainesville players to hit their players hard. None of this was done in jest. The opponent's fans were honestly cheering them on. When the Gainesville's Tornados team made their way out of the tunnel and onto the field, they ripped through a sign that read, "Go Tornados!" made by the Grapevine fans.

The game went on, as most games that season did. Grapevine Faith won. Gainesville State lost. But then something just as odd happened at the end of the game. The losing team, that had been so lauded by their opponents at the beginning, were again cheered at the end. In fact, their coach was given a Gatorade bath and carried off the field. This for a team that hadn't won a game all season long.

If you sat as an outsider, none of this would have made sense. Until you recognized the security personnel. After the game, the Gainesville players were ushered off the field by 12 fully armed officers. You see, Gainesville State School is part of maximum-security correctional facility. The Tornados were made up of kids who were doing hard time.

When Faith's head coach, Kris Hogan, scheduled the game, he knew it would be different. He knew that Faith's team had 70 kids, 11 coaches, great equipment, and involved students and parents. Gainesville had kids with convictions for drugs, assault, and robbery. Many of their families had disowned them; if they had any family in the first place. So Hogan came up with a plan. He sent out an email to Faith's fan base to that effect. He wrote, "Here's the message I want you to send: You are just as valuable as any other person on planet Earth."

Some people were confused by the coach's plan. One Faith player walked into Hogan's office and asked, "Coach, why are we doing this?" Hogan replied, "Imagine if you didn't have a home life. Imagine if everybody had pretty much given up on you. Now imagine what it would mean for hundreds of people to suddenly believe in you."

And what the coach asked his player to imagine is just what happened. On game night, the Gainesville Tornados players turned around on their bench to see something they never had before. Hundreds of fans. And even cheerleaders!

The Gainesville players thought at times that the fans were confused. Could they really be cheering for them. One player, Gerald (who had three years of time before him), said, "We can tell people are a little afraid of us when we come to the games. You can see it in their eyes. They're lookin' at us like we're criminals. But these people, they were yellin' for us! By our names!"

After the game, both teams gathered in the middle of the field to pray. Of course, it was anticipated that someone from Grapevine Faith would pray. They are the Christian school. But that's when Isaiah, a Gainesville State player, asked to pray. And this is what Isaiah prayed, "Lord, I don't know how this happened, so I don't know how to say thank You, but I never would've known there was so many people in the world that cared about us."

And it was a good thing everybody's heads were bowed because there were more than few tears. This was a night when winning was clearly not everything.

The Assisted Home Run²

The Central Washington University women's softball team found itself in a hole. They had to win the game to stay alive for a bid to NCAA Division II National Championships. Their opponent? Western Oregon University who had beaten them badly the day before.

In the second inning, Western Oregon got two players on base, but no one was too concerned when Western Oregon's 5-foot-2-inch right fielder, Sara Tucholsky, came up to bat. She was a career .153 hitter. But then she did something she had never done before, not even in practice. She smashed the second pitch over the centerfield – an apparent three run-homerun that could well sink the season for the Central Washington squad.

The ecstatic Tucholsky could be forgiven for missing first base when she began to run the bases. She realized her mistake and just after missing the bag she turned back to touch it. That's when the whole situation changed. When Tucholsky turned around, her left knee collapsed; she could not get up. Her coach yelled at her, telling her to crawl back to first place. She told her, "If you don't, you will be called out. I can't help you." So she crawled back to first.

It was at that point the umpires were consulted. They said that if Tucholsky could not continue on, she would be given a single and the home run would be nullified. Whatever the case, her teammates could not help her.

That's when Mallory Holtman stepped in, the first baseman for Central Washington and the conference's all-time home run leader. She asked the umpires a question: What if her teammates carried Tucholsky around the bases? The umpires said there was nothing in the rulebook that forbade the opposition from helping a runner. So Holtman grabbed a teammate and carried Tucholsky around the bases, allowing her to touch each base with her uninjured leg.

Holtman wondered to herself what this whole escapade looked like to the fans. She didn't have to wait long. After she and her teammate carried Tucholsky around the bases, they looked into the stands and then into their dugout. The whole team was crying. The coach was crying. Everybody in the stands was crying. Holtman had just sealed her team's fate by carrying Tucholsky around the bases. Central Washington wouldn't be going to nationals. They had lost their chance. But given the scene, no one thought they lost.

Missing Free Throws³

A basketball team is always glad when a technical foul is called against the other team and two free shots are awarded as well as possession of the ball. Well, almost always. DeKalb High School was not very pleased in its game with Milwaukee Madison High School. In fact, DeKalb was so displeased with the situation that the DeKalb player missed both free throws on purpose.

Why? Because the technical had been called against Johntel Franklin, a player from Milwaukee Madison, who had not been listed on the starting roster. It was for good reason, Franklin watched his mother lose her five-year battle with cancer that day, and Madison's coach never expected Franklin to show up.

He did, though, telling his coach, "I'm a competitor. I just can't sit there and watch." He added, "I knew my mom would have wanted me to play. She was always proud of me playing basketball."

When Franklin showed up in the second quarter, coaches from both teams were stunned. News of the passing of Franklin's mother had already spread to players and fans on both side. Despite his absence on the roster, both teams agreed that he should play. The problem was it was against the rules. If Milwaukee Madison let Franklin play, they would be charged a technical. The referees said it was the rule. Rohlman -- the opposing coach -- would have none of it. He told the officials he wanted to the kid to play without penalty. But rules are rules, and the technical was enforced.

That's when Rohlman had an epiphany. His team would shoot the free throws, but they wouldn't make them. He asked his team who wanted to take the free throws. That's when a 5'11" senior point guard named Darius McNeal lifted his hand. The coach quickly said, "You realize you're going to miss, right?" And McNeal nodded. He went to the line and threw the shots no more than two or three feet. The crowd for both teams erupted. That's right, they cheered for missed free throws. Because although Johntel Franklin's team would win the tragedy-laced game for his mom, the coach and kids from DeKalb also won. They won for the shots they didn't make to respect a kid who lost his mom.

It's often said that we live in a dog eat dog world. That if we don't play to win, will get trampled on. There is some truth to that. And there certainly is no shame in playing the game of life to win. But once in a while, we forget that the scorecard isn't always what we think it is. It isn't always about more points, or more victories, or more championships. Sometimes, no always—whether we recognize it or not—it's about people treating people right.

During his coaching days, Vince Lombardi said, "Winning isn't everything. It is the only thing." What is interesting is that near the end of his life he regretted having said those words. In their place he said, "I wished I'd never said the thing...I meant the effort. I meant having a goal. I sure didn't mean for people to crush human values and morality." In other words, in the end even the great Vince Lombardi recognized winning isn't everything.

¹ Rick Reilly, "[Life of Reilly](#)," ESPN.com (May 12, 2014).

² Michael Walden, "[Softball opponents offer unique display of sportsmanship](#)," Oregonlive.com (April 29, 2008).

³ Tom Rademacher, "[Playing fair with fouls sign of respect in high school basketball game](#)," *The Grand Rapids Press* (February 22, 2009).