

College Football! I love it almost as much as anything in my life. This happened abruptly in 1999 when my oldest son was accepted into his dream school. He became a “Domer” almost overnight and has been drinking the Kool-aid ever since, and my wife and I by association (and check book!) have as well. But his university is a little different than most.

College football is a business. At the Division I level – it’s a *very big* business. There is nothing amateur about it. Coaches with multi-million dollar salaries, facilities that rival – in fact may surpass – many of the facilities at the professional level, and the type of support effort between doctors, trainers, and guidance that no one would have dreamed of just 20 years ago. And, because of a very specific set of rules as governed by the IRS and the NCAA, students are not permitted to be paid for anything that is associated with their time in uniform for their teams. Just ask Coach Tressel from Ohio State!

Somewhere someone said it was ok to have a culture of abuse – that winning matters – not the student athlete. That we’ll develop a winning program but sacrifice our values and our beliefs along the way. It will be OK to treat one class of players differently than another, just because they aren’t as good or as talented as the others.

But where did everything run off track? College administrations that cave to alumni demands, especially those with deep pockets, the expectation that the team will win every year, or else. And then there’s the hype of the media. That can add more than kindling to a passionate fire to win!

It’s not easy to be a coach or to run a program that puts the kids first. Winning is important, and I absolutely hate to lose, just ask my wife. But our program is founded on their well-being, their discipline, their long term success. This isn’t a perspective from the cheap seats. As many of you know I’m now in my 24th year as a high school coach. Our program is different than almost every one we compete against. We’re just about the smallest school in the entire region where we are. We’re about a .500 team on an annual basis. But our kids learn to love sport, the exhilaration of competition, the character that comes with defeat, and something more important than anything. That, regardless of where you are today, you can change yourself for tomorrow. For most of my time as a coach we’ve fielded more players who never played the sport than those that did coming into our program. We teach them the basics and then encourage and develop and praise them to do better tomorrow than they did today. It’s a great life lesson that where you are today does not have to be where you are going to be tomorrow, or next week, or next year. Our best goalie in school history never played the sport before he came out for the team. He was All-Section, and led the team to the first playoff game we’ve ever competed in. But most importantly our players develop deep long lasting friendships with their teammates that last a lifetime, and, through a code of conduct, behave differently against their opponents. We are disciplined, well respected, and competitive. 98% of our kids go to college. We’ve got lawyers, and doctors, and pilots, and business owners that are successful around the world today. It’s about developing them, not about us.

One of the most important things we teach the kids is about being Spartan. What do I mean? A couple of years ago before competing against the previous year’s state champion, their coach asked me when our second bus was arriving, as he counted 14 players warming up on our side of the field. He had 35. I said, no, that’s it, we’re all here. And then rattled them. We lost 2-1 in one of the most dynamic games I’ve ever witnessed by any team. Their team was worn out, ours was exhausted. But it was one of the greatest performances any team has ever taken to the field. Oh, and last year ... we tied them 1-1 through two overtimes. Their coaches, players and managers commended all of us as the best team they’ve played all year. After all we’re Spartans – like the sacrifice they made for the greater good more than two thousand years ago – that sacrifice is legendary.

How can you manage differently? Have you created a living Code of Conduct? Do you teach business ethics as part of your operating philosophy. Do you hold yourself to a different standard, even when everyone else has sacrificed theirs? Change can happen through one person, like the concept of paying it forward. Once we make that commitment, the world can change – at least the corner that you and I live in.

Remember there is great success when you understand the power of people!

I wish you well,

Dave