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Honors Director as Coach: For the Love of the Game

Larry Clark
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Conflict: if we are to believe some of the great probers of the human mind like Freud and Shakespeare, it goes to the very core of our existence.

Look at our history books. The great conflicts form the timeline of our American past: the Revolutionary War, the French and Indian War, the War of 1812, the Civil War, the First World War ("the war to end all wars"), the Second World War, Korea, Vietnam (even if it was only a "police action"), Iraq, Afghanistan; and that's skipping over some "minor conflicts" in Granada, Kosovo, the Persian Gulf, and elsewhere. Where next? Iran, North Korea, the Middle East? We just don't seem to be able to stop. And that's us! The good guys!

Between wars, and sometimes during, we move our conflicts onto the playing fields (sublimation according to Freud) where we shrink our timeline to the seasons: football, basketball, baseball (insert your own favorite). On a slightly larger scale, we have the quadrennial, now biennial, Olympics where we get to witness "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat." Maybe that's why we reach to sports as a metaphor for some of our great endeavors, physical, mental, and emotional.

IT BEGAN ON A SANDLOT

It began on a sandlot. You were there just to help kids have fun and develop a positive sense of self, to help them hone a raw talent or discover a new one. It took time and effort, but it was all worth it to see the look of joy on a kid's face when she achieved what she didn't know was possible. "Wow, Coach, did you see that?!" With time their talents grew, individually and as a team, so much so that your success was noticed and you were tapped for the Big Time: the varsity (honors) team.

RECRUITING: THE COACH OF THE VARSITY ACADEMIC TEAM

One of the common duties of honors directors is to help recruit academically talented students to our schools and our honors programs. In my

fourteen years as an honors director, I was fortunate to work with an excellent team of professional recruiters in the admissions office. They did the heavy lifting, spending time on the road (just like sports recruiters), visiting schools, and organizing recruiting days on campus ("Show-Me Days" at my school). I got to step in to talk to the academic elite and try to convince them to join the honors program.

I used a sports analogy. I often began by asking these potential applicants how many of them had played varsity sports in high school. Many hands would go up, dispelling the myth that most good students are nerds. (As with most stereotypes, bright students tend to think that other bright students are "nerds"; not them, just most other bright students.) I said that I was the coach of the academic varsity team at the university and that we fielded a team that was five hundred strong and deep. I challenged them to go beyond the usual academic requirements of college "to be the best that you can be." I extolled the virtues of an honors education: smaller classes, hand-picked honors faculty, opportunities to be recognized as some of the most accomplished students on campus. Ultimately, though, the challenge was theirs to accept or decline. A swell of anticipation would grow on the sea of faces, and a majority of the group would sign on. Usually a reluctant few would inch forward and say their parents thought they should join. Thus our team grew.

BACK TO THE FUNDAMENTALS: KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE BALL

When a team's performance begins to flag or when they are preparing for a defining competition, a savvy coach will often take them back to the basics: get down on the ball, tackle him low, off the fingertips. Many honors students never learned the academic fundamentals prior to college. They didn't have to. With their talents they could pull the last minute all-nighter, whip it together and grab their A. Or maybe over the years they had developed the fundamentals at an unconscious level by trial and error, but they didn't know that they knew them, e.g., that memory is based on associations and that acronyms help in recalling strings of items. These old, unconscious habits worked fine when the demands of school fell well within their level of ability, but now in college, and especially on the honors varsity team, they were not going to cut it. Many talented students panic when they get that first B (or worse!) in college. Alert honors faculty (the assistant coaches) catch that moment of terror and use it to take students back to the fundamentals, to show them that they can make it over this higher bar that has been set for them; they just have to hone their basic skills. It can be an eye-opening growth moment for the student and a supremely rewarding experience for the teacher.

Time management and prioritization are other skills that some honors students need to learn. Because of their abilities and motivation, everybody wants a piece of them. They are aggressively recruited by academic departments, social and academic organizations, the central administration, everybody. Some end up as president of the student body, editor of the school paper, leader of a fraternity or sorority. Time is precious, and theirs can become golden. Some may begin to falter academically or wear out physically and emotionally as they get caught up in the heady rush of their celebrity status, just as some sports stars do. Again the seasoned coach/teacher with an eye for this dilemma can pull the conflicted student aside and help him untangle his priorities. Making choices and learning to say "No thank you, I don't have time for that right now" are probably more important and fundamental skills in life than learning how to solve a quadratic equation or place a fierce backhand in the deep corner.

MOTIVATION: "GRADE GRUBBERS"

Our honors students come to campus with academic potential, but they need motivation to develop that potential and apply it. Motivation is essential to win the championship or to graduate with honors, but it can be elusive, and, in the guise of perfectionism, it can freeze a student in her tracks, even crush her. Motivation is a tricky beast to tame.

A central issue in the study of motivation is the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is endurance at a task for rewards found within the endeavor itself, e.g., striving for mastery. Extrinsic motivation is working for goals outside of the task itself, e.g., fame or cash. We shine the spotlight on the athlete kissing the trophy or on the team piled in the middle of the field after winning the championship, but a caring coach feels the same tug of satisfaction when he spies the gymnast alone in the gym long after practice, beaming after she has finally nailed the new trick she had been afraid of for so long.

A common complaint heard by honors directors from their colleagues is "Why are the honors students such grade grubbers? All they care about is earning that A. I thought that they would all have a love of pure learning." The veteran honors director might reply, "They may not share your love of learning in *your* discipline. Do you share the love of learning of all of your colleagues in *their* disciplines?" She might also reply "Don't blame them. We set up the system. When your scholarship, your shot at the graduate school of your dreams, and your opportunity to walk across the stage at graduation wearing the honors medallion all rest on your GPA, you tend to be grade-

conscious." To top off the discussion she might ask, "If faculty are intrinsically motivated, why do they need promotion and tenure or merit pay?"

One thing that honors faculty can do to help ease the grade anxiety of honors students is structure classes so that students can build a comfort zone within which to explore outside their area of expertise. When I taught an honors section of our freshman seminar, I began the semester with a "Name Quiz." I took photos of all the students and constructed a table with each student's picture, first name, home town, and major. I told the students that they would have a couple of weeks to learn that information before they took a quiz on it. The quiz consisted of a table with the photos on it where the student had to fill in the rest of the information. It was scored as a mastery test: get 90% of the names and 75% of the other information correct the first time around, and you earn 100% of the possible points. If not, you get a second chance to earn 90% of the possible points. The vast majority of the students aced the test the first time (they were, after all, honors students). The few who did not take the exercise seriously at first mastered the material the second time around and still got an A, albeit a low A. Some students questioned the relevance of the exercise to the stated purpose of the class until they began to realize that it now gave them, at the very beginning of their college experience, a feeling of community. "Hey look, there's Aron; he's an anthropology major, too!" Now they were part of a team.

With a little grade cushion under them, the students were a tad less apprehensive about taking on some of the more esoteric projects I threw at them in the seminar. One of the most challenging was the "Box Art" project. It involved getting a box (broadly defined) and putting things in, on, and around it to represent you: who you are now, what factors in your life influenced you to become the person you are today, and what kind of person you hope to become in the future. Later in the semester the students would present and explain their box art to the class. To justify the project I explained that, as a developmental psychologist, I see college as one of the major transition periods in life. Whether they realize it at the time or not, most students use college to help them make important career, family, interpersonal, and personal transitions in their lives. I explained that, when we face such developmental milestones, it is a good time to stop and take stock of who we are now and where we are headed.

The first couple of times I made the assignment, most students produced boxes adorned with lots of photos. "Here is me with my friends. Here is me with my family. Here is me at graduation." So I began to tell them to stretch. Don't just present yourself concretely; express who you are abstractly. Then the results were amazing. In the papers they wrote for the project, many students complained about how confusing and daunting the assignment was at

first. They had never been asked to do such deep self-analysis before. Then, for most of them, came a moment of epiphany, and they became energized by the assignment. For some the project opened up dialogues with their families and friends that deepened their appreciation of both. Some found a rationale for choosing the life paths they were on. Some, for perhaps the first time, were able to savor their prior achievements. The joy and pride of self-discovery were palpable in the words of their papers and in their expressions during their presentations. A satisfied coach smiled to himself alone in the gym.

POINTS ON THE BOARD

The life of the elite athlete is not easy, obviously. The long hours of toil, the assaults to the body and the sense of self, and the sacrifice of other opportunities in life are more than most of us want to pay. The life of the coach must be no less fraught with costs to be paid for the elusive prize. The revolving door that is the professional life of many coaches demands a special kind of dedication to one's sport and athletes. Reasons for being replaced may be beyond the control of the coach: maybe you were trying to compete at the Division 1 level on a Division 3 budget; maybe you inherited some NCAA sanctions for the shenanigans of your predecessor; maybe you gave some kids with questionable backgrounds an opportunity to show that they had grown up, and they repaid you with headlines in a police report. The bottom line, you are told, is that you didn't put enough points on the board, enough trophies in the case. A special kind of loneliness must come with that call from the front office to tell you that "we have decided to go in a different direction."

In honors you strive to help the program grow, or at least remain viable, and to create learning experiences that will fire the imagination of students. Sometimes you succeed, at least in your own mind. You struggle to keep the numbers up—the number of students who enlist in the program, the number who enroll in honors classes, the number who win prestigious fellowships, the number who complete the program. Meanwhile, institutional decisions about the allocation of academic scholarship money, minimum class enrollments, disciplinary and administrative boundaries, and a host of other issues make it increasingly difficult to meet your goals. You keep yourself up at night and distracted on the weekends trying to think up creative new ways to make it all work. You also try to reassure yourself that, whatever is happening on the administrative side, as an educator you are still having an impact on students—pairing them up with outstanding faculty to fulfill their scholarly potential; helping them sort out their multiple talents and interests to find their own life path; organizing a seminar series that helps them understand that the events of the 60s were not just chapters in a history textbook but

events that wrenched a nation and shaped their parents' generation; making them believe in themselves.

Then you get a call from the front office. You are being replaced. We are going in a different direction. You leave the office and walk with a heavy heart through the empty locker room one last time.

You emerge on the old sand lot, playing with the kids, and you realize that this is where you belonged all along. "Great shot, Sydney. What an arm!" You see her beam, and it is good.

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