

A Football Coach's Lessons for Life: To Nurture Respect and Dignity in Our Youth

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In previous articles I described my perspective about the role and goals of youth sports (February and March, 2002) and the practice of hazing (April, 2004). Recent reports in the media have prompted me to reflect upon and share additional thoughts about these topics.

I continue to be disappointed but not surprised by continuing accounts of hazing incidents. As I noted in my April, 2004 article, hazing is a longstanding, common practice that some researchers believe is on the rise. A couple of weeks ago a disturbing incident occurred at Sandwich High School on Cape Cod. A story in *The Boston Globe* written by Stephanie Ebbert noted, "Garrett Watterson, legally blind in one eye, knew he would never be a star swinging a baseball bat or shooting hoops. As a lineman on the Sandwich High School's freshman football team, he thought he'd found his sport."

The article continued, "Now the 14-year-old freshman faces new physical hurdles, delivered by a body blow so devastating that doctors had to remove his spleen. The injury, suffered during what school officials described as a hazing episode at football practice, irrevocably changed Watterson's life. From now on, he will require routine immunizations and regular antibiotics to combat the bacteria normally filtered by the spleen." Garrett's pediatrician offered this prognosis, "He is at risk of dying from bacterial infection for the rest of his life. If I get sick and I get a fever, I take Tylenol and go to bed. He gets sick, he either goes to the doctor or to the hospital. It has a permanent effect on his life."

Apparently a junior on the football team grabbed Garrett's ankles, lifted him in the air, and then threw him on the ground at the beginning of a practice before the coaches had arrived in what was described as a "freshman beat-down." The result was a ruptured spleen; the surgeons characterized the force of his hitting the ground as similar to that of a car accident. At the time the first *Boston Globe* article appeared, school officials and police were interviewing football players. Nine had already been suspended and two were dismissed from the football team. A more recent article reported that "prosecutors, taking a hard line, announced

that they would file criminal charges against nine players who admitted taking part in the episode. . . . Authorities said they plan to charge two of the players—the junior accused of causing the injury and the senior captain accused of instigating the ‘freshman beat-down’—with felony assault and battery.” Massachusetts has an anti-hazing law that allows for a fine of up to \$3,000 and a year in prison for anyone convicted of participating in hazing and a fine of \$1,000 for failing to report hazing.

At the same time the initial story about Garrett appeared, another incident of hazing was reported in *The Boston Globe*. The story, written by Peter DeMarco, noted, “A group of female seniors at St. Paul’s School in Concord, New Hampshire, has been suspended for allegedly forcing new female students to participate in hazing rituals last weekend, school alumni said. The younger girls, some of whom were spending just their second night at the exclusive boarding school, were awakened in their dormitories in the middle of the night, blindfolded with sanitary napkins and locked for a time in closets and storage rooms, according to a source familiar with some victims’ accounts of the reported episodes. Some students were forced to simulate oral sex and swallow whipped cream, while other students were asked sexually explicit questions, the source said.”

Douglas Dickson, dean of students, said, “We’re disappointed with what’s happened here. There’s really no place for hazing in our school.” Bishop Craig Anderson, the school’s rector, sent an e-mail to parents and staff noting, “I am writing to tell you that in two of our girls’ houses, senior students engaged in a welcoming ritual with the new students in their houses that most would consider to be hazing. Although there have been no reports of physical contact or any type of physical harm involved, the School will continue to send the message that treating anyone with disrespect is simply not acceptable. Hazing will not be tolerated at this School. I want all of you to know that the girls who joined in these activities have insisted to a person, that they intended no harm. Nonetheless, each will appear before the Disciplinary Committee where they will be judged based on what they did and not what they meant to do.”

I concur with Bishop Anderson’s position. While the senior girls may have intended no harm, harm was done even if it was not physical. I would not be surprised if the student(s) involved in the Garrett Watterson incident

said that the intent was not to hurt Garrett. However, as I emphasized in my article about hazing, research indicates that actions that humiliate, degrade, or abuse another person may have longlasting, negative effects, whatever the intent may have been. As adults we must send a strong message to our youth that hazing is not to be tolerated.

I want to emphasize that more is involved in this issue than simply having pronouncements and laws against behaviors that are subsumed under the definition of hazing. Adults must be proactive in creating environments in which children and adolescents refrain from demeaning or hurting another person not only because they fear punishment, but, more importantly, because they know it is the wrong thing to do. We must provide our youth with realistic messages and memorable activities that foster respect and dignity towards oneself and others. The more we allow youngsters to experience the joys and benefits of prosocial behaviors, the less likely they are to display behaviors that humiliate or harm others.

An illustration of a proactive, uplifting approach was reported in a recent article in *Parade Magazine*. The author, Jeffrey Marx, focused on Joe Ehrmann, a football coach at Gilman High School in Baltimore for the past eight years. The article is based on Marx's recently released book *Season of Life*. Ehrmann is a 55-year-old former professional football player whose career spanned 13 years. His post-football life is very impressive. He is an inner-city minister who founded a community center known as The Door. He co-founded a Ronald McDonald House for seriously ill children and their families and developed a project to promote racial harmony. He also has astute observations, especially related to the psychological development of boys, although given the incidents of hazing among girls, the relevance of his ideas touch both genders.

Ehrmann believes that too many boys are brought up to believe in "false masculinity," namely, judging success in terms of athletic ability, sexual conquest, and economic success. "We compare, we compete. That's all we ever do. It leaves men feeling isolated and alone. And it destroys any concept of community." His ideas parallel those of my colleague, Dr. Bill Pollack, author of the bestselling book *Real Boys*. To counter the emergence of "false masculinity," Ehrmann advocates the creation of a new definition of what it means to be a man and labels it "strategic masculinity." The latter is predicated on two factors: nurturing relationships with others and identifying and working for a cause beyond

oneself. I was especially interested in these two factors since they are integral dimensions of what my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein and I refer to as a “resilient mindset” in our books about both children (*Raising Resilient Children*) and adults (*The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*).

Ehrmann’s eloquent words capture the paramount importance of these two variables. He notes in the *Parade Magazine* article, “Masculinity, first and foremost, ought to be defined in terms of the capacity *to love* and to *be loved*. It comes down to this: What kind of father are you? What kind of husband are you? What kind of coach or teammate are you? What kind of son are you? What kind of friend are you? Success comes in terms of relationships.

“And then all of us ought to have some kind of cause, some kind of purpose in our lives that’s bigger than our own individual hopes, dreams, wants and desires. At the end of our life, we ought to be able to look back over it from our deathbed and know that somehow the world is a better place because we lived, we loved, we were other-centered, other focused.”

Ehrmann not only “talks the talk” but “walks the walk.” He truly translates his beliefs into action. From the first practice he and Head Coach Biff Poggi convey to their players a perspective of what it means to be a man. They emphasize that football at Gilman High School is about living in a community and nurturing relationships in which each player serves to enhance the lives of others. Concepts such as empathy, inclusion, and honesty are emphasized.

Sean Price, one of the football players, commented, “I was blown away at first. All the stuff about love and relationships—I didn’t really understand why it was part of football. After a while though, getting to know some of the older guys on the team, it was the first time I’ve ever been around friends who really cared about me.”

The players are also reminded that one of the most important questions they can ask themselves is, “What can I do for you?” Consequently, there is a rule that no Gilman football player should ever let another student, whether on the football team or not, sit by himself in the lunchroom.

Ehrmann, teaching empathy, asks, “How do you think that boy feels if he’s eating all alone? Go get him and bring him over to your table.”

Ehrmann’s compassion and insight were evident in other rules instituted at Gilman. No player is ever cut from the team based on athletic ability and every senior plays regardless of the score of a game. One of the guiding principles of a coach is to build up players, not humiliate or embarrass them. Ehrmann adds, “Let us be mindful never to shame a boy but to correct him in an uplifting and loving way.”

Ehrmann punctuates his message with a thought-provoking exercise similar to one suggested by Stephen Covey in his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Prior to the last game of the season, each senior addresses his teammates and coaches to read an essay titled, “How I Want to Be Remembered When I Die.” The *Parade Magazine* article included the words of David Caperna as he read from his “obituary.” He wrote, “David was a man who fought for justice and accepted the consequences of his actions. He was not a man who would allow poverty, abuse, racism or any sort of oppression to take place in his presence. David carried with him the knowledge and pride of being a man built for others.” While a cynical person might wonder if these were simply flowery sentiments, I sense that under the influence of Joe Ehrmann, these words represent an integral part of the value system housed within David Caperna as well as his teammates.

These lifelong lessons of respecting oneself and others, being empathic, and contributing to the welfare of others are far more important than the outcome of a football game. However, for those interested in whether one can teach compassion and caring and still win football games, it should be noted that the Gilman football team was undefeated in three of the last six seasons and ranked No. 1 in Baltimore. In 2002, the team was also ranked No. 1 in Maryland and No. 14 in national standings. As Marx notes in his article, Ehrmann does not even mention these rankings unless directly asked about them. Obviously, even if his team had a losing record on the field, he would still feel they were champions and he had succeeded as a coach if they displayed compassion and caring off the field.

As I reflected upon Ehrmann’s philosophy and practices, I could not help but wonder if an incident such as occurred with Garrett Watterson or for

that matter with the new students at St. Paul's School would be likely to transpire at Gilman. While such incidents could occur under Ehrmann's watch, I think it highly improbable. I know that any youngster may be capable of demeaning another youth or certainly standing by passively as such an act occurs. However, as adults we have the responsibility of incorporating into our interactions with children and adolescents—both through our words and deeds—the message of respect and love so eloquently expressed by Joe Ehrmann. It is a message that deserves daily consideration by all who have the privilege of teaching our youth.

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