

Those Who Can Do...

Randy B. Young

One day long ago, when the world was fascinated with things like pocket calculators and Velcro and Tang, I came home from middle school, burst through the backdoor, and proudly recited an aphorism for my father.

“Those who can’t do, teach;” I chirped, “those who can’t teach, teach gym.”

Wasn’t I clever, I thought. My father smiled politely—might have even chuckled. He could have set me straight, but he was a junior high school physical education instructor and a football and track and field coach, so he was used to shrugging off pre-pubescent, self-important attempts at humor.

Yesterday, he turned 80. He probably doesn’t even remember the original incident, but I do. I remember it like one of those occasions from our childhood when we got away with doing or saying something stupid—something hurtful, something just plain wrong—when we really should have been called on it.

I’m not seeking absolution, but before another adolescent spews such a hackneyed cliché again, I want to set the record straight from where I sit at least.

First of all, if life has taught me anything, teachers CAN do. Teaching is a calling—not a last resort. Teachers bring to the table a host of talents, a pile of intellect, a broad range of interests, and the noblest of ideals—the exchange of ideas and knowledge. If there was justice, teachers would live in mansions and the unapologetic CEO’s of America’s bloated financial corporations would clean them.

Secondly, it’s not called “gym.” It’s physical education. At least one high school educator in Chapel Hill hands out punitive measures to any students calling their class “gym.” Classroom teachers don’t teach “class;” and nobody on a school system payroll, such as it is, teaches “gym.”

Treat physical education like a lesser concern, like glorified recess or study hall with dodgeball, and look how quickly “Johnnie can’t read” is quickly overtaken by “Johnnie can’t run.” Why, there are already days when Johnnie or Judy can barely lift themselves out of their new iPhone-ready, stereo-equipped video gaming chairs.

I used to think it was quaint when folks around the New England town in which my father taught used to wave or call out to my father in supermarkets, out of car windows, across playing fields:

“Hey Coach!”

“Good luck, Coach Young.”

“Coach Young, I was the long-snapper for punts and also ran hurdles on your team 13 years ago. Remember me?” And he always did.

No, if there are admirable careers in American culture, then “teacher” stands near the top of the list. And if there are honorable titles in teaching, “Coach” is arguably the most endearing, the most enduring. Teachers may retire. They may even start a new career. People suddenly discover they have first names. But coaches are like judges and generals. Out of respect or out of love, a coach is “Coach” forever.

Unfortunately, retiring 800 miles to the south of the school district in which he coached diminished that experience for my father. Here, the 1952 UNC graduate and former Tar Heel football player now walks in virtual anonymity. After all, in Chapel Hill, legends are our neighbors, and Olympians are commonplace.

As such, “Coach Young” doesn’t receive the handshakes, hugs, salutations, validations, or so much as a “Job well done, Coach,” from former players or students. Had he retired where he’d taught, he’d be hailed 20 times a day by former student-athletes. (I know one recently-retired Seawell Elementary School teacher who can’t get out of a Harris Teeter in under an hour.)

Rightly so. Teachers and coaches should be honored. Yes, teachers CAN do, and coaches not only can DO, they actually do: they demonstrate. And they do their job and about a hundred others.

Without a day of medical school, coaches have to be physicians, assessing serious injuries and often treating them. They unwind miles of athletic tape, dispense a glacier’s worth of ice, wrap a thousand sprains and strains, and kiss a billion boo-boos. They must be the ones to sit a recovering player out of the big game because they see the bigger picture. They must be the ones to tell a panicked player who thinks they’re suffocating to death that they’ve merely had the wind knocked out of them.

When a doctor says, “This will hurt me more than it will hurt you,” we scoff. When a coach says it, it’s true. Coaches suffer through every player’s aches and injuries as if those pains were their own.

Without a spreadsheet program, coaches have to be CPA’s and fundraisers, promoting financial backing and counting it, balancing booster club ticket sales with the price of field hockey balls. They drive the bus or arrange for carpools, sell candy bars door-to-door alongside the players, replace the light bulbs in the scoreboard, and happily lose for a good cause in the student-versus-faculty basketball fundraiser games.

Coaches have to be scientists, experimenting with exactly what physics it takes to turn objects-at-rest into objects-in-motion. They have to refute chaos theory by choreographing a herd of cats in similarly-hued uniforms into a single cohesive unit with one common goal.

Whether they are parents, grandparents, or childless themselves, coaches have to be as loving as surrogate parents and, in the next moment, as detached as casual observers. They have to impart both tough love and interminable compassion. They have to get seven-year olds to behave like ladies and like gentlemen. They have to remember that an 18-year old all-conference linebacker standing 6-4 and weighing in at 280 pounds is still, at heart, just a big kid.

A coach must stand upon the bridge and be a captain, often going down with their ship. When a team wins, a coach is proud of his players; when a team loses, a coach searches himself for answers, often shouldering the brunt of blame. They must scour a lopsided victory for things to work on before the next contest; they must glean from defeat some vestige of positivity to build upon before the next game.

A coach must be a motivational speaker. He or she must take a football team in the locker room that’s down 56-0 at the half and make them believe the contest is still winnable. They must take a girls’ pee-wee soccer team who’s up 10-0 at the half and make them believe they haven’t got the game won yet. They have to conjure inspiration like a poet, inspire us like a preacher, work miracles like a saint, paint pictures in our mind like DeVinci, and sculpt us into our better selves like Michelangelo.

At the same time, they cannot make our games seem bigger than they are.

“If you're going to make every game a matter of life or death, you're going to have a lot of problems,” UNC coaching legend Dean Smith said. “For one thing, you'll be dead a lot.”

Coaches coach because they can't help it. Their colognes and perfumes are the scents of menthol heat rub, their voices are weak from yelling and cheering, and their eyes are bloodshot from studying the X's and O's until 3 a.m. trying to find a hidden strategy that might unlock some uncanny victory. The trunks of their cars are filled with whistles and clipboards and soccer balls and hair ties or baseball gloves and rosin bags, and under the front seat are the empty DVD boxes for “Hoosiers” and “Rudy” and “Remember the Titans.”

Good coaches give credit where credit's due—like to their spouse, who may exert only a peripheral influence from their place beyond the sidelines, but must also stand ready to massage both wounded egos and aching backs. They cheer a lot, cry a little, offer hugs inexhaustibly, and know when to knock coaches off their pedestals if they start resembling their own trophies a bit too much.

Good coaching tells us there is “no ‘I’ in team,” “no shame in defeat,” and “no such thing as a moral victory.” Coaches must believe that their team can do anything; they must believe no one player or coach can do everything. Coaches make us better losers, more gracious winners, and maybe a bit better as people along the way.

As fate would have it, good coaching also put food on my table, put me through college, and reflected a lot more wisdom than I ever could have drawn from any textbook.

It would seem that, when all's said and done, my father—and coaches in general—CAN do, and they CAN teach. And so, on behalf of myself and so many former students near and far away, to you and to all who hold a similarly honorable title of “Coach,” out of respect and out of love: “Job well done.”

Oh, and “Happy Birthday,” Dad.

80 years...Now get back in there and show us one hell of a second half.