

WINNING ISN'T EVERYTHING. EXCEPT IT IS.

LESSONS I'VE LEARNED FROM SPORTS, BUSINESS, AND WAR

BY SCOTT BURTON

This year, my sophomore son Whittaker (#12) got his first opportunity to play quarterback on the varsity football team at Libertyville High School.

I'd be lying if I said watching my kid run onto that field feels like watching any other football game. It doesn't. I grew up here. I graduated from Libertyville High School, left not long afterward for the Marine Corps, and eventually came home to raise a family and build a business in the same community. So when your son steps onto that field wearing a Libertyville jersey, you feel it.

But someone else's son demanded my attention as well. Jackson Yarc (#13) was the starting quarterback, and as Whittaker got his opportunity on the big field, Jackson was right there supporting him.

That may not sound remarkable until you think about it. These boys play the same position. They compete for snaps. Each one wants the ball in his hands when the game matters. And yet Jackson wanted Whittaker to succeed.

The same is true of Caleb Stewart (#16), another quarterback and one of their close friends. These three boys compete with one another, push one another, support one another, and genuinely like one another.

There is a strange idea that supporting someone means you can't also want what they have. These boys know better.

And when I think about the families they come from, maybe I shouldn't be surprised. Jackson's father, Andy Yarc, is a fellow Libertyville High School graduate and Lieutenant with the Libertyville Fire Department. Caleb's father, Matt Stewart, served in the Army as a Black Hawk helicopter pilot. I spent my own early adulthood in the Marines.

I have given Whittaker plenty of lectures about leadership. Probably more than he would have liked. And I'm sure Andy and Matt have spent years instilling in their sons the same values of leadership, responsibility, and service.

But I also know that leadership isn't really taught in a lecture. The lessons that stick are usually learned another way. Kids absorb them at kitchen tables and in cars on the way home. They watch how we handle disappointment. They notice whether we make excuses. They see how we treat people when things aren't going our way. And they learn whether the standards we talk about are the same ones we live by.

Watching these three young men this season has me thinking about some of the lessons I've learned since I was their age. I've learned them in uniform, in courtrooms and conference rooms, in business, and now from the other side of a football field.

WINNING MATTERS

I'm afraid we've gotten awfully comfortable telling kids that winning isn't everything. Of course it isn't truly everything; there are things more important than the final score of a high school football game.

But I think we sometimes say "winning isn't everything" when



what we really mean is that we don't want our kids to experience the pain of losing. That's a mistake.

Winning matters. Losing matters. Keeping score matters. Competition matters. The scoreboard is honest. It doesn't know how hard you worked. It doesn't know whether you deserved better. It doesn't know that everybody tried really hard. It just tells you what happened.

There is something incredibly valuable about that. You either won, or you didn't. You made the play, or you didn't. And if you didn't, you get to decide what you're going to do about it.

The world after high school has scoreboards, too. They're just harder to see. Businesses compete for customers. People compete for jobs, promotions, opportunities, investments, clients, and ideas. A company can have wonderful people, admirable intentions, and a terrific culture and still fail if it doesn't deliver something people want. That isn't cruelty. It's reality.

Learning how to compete, and how to lose, adjust, work, and compete again, is one of the great gifts sports can give a kid. Those lessons extend far beyond the field. They're the same ones that help us make the play, close the deal, or accomplish the mission.

DO YOUR JOB WELL

Effort matters. Determination matters. Character matters. But ultimately, you need to be able to do the job.

That can sound harsh in a world where we rightly encourage kids to value effort. But effort is the path to competence. It isn't a substitute for it.

The Marine Corps teaches that the first priority of a leader is mission accomplishment. Troop welfare comes second. That ordering can sound cold before you have a full understanding of how it works.

Accomplishing the mission is one of the most important ways you take care of the people beside you. In combat, incompetence has deadly consequences.

The stakes in business may not be quite as life or death, thankfully, but they are high. Other people and their families depend on you to do your job.

Your coworkers shouldn't have to compensate for what you didn't do. Your customer doesn't care how difficult the job was. Your team needs you to understand and execute your assignment.

You can want it more than anyone else in the room. You can work incredibly hard. But when your number is called, you still have to get it done.

THE WORK THAT COUNTS IS USUALLY THE WORK NOBODY SEES

Friday night is the fun part. The lights are on. The stands are full. People cheer when something goes right. But what happens on

Friday night was prepared long before the teams ever took the field.

It was built during film study and in the weight room. It was built by practicing the same play long past the point where everyone was sick of running it. It was built in the winter, spring, and summer, and often before the sun came up.

That's how it's done in the Marines as well. We rehearsed things until we could do them in our sleep, and oftentimes, after multiple day training sessions, we did just that.

Business works the same way. People will notice the presentation, the successful negotiation, the product launch, the big sale, the promotion. But they rarely see the years that made it possible.

There is no arena I've encountered where visible performance consistently exceeds invisible preparation.

If someone is falling short, they deserve to know. This lesson can be among the toughest to learn. If somebody isn't performing, it's your responsibility to tell them. Time is of the essence here. Tell them while they still have an opportunity to fix it.

In the Marine Corps, correction was immediate, constant, and incredibly harsh. The consequences of an uncorrected mistake weren't theoretical, so people told you when you messed up.

A good coach does the same thing. When a coach stops a player to tell him he's doing something wrong, he's investing in him. He believes the player can do it better and is demanding that he does. The teammate that nobody bothers correcting is the teammate that people have already given up on.

Yet adults often deny one another that same opportunity. Someone underperforms at work for two years while everybody politely works around it. Then one day the person is fired and is genuinely stunned. Everybody knew, but nobody told him.

We sometimes call that kindness or professionalism. I'm not sure it's either. Often, we're just avoiding two uncomfortable minutes and charging the eventual cost to somebody else.

There is a difference between discomfort and harm, and kids need to learn that difference. Adults do too.

COMPETITION IS A GIFT

This is what watching Jackson, Caleb, and Whittaker reminded me of most this season.

These three young men genuinely want each other to succeed. They encourage one another, celebrate one another's accomplishments, and are there for each other when things don't go as planned. Watching Jackson support Whittaker when he stepped onto the varsity field for the first time was one of my favorite moments of the season.

And none of that makes them less driven. If anything, it's the opposite. They expect a lot from themselves and from one another. They understand something that adults sometimes forget: you don't have to diminish somebody else to become better yourself.

The best teammates make the people around them better. They raise the standard, and then they help each other reach it. In fact, some of the people who make the greatest difference in our lives are the people who refuse to let us become comfortable.

You don't discover your true potential by competing against people you can easily beat. You discover it when somebody across from you is good enough to expose your weaknesses.

That happens in sports. It happens in the military. And it certainly happens in business.

Competition has kept me honest my entire adult life. There was always another Marine who was stronger, faster, or better prepared. I will always have something to learn from another

lawyer or businessperson. I've taken my fair share of beatings on the field or on the golf course. And that's a good thing.

SET AUDACIOUSLY HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Expect a lot from people. Expect a lot from your teammates, your colleagues, your children, and most of all, yourself. Set the bar higher than what seems reasonable, and then do the work required to reach it.

Somewhere along the way, we began to worry that high expectations put too much pressure on people. They do apply pressure, but that's not always a bad thing.

The people who have gotten the best performance out of me in my life were never the ones who made things easier. They were the ones who saw more in me than I saw in myself, and they refused to accept less.

The best leaders I served under in the Marine Corps had extraordinarily high expectations. They expected you to know your job, to be prepared, to take responsibility for your actions, and to perform under the harshest of conditions. They didn't lower the standard because you were tired, inexperienced, or having a bad day.

And yet the most demanding leaders were often the ones who cared most deeply about the people they led. I've come to believe those things weren't in opposition to one another. They were connected.

To be clear, there is a tremendous difference between demanding excellence from someone and treating them poorly. High expectations say: I believe you are capable of more, and I am not going to pretend otherwise.

I think kids deserve that same confidence from us. Our job isn't to make sure they never struggle, fail, lose, or feel disappointed. It is to help them become people capable of handling those things. That means letting them attempt things that are difficult. It means expecting them to prepare. It means telling them the truth when they fall short. And it means resisting the temptation to lower the bar simply because reaching it is hard.

And that brings me back to the three quarterbacks. Jackson, Caleb, and Whittaker all want to play. They should. They all want to win. They should.

They compete with one another, and I hope they never stop. Because the point isn't to become comfortable. The point is to make each other better.

But when one of them gets the ball, the other two want him to succeed. Pay attention to that. Because someday there won't be helmets. There won't be Friday night lights or coaches with headsets. There won't be a scoreboard telling them exactly where they stand.

But there will still be teams. There will still be competition. There will still be disappointment. And there will still be victories.

Do your job well. Put in the work nobody sees. Tell people the truth. Welcome competition. Set audaciously high expectations, and then work like mad to meet them.

Maybe winning isn't everything all of the time. But wanting to win matters. Preparing to win matters. Learning how to lose and come back better matters. Discovering what you're capable of when the stakes are high matters.

If you want to see young men displaying the best that competition has to offer, come see us on Friday night. We'll be in the bleachers cheering for a win!

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