

Football Coaches and the Making of Boys Into Men

I sing of shoulder pads and the player. Even more so the football coach.

This position is controversial these days. After all, football is, in George Will's famous words, "violence punctuated by committee meetings." And we all know – or think we know – that football is both dangerous and leads to a life of violence. But I don't think that's quite correct. Yes, rates of injuries among football players in youth are high – hockey is similar – but boys are good at doing dangerous things and getting hurt. Better they do them in a controlled atmosphere where they learn discipline, teamwork, and other things. What about violence, though? Even among professional football players, who have had a history of occasional spectacular violence, the rate of criminal activity is still well below the average for the population as a whole. Check NFLArrests.com if you want to know about them. But there isn't much evidence that football itself is a cause of violence, except in cases of brain trauma caused by children playing full tackle football too young.[1]

What's the connecting factor in teenage mass shooters, after all? It's not playing football. It's missing a father.[2] And what do fathers do? They teach young boys how to become men. They teach them not just about discipline, duty, and their need to use their own particular gifts for the good of the whole – and that includes male aggression, which isn't toxicity, but a gift to be controlled and used to protect the weak. That is not something that women can do for boys, no matter how good a mother or a teacher is. It is something that men can do, however.

It is particularly something that football coaches, who are teaching a sport that is high on discipline, teamwork, and the

controlled use of physical force, can do for boys. My son Gus never had very good experiences in sports as a kid, but in high school he decided to play football just as his father had done. I was very pleased, but also a bit apprehensive. Fathers too often invest their own ancient hopes for athletic success in their own children and become That Guy in the Stands. Or, even worse, That Guy on Social Media. Gus didn't really understand football very well. How would this go?

But his coach, Tom Flood, is the kind of old school character too often drummed out of the modern world. Balding, with his reading glasses perched on his head, he's often seen yelling at his players and getting in their face when they miss their blocking assignments or screw up their footwork. But he's not yelling at them simply about football. He's not in their face about a playbook ultimately. He's out there to help them become men.

As he tells them, he wants them to get better in football, but Tom's more concerned about them as men. Yes, he wants them to get mad on the field – but in a controlled way. He wouldn't say it this way, but he wants to see what the Greeks called *thumos* in them so that they can do what men have always done to protect and provide for others in the face of hostility. But he knows that out-of-control *thumos* doesn't make for a good warrior either. It must be seen in the context of a broader duty. He insists their schoolwork comes before football. If a player is not doing his work, Coach Flood makes him do it first before coming to practice, even if that means doing it out on the field. He insists on their behavior as gentlemen, meaning respect for teachers, coaches, parents, and fellow students. He insists that they work hard in practice no matter how much playing time they're getting. And he insists that they see that whether they're playing a lot or not, whether the position is glorious or not, they understand that their work is part of a bigger whole and has value.

Does this old-school drill sergeant approach to football and

life work? I know that many people would simply say it can't work. Today's kids are different. They all need trophies. Blah, blah, blah. Tom doesn't believe it. Nor do the parents. Nor do the players. They love this guy who's always on their case. They listen to him. To be quite frank, I think it's no coincidence they go 9-2 and lose in the sectional championships for a second straight year despite losing a raft of seniors, including a 2000-plus yard rusher.

I was very touched at the end-of-season banquet when a mother of one of the managers stood up and talked about how as a single mother she has been thankful each day for how Coach Flood has been a guide for her own son.

It's not just single mothers who are grateful. I'm not one to go around quoting Secretary Clinton, but even for intact families, it really does take a village to raise a child. George Orwell once observed that young men take great delight in hating what their fathers love. But put those loves and views of a father in the loud mouth of a coach and they suddenly take on a new attractiveness for young men. It can be very frustrating to hear my own words as a father quoted back at me as if they were Mosaic wisdom but prefaced with "Coach Flood says. . . ."

But that's how coaches – especially tough, irascible football coaches – affect young men. And that's how a healthy society works. Others serve our sons in ways that we can't. Gus was often frustrated at the amount of playing time he got throughout his high school career. But he never gave up, and his nickname on the team was "The Secret Weapon." His secret was that he always did his best to serve the team's needs and others. Sure it's the worst sports cliché, but Gus really did give 110 percent.

The end result was that when the all-district awards were given, Gus was named to the "Why We Play" team, which honors players who have not necessarily excelled in the sport itself

but have exemplified “the valuable life lessons” of sports that “are defined by the words ‘Courage,’ ‘Confidence,’ ‘Failure,’ ‘Belonging,’ and “Growth.’”[3]

As his father, I’d like to take credit for that. But I think the game and the coach are a big part of producing the young man who has learned a lot about why we play.

Notes:

[1] For players starting tackle football too young, see Sean Gregory, “[New Study Links Playing Youth Football to Later Brain Damage](#),” *Time*, September 19, 2017. A [2007 study](#) showed a correlation between contact sports and off-field violence, but there are a number of reasons why this is more likely correlation than causation.

[2] See, among others, Mark Meckler, “[Of the 27 Deadliest Shooters, 26 of Them Had One Thing in Common](#),” February 20, 2018.

[3] Cody Porter, “[Minnesota’s WHY WE PLAY Initiative Teaches Purpose of Educational Sports](#),” February 8, 2016.

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