

InsideOut Coaching Book Review

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All across the United States youth coaches are striving for excellence and notoriety often at the expense of their players. In *InsideOut Coaching*, Joe Ehrman explores a transformational model of coaching as a better alternative. Throughout the book Ehrman reflects on his youth experiences in athletics and the lasting effects they have had on his life. Through *InsideOut Coaching*, Ehrman relays a different message to youth coaches, one of high moral, character and sense of purpose in transforming the lives of all players.

InsideOut Coaching has helped me see flaws in my own coaching methods while encouraging me to reflect on my past experiences to evaluate my story and purpose in coaching. Ehrman has also helped me dive deeper into character values and how coaches can be primarily responsible for their development – not simply sport. Lastly, *InsideOut Coaching* has allowed me to realize the developmental value in teaching life skills. Despite your best efforts to coach players to the next level, it is simply a fact that very few players will advance to play in college. Coaches should be focused on things that will help everyone in life, not just the small percentage of players that make it to the next level. *InsideOut Coaching* can be a benefit to all players' development, but it can simultaneously lead to success on the field as well.

Inner Story

Joe Ehrman's realization that his past had severely impacted his coaching has caused me to reflect on "my story" as well. My last two years of college baseball is why I coach today. During my sophomore year I had made the ascent to claim the coveted spot as 'Friday Night Starter', the ace of the rotation. I had a successful year; I went 8-2, received some All-Big Ten honors, hit 92mph for the first time and filled out questionnaires for about half of the Major League teams. I had a great chance to be drafted after my junior year with continued development. My junior year did not go as planned though. I developed a stress fracture in my

foot that kept me out of fall ball that year. When I resumed throwing in February in preparation for the season, I developed shoulder tendonitis that would linger throughout the season. I only pitched 5 innings that season and due to my shoulder woes, I wasn't even invited to join the team at the Big Ten Tournament. When I was told I wouldn't be traveling, I remember my coach asking me to think long and hard if I wanted to even be on the team next year. I had seemingly gone from being our best pitcher to being unwanted over the course of a year. It was difficult to hear and my first experience with a transactional coach. In this coach's estimation, I was no longer able to help him win. I became very expendable not only as a part of the roster, but with time in practice as well. My fundamentals were a mess after not pitching for a while and the coaches would not give me the individual help I needed anymore; they were focused on the freshmen, as I was a lost cause and would soon be gone.

During the summer before my senior year I played summer ball close to my home, and sought outside treatment to calm my lingering shoulder issue, as our team trainer would not help. With essentially a year off from pitching, I was no longer the player I was sophomore year. That fall I had to work extra to help recover what I had lost. I will never forget the Saturday morning I went over to the field on an off day to do some work. That day there happened to be a father and son hitting in the cage while I was out on the field throwing a bucket of balls into a net. Eventually the father came over and talked to me. He noticed I was struggling fundamentally and he gave me the best pitching advice and instruction I had ever received to this day. He worked with me for almost an hour while everything he said to me clicked like a 'light bulb' moment. I was incredibly grateful for this stranger's time. His advice helped and when spring came around I settled into a long relief/emergency starter role for my senior season. I would go on to have a decent year all things considered, but my chances of playing after college were over and I was

counting down the days until I could leave and join the real world. Baseball was no longer fun for me.

Today I am far from being a perfect transformational coach, but I know that a driving force for me to get into coaching was my poor experience with *my* coach at the end of my career. As a coach today, regardless of talent, I try to keep developing our players throughout their senior year. One of the first things I say at the beginning of the season to our seniors is that they still have time to develop and that I am willing to work with them until the end of the season regardless of performance. I will not give up on them. As a coach I strive to be like that stranger I met on the field that despite not knowing me and having zero stake in my development, took an hour out of his and his son's day to help me. I will never forget that.

Identity

After college I wanted no part of baseball. I stayed away from the game I once loved for over three years. That summer back home after my senior year was tough. I fielded questions from my friends and family about "how is baseball going?" over and over. I was disappointed and embarrassed how my once promising career ended and it seemed I was nothing more than a 'baseball player' to everyone back home in Chicago and perhaps myself. I moved out to California for a year after school with my future wife, perhaps subconsciously to get away from it all. We moved to Minneapolis afterward and have lived there ever since.

In college, my coaches never made me feel I was anything more than a baseball player. When I graduated I felt like only a failed baseball player, not a recent graduate ready to enter society. Nothing we ever talked about or did as a team shaped me as a man of community, service or scholar. As Ehrmann (2011) asks "What is the moral and ethical composition of their

program? What are they teaching about living an honorable life?" (p.47). After four years and over 200 games I still cannot answer these questions about my college program. It took me until my injury plagued junior year to realize it, that despite the fact that very few members of our team would play professionally we were not being prepared 'to go pro in something other than sports.'

InsideOut Coaching has made me realize this flaw in many athletic programs and the importance of developing a positive identity and self worth. Like Ehrmann writes in *InsideOut Coaching* (2011), I too

"bought wholeheartedly into three sports myths: acceptance, status, and performance-based identity. I viewed my athletic prowess, and the plaudits it produced, as a way to receive acceptance—a false acceptance because it was based on my performance and not on my character." (p.92)

This is the underlying reason I try to connect with my players and make them feel comfortable conversing with me. I attempt to get to know them and discover their interests outside of baseball. I ask them about their future plans regarding college and academic interests. I want them to feel that baseball is only a part of their life so that whenever they are no longer able to keep playing they are content with who they are as a person.

Life Long Values

When my baseball career ended I wasn't sure what to do. I had been unable to work, intern or gain any type of professional experience during my college career. While students at large took the summer to obtain and complete internships throughout college, members of the baseball team were sent off to play in one of the numerous collegiate summer leagues across the United States. I was sitting in the training room one day at 6AM grabbing marbles with my toes and placing them into a cup to

rehab my stress fracture when I realized I was not prepared for life. I was almost 21 years old, yet I had never had a real job or internship, was still timid to talk to adults in authority and had difficulty expressing my emotions. My coaches had missed out on developing these important areas of my life, but until reading *InsideOut Coaching* I never realized they even had the opportunity too.

The biggest take away from Ehrmann was the value of community and how it can be fostered through coaching. In college we were a collection of individuals who were members of a team, but not necessarily teammates (Ehrmann, 2011, p.150). Back then it was difficult for me to be invested 100% in my teammates. After all, I wanted to advance to the next level. In my mind this meant beating out my current teammates for playing time and exposure. When our best pitcher heading in my sophomore year got kicked off the team for failing out of school, I couldn't help but feel good that his departure put me in the starting rotation. Throughout the year we would have fringe starters on the bench privately cheering for our current starters to fail so that they could have an opportunity to play. This was not a successful team dynamic and its not surprising our teams struggled throughout my four years.

In *InsideOut Coaching*, Ehrmann (2011) describes community as a tripod of liberty, respect and moral courage (p.156). These values were not assumed however, but taught and encouraged through coaching. Ehrmann (2011) insists on creating a "team without walls", a team with "no separation between starters and scrubs" where everyone felt "wanted, needed and valuable" (p.136). When I look at the team I was on in college we did not meet these standards. We were not at liberty with each other nor had respect for everyone on the team. Most importantly, no one had the moral courage to speak up. The majority of our team drank excessively and ran through girls, the small group who didn't was ostracized into feeling they should. Our clubhouse was not an accepting community.

I see separation amongst the team I currently coach as well. Our talented players tend to gravitate towards each other and sometimes put down our fringe players through what they think is

playful ribbing. I believe I can take Ehrmann's practice of community and instill it in our high school team to make everyone feel equal and accepted in our program.

When we resume baseball this spring, I will also be looking to take advantage of everyone talents more efficiently to help foster a better sense of community and purpose. I enjoyed Ehrmann's recollection of his "blitzing linebacker", a player who was not the starter, but throughout the course of the game would simply come in and replace the starter whenever he called a blitz (p.148). Despite not being as talented as the starter, Ehrmann saw this has an opportunity to get him involved in the game and team community. With our team, we will have some senior players who may be fringe varsity players this year. Both are left handed pitchers and while I'm not sure they would be able to carve out a starting role for themselves, we could certainly utilize them as left handed relievers to include them and make them feel valuable to the team.

Lessons Learned

InsideOut Coaching has helped me question and reflect on my beliefs as a coach. It has reinforced my belief that I am in fact a teacher, but it has also opened me up to see just how deep and long lasting my teachings with my players can go. After initially reading this book I thought I exhibited some classic transactional tendencies. I thought I was coaching to "get back into the game", to fulfill my self-interests in baseball. Instead this book encouraged me to dive deeper into my past to help sort through some emotional baggage I had yet to explore. After coming to terms with my athletic career I had realized I was a victim of transactional coaches and I had started coaching to ensure other young players never feel the same way I did, unprepared for life and without an identity, when they are no longer able to continue playing baseball.

Currently, I am by no means a complete transformational coach, but the messages from *InsideOut Coaching* have taught me how to be more impactful as a coach. I have always

believed there was conflicting dilemma between developing people, developing players, and winning, and that it was impossible to do them all together. Ehrmann proved it was possible however,

“Winning was the by-product of teaching, nurturing, and prioritizing our players’ developmental needs and honoring the sacred journey of each boy. With one hand we did our traditional game plans that helped us win games and with the other we defined, modeled, and integrated the virtues that helped us transform lives.” (Ehrmann, 2011, p.131)

As a high school coach who faces pressure to be successful on the field, this message is one that I take away from *InsideOut Coaching*. If I am able to foster a nurturing and developmental atmosphere with the players in our program, success on the field will come naturally as a result.

References

Ehrman, J. (2011). *InsideOut Coaching: How Sports Can Transform Lives*.
New York: Simon & Schuster.