

FOOTBALL



HELP DESK

'Helping Coaches Helping Kids'

WHAT IS A SPARTAN?

The public's perception of what we do or what we stand for is drastically different than what actually takes place. I can imagine that this is probably true for many organizations. This is especially true for our football team. People are constantly writing the local papers questioning the integrity of our program. They say we cheat by recruiting the best athletes, give out athletic scholarships, actually pay money to players and occasionally buy a car for a superstar. My opinion about this is usually, "Someone's got too much time on their hands - or they need to get a life." It's upsetting in so much that it questions the integrity of school officials and coaches sworn to uphold the ideals of our founder St. La Salle. What's worse, it completely nullifies the hard work, sheer grit and determination of our student athletes at De La Salle.

Society has its share of pessimists and skeptics. Many believe that success cannot be achieved without dishonesty. It's hard for them to see our success and not assume that it was achieved by cheating, stealing, or just blind luck. But I don't care what society believes. I know the truth and I sleep every night with a clear conscience.

You see, success is in the eyes of the beholder and is most certainly relative. Many measure success in wins accumulated and titles won - we don't. Don't get me wrong; we are very proud of break the national record for consecutive wins and being ranked in the *USA Today*. But wins and titles are just an outcome generated from true meaning of success. It's what got us those titles that we are most proud of. Winning is just a by-product of many, many short-range goals that must be accomplished along the way.

To explain the experience of a team sport and pinpoint its success is very hard to articulate. This is true for most experiences where people are involved in interpersonal relations. The reason is, the knowledge gained or lessons learned are very hard to measure. We are far from a scientific environment and there are too many variables that contaminate the project. This is why some educators see little value in interscholastic sport. The knowledge gained cannot be measure by GPA's or an aptitude test. It's difficult to measure what we call intangibles. That would be like trying to measure one's faith or someone's capacity for love. What is learned is written on the hearts, and minds of every member who participates and experiences.

We measure our success by how well we have embraced the spirit and essence of those intangibles. And I'll share of few of them with you.

First off there are many student athletes who have fought, sacrificed, achieved and won at De La Salle the past (20) years. They have set the groundwork or foundation for a tradition. The first thought of tradition or the word tradition seems to have a negative connotation in today's rapidly changing world. The word itself conjures up the thought of being old-fashioned, backward, and even stubborn in the face of truth; and for some traditions I would suppose that's true. Thomas Elliot once wrote: "Tradition by itself is not enough; it must be perpetually criticized and brought up to date under the supervision of orthodoxy."

Please don't me mislead, our tradition is not the color of - or how we wear our uniforms. It is not what we eat at a pre-game meal. It is not the plays we run, and to a large degree it is not how many wins we have accumulated. The wins are just a by-product of what our tradition actually consists of. These are just the trappings of a tradition; shallow, hollow; in fact this has nothing to do with tradition at all. Those who believe that this is tradition will eventually realize that they didn't belong to; or experience tradition.

Our tradition begins with a commitment. There is a qualitative value we place on that word - commitment. If I had to choose just one lesson a student would learn from participating; it would be learning how to make a commitment. If they say yes to participate, then they must understand that (have said yes) to entering into a relationship with everyone involved with the program. With that comes enormous responsibility. Essentially it means that I am going to expect the best from you and you can expect the best from me. It isn't enough to say, "I'll show up." We may say we are committed to many things in life; but to what degree? Commitment is a precursor to many adjectives used to describe our tradition. It is the title of (this piece - What is a Spartan?). The key is to infuse commitment into everything we stand for and what we do.

Is it enough to say we work? No. What makes our work ethic special is that we are committed to work. We don't just go through the motions. We know the pain and dedication necessary to ready our bodies for top flight athletic competition galvanizes us into a team; and through this process we are already heavily invested before the season begins.

Success is understanding that where preparation meets opportunity - greatness can be achieved. Preparation for us is long, tedious, and difficult, and the windows of opportunity are brief and intense. I know for a fact that nobody - at least our opponents - out work us. We prepare well and when ready, we welcome, not fear, our opportunities. This is the cornerstone upon which all achievement emanates - that boring, monotonous, nose-to-the-grindstone, hard work.

We are committed to the achievement of short, long-term individual and team goals. These goals are carefully planned and diligently monitored. They are not just wish lists. Our goals serve as the blueprints for our success. What makes our goal setting different is we don't just state our goals or write them down; we figure out actions, behavior, and attitudes necessary in order to accomplish those goals. Every goal must be accompanied with a plan of action and if it's not, it really isn't a goal at all.

Our tradition calls for a commitment to accountability. This is not an assumption - this is a promise that I will be there for you; and I can count on you being there for me. From the way you spot my barbell, to the effort you give on a double line team block, to the lift you give me home after practice. In the end to be able to claim: "I was there for you" is not only the most difficult one could make upon himself, but one of the most rewarding when it comes to assessing the quality of our humanity.

Our tradition is built on trust and honesty. Having the courage to say, "this is who I am, can you help me - or can I help you?" it begins sometimes with a painful evolution of our strengths and weaknesses. Laying our self open to be vulnerable. But it is only through this process that real growth and change can occur. To fool ourselves into believing we have arrived is just closing the door on life itself. I don't know if any of you have figured it out but I have thought that someday I (we) will arrive at some fantastic conclusions; in so thinking, I have lied to myself believing life would be complete. But the truth is we never arrive, and never will. The best we can hope for is to come as close to that destination as possible. That journey is no walk in the park, it is littered with setbacks, disappointment, and broken hearts. It is only through the pain of significant self-examination that we can hope to right ourselves and remain on the straight and narrow path that will lead to true fulfillment and inner peace.

To be a part of Spartan tradition means one must be courageous. This does not mean just being brave in the face of a tough opponent - rather it's having the courage to conquer our own cowardly spirit. That little voice inside of us that says, "I can't." - "It's too hard" - or "I am not good enough." The biggest reason why we don't achieve is because we don't believe we can. We place roadblocks in our own way, sabotaging our own efforts. It takes courage and determination to crash down those roadblocks and push the limits we have placed upon ourselves; what others have placed upon our ability.

The famous Jesuit scientist and philosopher Teilhard de Chardin claimed, "The meaning to existence is the passing on to something greater than our own immediate selves." It was his belief that everything living is in a constant state of

striving for perfection. Isn't this the essence of fulfilling human potential? The reason why we achieve is because we believe we can.

The most important component of Spartan tradition is our commitment to create a brotherhood among ourselves. This task is bigger, tougher, and more elusive than any opponent we ever face. It is understanding that I must lose some of myself in order to find others. Individual egos must die in order for a team to live. It's learning how to be a team player. To claim I am a good teammate or team player simply means I know how to sacrifice for a just cause, cooperate with my fellow human, respect the dignity of others, and can respond when called upon. This is what I call harmony, the key to understanding. Which one of us at this very moment is not a member of a team? Everyone here today is a team. Parents work as a team raising and caring for their children. When involved in clubs, city government, and community projects we are members of a team. My classrooms are teams. The question we all must ask ourselves is, "what kind of team player are we?" We must understand that sometimes our needs and wants are secondary to the greater good of the whole.

Now this may sound odd to you; but the reason we win and what beats at the heart of our neighborhood is love. Yes, we win because our players love each other. They are not afraid to say it or embrace each other as a sign of that affection. This is just an outward sign. To love someone; words are nice but insufficient - actions speaks volumes. And that's not too easy. Put simply, love means I can count on you and you can count on me. This translates into being responsible. Responsibility is learned and not inherited. Being responsible to 45 teammates is not so simple. It means following team rules and knowing that my attitudes and actions have a profound effect on the success of the whole. We pride ourselves on that exact accountability. We recommit to each other on a weekly basis before games. We commit that my contributions to the team will be my best self. This commitment extends to all facets of my life. It's how I conduct myself as a person - from the classroom to the field, to the outside community. Wherever I go or whatever I do, I carry my team with me knowing full well that I am connected to a group that loves, accepts, and respects me. We try to make our football team a safe place to be; safe to be ourselves. There is nowhere to hide on a football field. Teammates know each other, coaches know the players, and the players know the coaches. All attempts at not being yourself fail miserably. The key is to be the best self you were created to be. We work hard at breaking down the walls that separate us called race, status, religion, jealousy, hate and culture - and truly experience each other on a purely human level.

Now, what does that all translate into? Well, our founder, St. John the Baptist De La Salle, say that the spirit of our Lasallian family is a spirit of faith and ardent zeal. And the motivating force of zeal is love. I have witnessed this zeal, this passion. You should see the passion with which our students play. I stand on our sideline sometimes in utter amazement. I watch them fight, compete, and push themselves far beyond what they thought was previously possible all because they felt connected to others we care. This point brings me back full circle to a question I asked you in the beginning - what are you doing in your environment? What is your passion? Is there something in your life that you have faith in and are passionate about? I challenge my students with this question and regrettably more often than not the answer comes back, "I don't know." How unfortunate.

Please don't miss understand me; I am not a football nut. I have often heard it said that football builds character. I disagree; I believe it reveals character. There are many different people, events, and experiences that contribute to character formation. Every single person at this gathering has a special talent. Mine I think happens to be coaching - many times I wish that I had certain talent my students possess but that's what God gave me. This point could not be better illustrated than in Jesus parable of the Three Servants in Matthews gospel. In it, a wealthy landowner gave three of his servants a certain sum of money to see what each would do with it. The first two returned the money with profit. They used their courage and ingenuity to parlay their sum into something more. The third hid the money and just returned what he originally received. The landowner didn't expect much - he just wanted the servants to have the courage to use what talent they had and do something. The key point to the story is and I quote, "The land owner gave to each servant according to his ability." The assumption here is that each of us has some sort of ability: talent. Now it's our responsibility to discover what that is and what's more, have the courage to use it.

Again the question, "What are you doing in your environment?" Are you sitting still or are you working on discovering and developing your talent? In my mind I say, "I hope so." You see we are privileged to be here. God not only gave us some sort of ability but also by fate or will placed us in an environment to develop those talents. And for what purpose? Is it to allow us to make a fortune? I don't think it is.

Let me share with you some words from one of my childhood heroes Bobby Kennedy. He said, "For the fortunate among us, there is the temptation to follow the easy and familiar paths of personal ambition and financial success so grandly spread before those who enjoy the privilege of education. But that is

not the road history has marked out for us. Like it or not we live in times of danger and uncertainty. But they are also more open to the creative energy of human kind than any other time in history."

Those words were spoken 30 years ago, however I believe they are more applicable today than they have ever been. Ignorance is not an option for us; we are the fortunates that Kennedy spoke. We now have a choice and that choice is a moral decision. Either we accept and serve or we don't.

We open the paper everyday, breathe a collective sigh and cry out "why?" Why is there hate, prejudice, war, crime, pollution, etc? We see ourselves as victims, powerless to control what happens to us. We too often want to relieve ourselves of all responsibilities and believe that things are beyond our control. The sad or good news is there is very little beyond our control, and what is, we should offer up to God's will.

As for now, my faith remains with us assembled today. That we will put on the armor and join the fight in this wonderful, beautiful, yet fragile world. That we use our talents and abilities to be agents of change knowing full well that many of us have the solutions to our collective problems.

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