

## CHAPTER 1

# USED BY YOUR SPORT

**D**anny sat on a stool in the empty locker room with his head in his hands. A million things seemed to be racing through his head. He had felt the pain of loss before with some ugly seasons, and every loss seemed more agonizing than the last. As a coach, you get used to the ups and downs of your sport. Extreme highs and even deeper lows. The losses were much more sour and the wins sweeter. No matter how many times Danny experienced loss, he just couldn't get used to it. Each loss still felt like an unexpected and unwelcomed experience, like jumping into a freezing cold pool. Loss sucked. Every single time. But this one seemed to cut a little deeper and burn a little more than all the rest.

*Four years . . . four years of sacrificing so much, only to have it end like this?* They'd won their conference championship just last week. What a feeling of elation, the high of highs. But a humiliating loss in the first round of the state tournament quickly overshadowed that accomplishment.

Danny *knew* his team had the potential to develop into something special this season—maybe even to go all the way to the state championship. But his squad fell apart in the last few minutes of the game. Jayden, their star player, had again lost his cool. But this proved to be costly timing. After picking up his fourth foul, Jayden decided to mouth off to the referees. The usually patient refs called a technical foul on Jayden, which led to two free throws for the other team and possession of the basketball. But

maybe even worse was that the technical foul also counted as a personal foul, and Jayden was done for the night. The final moments of his high school career seemed to act as a microcosm for his entire story.

As much of a head case as he was, he was every bit of a talented ball player as well. With Jayden on the bench, the team didn't have a true scorer on the court, and blew a six-point lead. They lost in the last few seconds of the game. While the opposing team stormed the court, Danny and his group of men stood by in dismay, trying to comprehend another season of falling short of their goal to make it to the state title game.

None of the team's seniors shed a tear in the locker room after the game. They didn't even thank their teammates and coaches, or express any emotion other than indifference. They seemed apathetic to the situation. Danny, who had spent the last four years pouring everything he had into these young men, felt like he was hugging corpses as he thanked them for their hard work and told them he loved them.

Finally alone and capable of fully comprehending his present circumstances, Danny sat on one of the locker room stools and looked around him at the trash littered everywhere, the jerseys hanging from the lockers, and the random shoes scattered across the floor. Normally, he would have called the team back into the locker room and lectured them about respecting their facilities—even if his admonitions were trite—but he realized he had failed if he hadn't made his point by now.

*A failure . . .* Yes, that is what he felt he was in his own mind. Even after the conference championship win the week before, he couldn't help but remember how, for the past two years, his team had consistently fallen short of their goals. One win does not erase the pain of past defeats; he understood that now.

The confusing part was that Danny wasn't even that upset with how abruptly the season had ended. For every good moment with these boys, there seemed to be ten that were completely devastating.

Every season, Danny recommitted himself to developing an even greater sense of personal character, and doing things the right way. Early in

his coaching career, he believed the myth that sports build character. However, he had listened to a talk from a coach named Joe Ehrmann, who had discussed the “sports build character” myth. Joe said, “They can, and they should. Indeed, sports may be the perfect venue in which to build character. But sports don't build character unless a coach possesses character and intentionally teaches it.”

This singular statement inspired Danny to build strong young men and make a difference in their lives. To do that, Danny attempted to hold them accountable to really high standards. In spite of his best efforts, they only seemed to backfire. The more he tried to *make* them better men, the more his players seemed to fight him, and the weaker his relationships grew with the young men whom he had once felt liked him enough to enroll at Washington Prep. As the season progressed, Danny struggled to find the emotional energy he needed to motivate the players to live up to the high standards he had set forth. It just seemed like diminished returns, and he was recognizing no return on his investment. He had definitely run out of the energy it took to hold them accountable. He was burned out and felt lost, as if he were navigating treacherous waters in a small and poorly built boat.

At one point in the most recent season, he even suspended Jayden for three games and threatened to kick him off the team. Suspending Jayden gave Danny a brief sense of relief, as he knew he was strong enough to bench his top player and face the critics. His decision caught the attention of so many people in the city. However, Jayden's parents—who had supported Danny for years—were suddenly not in his corner anymore. According to them, it would be Danny's fault if Jayden lost his scholarship offers.

This made Danny think about the parents of all his players. He dreaded facing them after any loss, much less this one. Nothing he did was ever good enough for them. He was always “too hard on the boys,” even when the team clearly showed a lack of discipline. If they were losing, it was always due to a lack of good coaching, not a lack of talent or effort. If they

won games, they didn't win by enough, or their son didn't play enough or score enough. It was a lose/lose for Danny. He never got a "thank you" after a practice or game. Instead, he often received a phone call or a text, because they would rarely have the courage to make those comments to his face. He was their punching bag and their scapegoat.

Danny had tried to forge positive relationships with the parents, encouraging team get-togethers with the families after games, or inviting them to travel to tournaments with the team. But they weren't interested in getting to know the other families. They were too focused on making sure their sons received the attention they "deserved." He knew they didn't feel he was the right man for the job, that they resented him and constantly compared him to the other coaches in the school, who consistently won games and secured athletic scholarships for their players. However, the other coaches' scholarship players barely managed a 2.0 GPA. They rarely finished college, usually flunking out or getting expelled. But who was Danny to point that out to his team's parents?

With all this at the front of his mind, he would still have to step outside that locker room, no matter how terrified he felt about doing so. He knew he'd be met with disapproving looks and possibly a few nasty comments on the other side of that door. He wished he could somehow morph into someone else, so he could escape their forthcoming judgment. Danny didn't want praise or a high-five, he just wanted something as simple as a "thank you."

He felt unappreciated and disrespected, like a complete and total failure. He wanted to quit and be done with it all. It just wasn't worth it anymore. Danny felt like he was constantly caught in a lose/lose proposition. If he won, it wasn't good enough. And if he lost, it was unforgivable. Boy was he tired of losing. The ungrateful and critical parents that watched his every move and decision were exhausting. Then there were the lazy and entitled players who didn't seem to care at all.

Danny was part of a sports culture that valued three things above all else: winning, notoriety, and most of all, money. He wanted something

more for the young men who played for him, but he had begun to believe that was nothing more than a pipe dream and simply impossible.

It didn't take but a few hours for Danny to start facing his after-season demons. They reared their ugly heads even earlier this year. He hadn't even made it out of the locker room. But there they were, questioning his very purpose and desire to continue coaching. It just hurt too much—the ups and downs, the unbelievable expectations, and the feeling of aloneness while still being surrounded by dozens of coaches and basketball players.

*Next year, if I come back, I will prove to all the people who doubt me that they are wrong. I'm a good coach! I can win! I can build a successful team.*

As that thought bounced around in his head, he finally gathered the courage to stand up and walk out that door. As he walked through the gymnasium, he noticed a few straggling players and their families. Cold stares fell upon him, and in response Danny's head fell to the floor.

Typically, his assistants would stay after the game and remain by his side to shield him from approaching parents. But tonight, they had already headed out to the bar. Danny had wanted a few moments alone before he followed suit.

As he walked through the gym, he saw his athletic director, Bill, who was meticulously supervising the gym cleanup. Danny decided to stop by and thank him for his support during the season. Bill had been his rock, a constant source of support, and Danny knew he was lucky to have a friend who supported him like Bill. It was a rare thing, especially in this line of work.

Bill looked up and said, "I know what you're thinking, Danny, but don't. You have done the best with what you know this season. Your value comes from who you are as a person, not your past accomplishments, performance, or even your potential."

With his head down, Danny somberly responded, "I know, Bill, but it's just not good enough. We could have been so much better. We could have gone to the state championship this season. I have failed miserably."

Bill struggled to stay patient. “Danny, when will it be enough for you? Nothing will ever be enough if you find your value in the performance of your team and the scoreboard at the end of the game. Don’t make the mistake so many coaches make today: sacrificing their principles and character to climb the ladder . . . to win it all. They all eventually realize they were climbing the wrong ladder and were being used by their sport instead of using their sport to make a positive impact on the world.”

Danny pretended to be listening but was only thinking of how few people saw things the way Bill saw them. Bill lived in a different world than most of his counterparts. Even if Bill was right, Danny had still failed to make a difference.

“You think I made a difference in these kids’ lives? They are selfish, entitled, and lack mental toughness. Just look at how Jayden finished the game tonight. Pretty much sums up his career and my inability to teach him anything on or off the court. Four years with a player and that’s still happening? That’s on me! I couldn’t reach him. I couldn’t make a difference.”

Bill paused for a second, as if to let Danny’s point set in. “Our sporting culture makes it incredibly difficult for coaches like yourself to try to do what you attempted this season. You tried to use sports to build men of character. To build personal strengths like honesty, self-control, and empathy.” As Bill said this, he looked up at Danny and put his hand on his shoulder. “Nobody can do it all, but you have done something. You have done your best. You have sacrificed and invested to help others, and that’s where you need to find your value. Until you find your value in the person you are, rather than your achievements, you won’t scratch the surface of your potential as a coach and a leader. As a coach, you will almost certainly face a great deal of problems, challenges, and issues. But great coaches are not created in times of victory or during winning streaks, they are forged from the pain of the loss, the struggle of bouncing back, and keeping morale high when the odds are stacked against them.”

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**Reflect and write: What are the problems, challenges, and issues you face as a leader?**

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Danny thanked Bill. He just wished he could believe him.

As Danny walked to his car, he started to think about his family. Two children and a patient wife awaited him at home. He was a lucky man but felt conflicted in his personal and professional responsibilities. They always seemed to come at the cost of one another. They didn’t co-exist, they co-conflicted. He missed his family so much during the season, and his children were not getting any younger. Early mornings and late evenings kept him from his kids nearly every day of the week. He was missing some amazing moments with his family, and for what? To put up with the ungrateful and selfish players and parents? That just didn’t sit right with Danny.

Danny eventually made it to his car, and as he carefully placed his key into the ignition, he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He grabbed it and focused on the small but bright screen. A text appeared on his phone from Richard, the school principal. As he read the text, his heart nearly stopped. He knew Richard was unhappy with the team’s performance, but he didn’t realize he was *this* unhappy. The text read: *Disappointing and tough loss tonight. We expect more at Washington Prep. As much as we really like you, Daniel, you have to do better next season.*

*Have to?* Danny thought. *What does that mean?*

Danny was sick to his stomach and couldn’t face going home. Not yet. So, he started his car and headed off to the bar.