

Life Lessons from Baseball
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In honor of Father's Day, I'd like to do something a little different this morning. After 38 years in education—as a government teacher, coach, assistant principal, principal, and athletic director at two middle schools and a high school, my father is retiring in a few weeks. I imagine he is echoing the words we just heard from 2 Timothy these days, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." [1]

The Black River High School Class of 2013 asked him to be their commencement speaker in honor of finishing this race of his, and a few weeks ago he delivered his speech, "Everything I Ever Needed to Learn in Life, I Learned from Baseball." I'm going to share an edited and adapted version of my dad's speech this morning. But to first put this into context, you should know that, like many of you, the man loves baseball. He played it, coached it, still umpires it, reads about its history, watches every baseball movie, and has been a rabid fan for years. It was not an option for my mom, my sister, or me to not be baseball fans, specifically Cleveland Indians fans, though he is okay that the Red Sox are now my second favorite team—just as long as I never like the Yankees, that is not allowed in the Lorincz household.

For the year that I was living with my parents after seminary and before coming to Pilgrim, my dad and I decided to take a trip for spring break, just the two of us. I was excited about our little trip—I figured we could go to a state park in Ohio or one we like in West Virginia, or maybe even head over to Chicago for a couple of days. But no, dad's ideal spring break was going back to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York—my second trip to Cooperstown, his fourth by now.

So now that you understand the context a bit, here are the five life lessons my dad passed along to the Black River Class of 2013 from our great American pastime. Lesson One: Don't let the fear of striking out keep you from playing the game. Jackie Robinson was not welcomed with open arms by the press, fans, other teams, or his teammates. He faced hostile crowds wherever he turned, but the risk he took in 1947 allowed the game of baseball to be integrated and helped the nation think about Civil Rights differently. We all need to consider taking risks, getting outside of our comfort zones, and sticking our necks out. The rewards for being bold can be great. Or another baseball metaphor I like—you can't steal second base with your foot still on first!

Lesson Two: Don't be too proud to let a veteran show you the ropes. No position in baseball is more demanding than being a catcher. You are the captain of the defense, the messenger of signs to the pitcher and the individual who throws out potential stealers. As an umpire, my father has a great deal of respect for good catchers and don't even get him started on bad catchers when he has to take a foul tip in the arm because of their lack of skills.

On November 11, 1942, the New York Yankees (I know, boo, hiss) signed a gangly, awkward-looking 17 year old from St. Louis. Yogi Berra needed a mentor and got a great one in Hall of Famer Bill Dickey. Dickey took the novice catcher and gradually gave him some life-long lessons in catching, and Yogi turned out to be a pretty good player himself.

We all need mentors, a person who knows their way around our new school or place of employment. My father advised the Class of 2013 to take the advice of these veterans and ask them questions to clarify specific techniques of their craft. And for those of you who are a little older, take it upon yourself to be a mentor and pass on your knowledge. Be there for your

mentee when they need your advice and support. From baseball, we learn the importance of ushering in a younger generation to play the game.

Which leads to Lesson Three: If you love what you do, you will never work a day in your life. He was born in 1967 in Caracas, Venezuela. His manager Mike Hargrove once said he is the best shortstop to play the game, and announcer Bob Costas said that he could field a ball under water. Omar Vizquel loved playing shortstop for the Cleveland Indians. He was always smiling or laughing in pregame warm-ups. He had the smallest glove imaginable so he could flip the ball to his second baseman or make a throw to nip every runner. Omar was selected as the Gold Glove winner nine consecutive times in the American League. He was optimistic and humble, staying after games to sign autographs for children and other fans.

We need to have positive attitudes and love what we do. If you think that your glass is half full and good things will happen to you; it's sometimes a self-fulfilling prophecy. I actually saw this lesson play out when I attended a game at Fenway with my parents. The Indians were playing the Red Sox, and it was our first time at Fenway Park. I am woefully directionally impaired and had no idea how to find our seats, so we were wandering aimlessly for awhile while I was looking for our section. We even missed the first pitch in our wandering which is an almost unforgivable offense to my father.

My dad and I were both wearing Indians hats, and a surly Red Sox fan yelled at us as we were desperately trying to find our seats, "Hey, you guys in the playoffs this year?" The answer was no, we were not. I held my breath as my father turned to that guy, and said, voice full of frustration, finger pointing in rage, "You just wait 'til next year, sir." That is sometimes how we nice Midwestern folk tell people off—take that, sir! But this gets to loving what you do, having a positive attitude, and being optimistic about the future. At the end of disappointing seasons, my dad, like many fathers I know, always says that we will get them next year, just you wait! Sometimes I'm not sure if that's amazing optimism or delusional thinking, but I'm going with optimism and having a positive outlook no matter what.

Lesson Four: Don't settle for anything less than your best. Since it happened over a century ago, few people know about the World Series of 1905. The New York Giants were thought to be no match for the Philadelphia Athletics and Connie Mack. Christy Mathewson was a gentleman in a ruffian's game, a sportsman among brawlers. He exemplified personal virtue as an American characteristic. All he did in the 1905 World Series was pitch 27 scoreless innings, gave up 14 hits, one walk, and he struck out 18 batters. Christy Mathewson was a charter member of the Baseball Hall of Fame, and my dad firmly thinks he may be the best pitcher to ever toil in the majors.

Honestly though, dedication to be the best is a lofty goal. But everyone can use their skills and abilities to be the best they can be in their chosen field. Taking pride in your work and its outcomes is a good tradition, having a solid work ethic is essential to success in life.

Our Fifth and final Lesson is that on a baseball team, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Think about a team and all the different positions—pitcher and catcher, outfielders and infielders, base coaches and managers. We all have our parts to play and it takes a team to win. You can also have the best individual players out there, but if you're not working together and backing one another up, you won't be very good.

I always love the moment when there's a pop up and someone on the field tends to call it, looking up into the sky and declaring, "I've got it!" and waving others off. Yet, you usually see another player or even two hover around to back them up if needed. The right fielder is there in case there's a wild throw and the ball gets loose from the first baseman, the pitcher sometimes steps in to make an out at first or home—helping out the first baseman and the catcher. The

shortstop can find himself in shallow left or center pretty easily to field a ball and assisting the outfielders at the same time. The point is, it takes a unified team effort to play a baseball game.

No one can operate in a vacuum. The best business, hospital, school, or church seeks peoples' opinions and everyone should feel like a part of the organization when we respect one another, communicate openly with each other, and work for unity. A former professor of my father's Dr. James Viering from Akron University once told him, "We are all pulling the little red wagon together."

In the end, baseball has been and continues to be a vital part of American life. In 1947 Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball closely followed by Larry Doby of the Cleveland Indians, 17 years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964! When 9/11 happened, the Yankees took center stage to attempt to pull all of us out of our shock and despair. On April 15th it was the Red Sox that buoyed our spirits in Boston by holding an event to honor the Marathon victims prior to playing at Fenway, and they brought Neil Diamond in to sing "Sweet Caroline" in person. Baseball is America!

Try to remember the tips about taking risks, getting a mentor or becoming a mentor, loving what you do, giving your best, and collaborating with others to be successful. And my hope is that we all have moments in our lives, whether that is when we retire or face other transitions when we can say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Happy Father's Day. Amen.

[1] 2 Timothy 4:7