

What a Good Coach Does

Actor David Duchovny on the coach who taught a reserved, scared, outwardly blasé teenager to care

By **DAVID DUCHOVNY**

To me, he was always Coach Byrnes. As if his first name were "Coach." When I heard other teachers call him "Larry," it rang like a sour note, vaguely disrespectful. Larry may have been his name, but his essence, his true name, was Coach.

I had come into high school figuring I'd play some basketball but also terrified of not living up to academic expectations and loath to let sports siphon away study time. My future was built on a house of cards, the bottom floor of which was a scholarship to a prestigious private school in Manhattan called Collegiate. If I didn't perform academically, I thought, it would start a chain reaction that would lead to me in the gutter somewhere. I was 14 and scared.

The basketball program was in disarray. My sophomore year, we were 5-18. Our warm-ups, vertically thick-striped orange and blue, snap-button flared at the ankles, looked liked the bottom half of a clown suit straight out of the Tony Manero fall '78 collection.

I was concerned with how many points I scored. I wore my hair not quite Frampton long and tamed only by a terrycloth headband. I had no idea how silly I looked. I cursed loudly and often when I missed a shot or disagreed with the refs. Off the court, I was quiet and well mannered. On the court, I was an ass. Everything about me said "I don't really care." My father had left my mother a couple years before. I guess I had some issues.

My junior year, Coach Byrnes showed up. He was about 6-foot-4. He looked like a man. He told me to cut my hair because I would play better if I could see. He told me to stop cursing and to direct that fury into my desire to win. He told me not to celebrate when I hit an important shot, but to act like I'd been there before. You hit shots at the buzzer—that's what you do.

Coach Byrnes told me I was worthwhile and good and that we could win. He talked to me as if I were someone worth telling a story about, subtly enjoining me to become active in that story. My father was mostly gone by then, and now here was a man who respected me by demanding that I respect myself and a game. I never knew if he liked me. That wasn't so important. He saw potential in me, and I began to respect myself.

That is what a good coach does. He fills you with a belief that may or may not be justified. As you make the dangerous crossing from unproven belief to actual accomplishment, from potential to reality, a good coach holds your hand so expertly that you don't even know your hand is being held. I got better because Coach Byrnes told me I was already better. It was that simple—a magic trick. And every success I've had ever since has had some of this same magic in it, either at the hands of other skilled teachers or by the generous trickery of the voice inside me that they instilled.

I stopped caring about how many points I scored. I even played some defense (though some still argue that point). I would dive after loose balls, rebound my ass off. I was learning what it meant to want to be good for someone else—to be good for an idea, for a team.

That is why, after so many years, men will tear up talking about a high school team that competed in what Coach Carill, my basketball coach at Princeton, called "the argyle socks league." It didn't matter that we weren't close to the best. We were the best that we could be, and once you have tasted that, anything else is bitter and false. There is no longer any fooling yourself.

I spent just two seasons, a mere 50 odd games, with Coach Byrnes. How is it that he got through to me in such a short time? That's the genius of a coach. They talk to you between the lines, but then you take them with you outside the lines.

One memory stands out, not of winning, which fades, but of losing, which hurts and lingers. My junior year, we lost an important league game to an arch rival. We could have won if we'd executed perfectly. We didn't choke; we just didn't

finish the game strongly. It was a respectable but devastating loss.

After the game, all of us were assembled in the locker room waiting for Coach Byrnes. I know I felt like we had let him down. The door to the locker room swung open, and Coach walked in, put his hand over his heart and said, "A pint of blood. Right from here."

It was a simple gesture—a bit corny but true to the moment. A few of us started crying. He had given us permission to care enough about a game to cry. Now that I have my own family to love, it seems strange to still care about a silly game so long ago, but there was blood in that too. Coach Byrne was still coaching after the buzzer, teaching me—a reserved, scared, outwardly blasé teenager—that men could care like that. No one was to blame, but it hurt like hell nonetheless—like much of life, as we all find out eventually.

I don't remember, but I think I cried. I hope I did. I feel like crying just remembering it. That's a coach—a real coach.

—Mr. Duchovny is an actor, writer and director and was the captain of the 1978 Collegiate School basketball team. This essay is the preface to a new edition of "Coach: 25 Writers Reflect on People Who Made a Difference," edited by Andrew Blauner.