

THIS GAME IS OUT OF CONTROL: I WANT A TECHNICAL

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Erika quit our basketball team before we could kick her off. Belinda, through a weird series of events (too often the norm in intercollegiate athletics) had only been suspended from playing for the rest of the year. Some thought that suspending her was too harsh, but as a coaching staff we knew that it would help our team in the future, and in some hidden part of my consciousness I knew that Belinda would return to full playing time. The timing had to be right and had to offer our team a unique opportunity to succeed. Maybe events would even contrive to help teach the principle of forgiveness.

I had read or heard, four or five times, the story that President Hinckley retold in his December 2000 *Ensign* article. I liked the story. It seemed to tie in with my Grandpa Grant's era: a time of ethical mischief that produced great stories and great men. I knew that the story could potentially help our team, so I cut and pasted it from President Hinckley's article and left a copy in each player's locker:

Years ago there was a little one-room schoolhouse in the mountains of Virginia where the boys were so rough that no teacher had been able to handle them.

A young, inexperienced teacher applied, and the old director scanned him and asked: 'Young fellow, do you know that you are asking for an awful beating? Every teacher that we have had here for years has had to take one.'

'I will risk it,' he replied.

The first day of school came, and the teacher appeared for duty. One big fellow named Tom whispered: 'I won't need any help with this one. I can lick him myself.'

The teacher said, 'Good morning, boys, we have come to conduct school.' They yelled and made fun at the top of their voices. 'Now, I want a good school, but I confess that I do not know how unless you help me. Suppose we have a few rules. You tell me, and I will write them on the blackboard.'

One fellow yelled, 'No stealing!' Another yelled, 'On time.' Finally, ten rules appeared on the blackboard.

'Now,' said the teacher, 'a law is not good unless there is a penalty attached. What shall we do with one who breaks the rules?'

'Beat him across the back ten times without his coat on,' came the response from the class.

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‘That is pretty severe, boys. Are you sure that you are ready to stand by it?’ Another yelled, ‘I second the motion,’ and the teacher said, ‘All right, we will live by them! Class, come to order!’

In a day or so, ‘Big Tom’ found that his lunch had been stolen. The thief was located—a little hungry fellow, about ten years old. ‘We have found the thief and he must be punished according to your rule—ten stripes across the back. Jim, come up here!’ the teacher said.

The little fellow, trembling, came up slowly with a big coat fastened up to his neck and pleaded, ‘Teacher, you can lick me as hard as you like, but please, don’t take my coat off!’

‘Take your coat off,’ the teacher said. ‘You helped make the rules!’

‘Oh, teacher, don’t make me!’ He began to unbutton, and what did the teacher see? The boy had no shirt on, and revealed a bony little crippled body.

‘How can I whip this child?’ he thought. ‘But I must, I must do something if I am to keep this school.’ Everything was quiet as death.

‘How come you aren’t wearing a shirt, Jim?’

He replied, ‘My father died and my mother is very poor. I have only one shirt and she is washing it today, and I wore my brother’s big coat to keep me warm.’

The teacher, with rod in hand, hesitated. Just then ‘Big Tom’ jumped to his feet and said, ‘Teacher, if you don’t object, I will take Jim’s licking for him.’

‘Very well, there is a certain law that one can become a substitute for another. Are you all agreed?’

Off came Tom’s coat, and after five strokes the rod broke! The teacher bowed his head in his hands and thought, ‘How can I finish this awful task?’ Then he heard the class sobbing, and what did he see? Little Jim had reached up and caught Tom with both arms around his neck. ‘Tom, I’m sorry that I stole your lunch, but I was awful hungry. Tom, I will love you till I die for taking my licking for me! Yes, I will love you forever!’

I had given the “Tom Story” to the players the first week of December. Now it was December 30, 2000. The weather in Prescott was spectacular, well above 70 degrees with full sun. The third-round game of the Yavapai tournament pitted us against a team from Michigan. The first half against Gogebic College seemed particularly good. Crystal Hardcastle, a back-up point guard, had come off the bench and scored ten points. She was gaining confidence back—in her first scrimmage of the year, against Ricks College, she had lost the ball four times in a row and barely held onto it the other two times before we could get her pulled. She had lost confidence in herself, and I had concluded that it would take her entire

freshman year for both of us to recover from the experience. Now, against Gogebic, she had stolen the ball a couple of times; she had two assists and a couple of rebounds, plus the ten points. Her eyes sparkled as she walked into the classroom that served as our halftime locker room.

High fives and laughter echoed down the hall. As I approached, Coach Wright quieted the group. In a solemn tone, I told them that I needed help. I knew that Belinda's suspension could provide a miracle for our team. "I need a Tom."

Without hesitation, Crystal raised her hand. She understood; Coach Wright understood; I understood. And Belinda understood. For the four of us the tears came freely.

In a voice muffled by emotion, I told Belinda to change into Crystal's uniform. Crystal would get into her street clothes and take over Belinda's suspension for the remainder of this game. I hoped that Crystal's stepping in for Belinda would set a precedence that the other players would follow, but mouths gaped open. I should have realized what that meant.

Crystal quietly gathered her clothes and went into a restroom with Belinda.

Belinda played with zeal—in fact, she finished the entire season with that zeal. She scored in double figures and had nearly ten rebounds against Gogebic. After the game and in semi-privacy, she hugged Crystal and told her thank you. "I will love you forever."

That is why I have never been able to separate myself from athletics—often, life's most powerful moments occur in athletics. Athletics becomes a microcosm, an intense, fast, compact version of life's principles that give quick feedback so that we can define the principles and how they work. For Coach Wright, Belinda, Crystal, and me, we had learned so much so quickly about the atonement... and later, about free agency. In athletics, it seems that these principles can be learned faster and often better than in an outside world where line upon line and precept on precept requires much more patience. I love the good news in athletics, and it brings me back time and time again to being a participant.

It was the greatest moment that I had known as a coach. Coach Wright couldn't quit talking about it. In her Christian religion they spoke of Christ's sacrifice. "Now I feel like I have experienced a small portion of his love and willingness," she told Crystal. As we loaded the vans for the drive back to Phoenix, I listened to player conversations; my yearnings for a miracle began to find signs of cancer. During the drive, both Coach Wright and I carefully listened. Almost all of the player conversations were the same. "If he asks me to sit out for Belinda, I'll tell him in no uncertain terms that I won't. I'm not going to suffer for her bad decisions." A real cancer began to metastasize.

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It was not Belinda's poor decisions that made us suffer. In the end, it was the reaction to Belinda's good fortune that quietly and effectively diseased our team. It didn't matter which religion the players followed (and we had six religions represented); they all agreed on one thing—that "Tom's Principle" had little to do with our team and nothing to do with them as individuals. This cancer overpowered my dreams of bringing our team together through sacrifice. No other players volunteered to sit out for Belinda, so I just let her play.

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All it would have taken was for one player besides Crystal to stand up and say that she would sit out for Belinda. A domino effect would have pushed us to exceed my expectations. I don't know if we would have won many more games—I think probably so. But more importantly, we would have become champions, champions for each other and for others, champions like my grandfather's team: when they won second place at state, they hoisted the first place team on their shoulders and carried them around the gym. I would have loved participating in that game! Can you imagine Dixie carrying our players off of the floor after Ricky Bower hit the game-winning shot a few years ago?

I remember Ricky Bower hitting that last second shot against Dixie. I rank it as the greatest moment for spectators in the history of Ricks College athletics. I remember hearing the play by play when Teresa Gemar hit the baseline shot that sent the Lady Vikings to their best finish ever. I remember when the volleyball team broke the longest winning streak in volleyball history—CSI's streak. I remember the game where Rod Dixon dunked it with .2 seconds on the clock to beat CSI. I remember Marshal Brantley running the full length of the field on a kick-off return. Ricks College enjoyed some spectacular moments in history, and as spectators we have had fun.

But it is in participating that the intensified line upon line and precept on precept become so noticeable. It becomes powerful, providing wonderful teaching moments. Crystal Hardcastle, my Tom, was married in the Bountiful Temple on July 5, 2002. She and I enjoyed her wedding more and understood and appreciated the ceremony more because of our being involved in athletics.

With the good anecdotes, arising from the intensely magnified and quickened version of life in athletics, come the bad. Evil grows and develops at that same seemingly increased rate in the microcosm of athletics as in ordinary life. It doesn't take long to see quick results from poor choices. The backbiting after the experience with Belinda and Crystal immediately affected our efforts in trying to win a championship. Steadily the cancer spread and even after efforts to slow or kill the cancer, it finally built into a disease that could not be treated, even a persistent form that had grave effects on our next season at Southern Idaho.

I have many good—no, great—stories, but I have to admit that in my two years as a head coach, I heard or experienced a dozen bad stories to each great one.

But much of the good in Kendall Grant comes directly from my participation in athletics—especially Ricks College athletics. I grew up a coach’s son; as a student, I helped Gary Gardner; while teaching English, I helped Lori Woodland. I wanted to be a Head Coach at Ricks College. As my father’s shadow, I watched Tiny Grant orchestrate goodness in athletics. Gary Gardner and Lori Woodland did the same. Spectators saw a little part of these great people—and sometimes what people saw and spoke about focused on their weakness. Did these coaches have weaknesses? Yes they did, and I know about the weaknesses because I lived and worked so closely with them in an unforgiving microcosm. But despite weaknesses these individuals understood the spiritual magnification that could take place in athletics, and I could spend pages telling the very best stories that I know and what I learned from them—these people were and are catalysts of much good in intercollegiate athletics. They strengthened my testimony of Jesus Christ as they coached. I will miss intercollegiate athletics at Brigham Young University–Idaho.

Life is an individual affair. Seeing society from the surface belies the great fact that each of our lives works itself out microcosmically. Can we find a better microcosm than intercollegiate athletics? Is there another vision that we can take? I support without reservation the decision made by President Gordon B. Hinckley, the BYU-Idaho Board of Trustees, and Elder Henry B. Eyring, the Commissioner of Education, to discontinue athletics. I have no murmuring in my heart—and I did hope to be a Head Coach at Ricks College one day.

I don’t know what reality we will create through our free agency and through following our leaders. But creating visions of what is possible now at BYU-Idaho can better that reality. Can we become motivated enough to support a program that might educate a healthier and happier people who make physical activity more a part of their lives because they have more opportunity to participate? Do we have the opportunity, through new ideas, to help cut back the obesity that is taking over the United States? Could our new student activities program become a model that influences a whole world of healthy people? Could the program become so renowned that it brings thousands to campus who learn more about God’s truths than about an activities program? Could this program have implications in the millennium? Will we see the benefit to our own families and become more active in ice skating, kayaking, tubing, snow shoeing, camping, weightlifting, bicycling, etc., because we have better facilities and opportunities?

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Will we find or create other microcosms that work even better than athletics and activities at bringing spiritual principles into a quick focus, a focus that cuts down learning time even more and allows the Holy Ghost to move us forward? Will we be found closer to God because we believe in inspiration and in inspired men and women?

I feel blessed and grateful to be employed at BYU-Idaho; I am blessed to have had the opportunity to work at the College of Southern Idaho for two years. I had no idea of the hidden gem that lies in Twin Falls. Superb academic programs offer great insights for those willing to explore CSI. I have never seen an institution that does more for and with their community than the College of Southern Idaho. Hard work and a sense of trust that the administration and staff have with each other and with the faculty makes CSI like Ricks College. I learned so much.

I interacted enough with other junior colleges and with senior colleges to realize that athletics offers less in positive learning and more in “negative experiencing.” I witnessed poor academic traditions, and I fought dozens of traditions that resemble the secret combinations mentioned in the *Book of Mormon*. The best way to avoid them on our campus is to get rid of them totally. This strong statement comes from someone who loves athletics and who is strong in the Church because athletics and coaches taught him many spiritual qualities. I see great wisdom in discontinuing intercollegiate athletics at BYU-Idaho before negative traditions can take as strong a hold as they have on many other campuses.

As the goal becomes winning games, the losing traditions take stronger root. Fewer athletes are winning for themselves a principled understanding. In a nightmare game against Dixie State College, I walked to the middle of the floor and asked the referee for a technical, “Give me a technical: this game is out of control.” He told me in a kind way that he wouldn’t give me a technical and that I should sit down and be quiet. I won’t just sit down and be quiet. I’ll walk away from the game that I love if it is out of control and if I can’t get people to listen and help bring back the tremendous learning opportunities. I’ll find a better microcosm—one where good stifles evil. ∞

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