

When Does A Coach Become A Coach?

Over a span of 21 years, it took legendary North Carolina basketball coach Dean Smith seven trips to the Final Four before winning his first national title. Afterwards he asked, "Am I the same guy I was two hours ago?"

It took Smith nine more years to return, and two more Final Four appearances to get another national championship. In those thirty years Smith undoubtedly remained the same guy- a great educator, class act, and brilliant coach.

How many teams win championships because of their coach? How many teams win championships in spite of their coach?

In December 2011, I walked past a news stand and noticed a picture of Tom Coughlin on the back page of the Daily News. In 3 inch bold print the headline read "Tom Must Go! Wow, I thought. Isn't that the same Tom who led the New York Giants to a win in Super Bowl XLII against the undefeated Patriots in 2008?"

Just this year alone, I've seen the Anaheim Ducks fire Randy Carlyle, the Carolina Hurricanes fire Paul Maurice- both Stanley Cup winners. Their ownerships would offer the catch all, "we needed a different voice" rationale as the driving force behind their removals. Then I thought of Terry Francona. He had by all accounts "lost the room" during the Boston Red Sox epic collapse in September 2011 prompting his own resignation. I wondered if Red Sox Nation had been informed on that day back in 2004 when Francona was introduced as their new manager that he would exorcise the *Curse of the Bambino* in his very first season, then come back and do it again in 2007, could they even fathom ever using the word lose and Francona in the same sentence? He remains the only manager in MLB history to win his first eight consecutive World Series games. Now, he's lost the room!

"It's a tough gig this coaching thing," I said aloud to myself. It's at times like this that the scoreboard becomes God to you. I had experienced my own dealings as a baseball coach at West Essex High School in New Jersey. During my first ten seasons we achieved winning seasons in seven of those years but we had never won a championship. I was quickly reminded of the perception within our culture that if your team wins a championship, then you're a great coach. If your team doesn't, then you're not.

In one season we suffered through a 9-17 record. Our staff was proud of it, others not so much. I recall getting back to the office after the final game, looking at my assistant, and wondering how did we ever win the nine?

I'm certain that the absence of a championship played some role in the fact that I was asked to appear in front of our Board of Education in order to justify playing time decisions. A couple years later, the thought of another season without a championship nearly caused me to quit without ever turning back. I was even labeled by a reporter as the winningest coach within my

school without a championship! But how much reality is in that perception? What effect can it have on a coach?

I used to keep a container of fruit flavored Tums in my center console and eat them on the way to school. I suffered from loss of appetite, weight loss, jitters on game day. I know I had asked myself more than once if high school baseball was really worth what it was doing to me.

What is it then that continues to give coaches headaches, diarrhea, and other bodily symptoms? Is it the label? I know prior to our 2006 Greater Newark Tournament final, I had this sense that if we could just win this one, then it would cover all of my losses put together. We were pitted against national power Seton Hall Prep They had 6 Division I scholarship players, 8 total Division I signees, and a pitcher named Rick Porcello less than three years removed from his first Major League start with the Detroit Tigers. I chronicled our story of that season in my recently published book Our Time- A High School Baseball Coach's Journey. Was this true? Would that one win really undo all my losses combined? I don't know but I sure felt that way!

I know during that season that it took a visit to the hospital to see my father being treated for prostate cancer to wake up and realize that I had completely lost perspective. Thoughts of a championship were so consuming that the scoreboard had become God to me. I was seeking a 'shallow validation' that culture had convinced me that I was supposed to feel. I was trying to control the game but I couldn't control the game. If we won I would feel validated. If we lost I'd feel like a total failure. That form of shallow validation nearly destroyed me. But, that Spring, I realized that I had a choice. Most people do not ever recognize that. I knew that my choices were to either continue this way, and keep living the same life, or I could look deep inside myself and figure out who do I really want to be and who do I really need to be? The scoreboard can't be God to me. I already had a God and it isn't the scoreboard.

Some of my soul searching led me to develop some newer and better practice methods. Some of it made me more aware of the type of vibe that I was giving off to my players. I began to place my focus more on the relationships with my players and more in the process of teaching, rather than focus on the rewards derived from winning.

In my first ten years we didn't win any championships. In my next six years we won ten championships including the Star-Ledger Top 20 Trophy as the # 1 ranked team in New Jersey in 2010. I'm still the same guy, still the same coach.

So when does a coach become a coach? Is it that moment than at athletic director reaches across the desk, offers his hand and says, "Congratulations, you've got the job!" Is it that first win? First championship? Is it somewhere else along the way or is it when all those nagging questions in the back of the mind finally stop nagging?

I often wonder what if I had never won a championship but a heart-to-heart that I had with my team based upon things I was seeing and over hearing led them to leave a party early, just moments before arrests were made for underage drinking and possession of marijuana. That's

not something that will ever make the front page of the sports section but I contend is a bigger victory! However, most of society won't care about that and will run you out of town without a championship.

When does a coach become a coach? It's when your inner monologue quiets. Notice, I said quiets, not stops because it will never stop. In fact, I've woken up 3 times since losing the 2011 Group II State Finals 8-2 after being tied 2-2 in the top of the last inning.

A coach's inner monologue can only be quiet when they know that they have done their best to prepare their teams at the highest level. It will quiet when they can accept that they will make mistakes in the future and that countless others will judge the job they do with the benefit of making such judgments after a play has already occurred. The greatest majority of those making the judgments would never think to sign up to be the coach themselves, but they will judge anyway. It will quiet when they can be at peace, no matter the outcome, because of their work ethic, and because they took the time and made the effort to be a good person, and to make a positive influence in the lives of their athletes off the field.

Is Tom Coughlin the same Tom he was five years ago? Five months ago?

It's a good thing Tom stayed.