

Making A Difference

By Heather Ross

If anyone was born to be a coach it was Tom. Growing up in Southern California, Tom had been drafted out of high school to play professional baseball but instead chose college where he continued to play ball, hoping to be drafted later. Unfortunately, a shoulder injury and subsequent surgery ended this dream. Tom accepted his fate and went on to various jobs in sports representation and eventually computer technology. Yet he never felt fulfilled until he was motivated like so many of us by the 9/11 terrorist attacks to make a life change. When Tom volunteered to coach a nearby little league team, he did not realize the events that would transpire on that field under his leadership would touch and inspire the lives of many.

Before the season began, Tom thought seriously about the best way to coach his team of eight- to ten-year old boys, how to show them at this young age that baseball was not merely a game but a microcosm of life. Lessons to be learned could apply on and off the field – lessons about being coachable, about playing full out, about making a difference for others, and about that quality of behavior that makes this possible: class. Tom loved baseball almost as much as he loved life. He wanted these kids to feel the same way, to take "America's Favorite Pastime" and give it 100 percent of themselves, and to play life the same way.

In his many talks with the team, Coach Tom often reflected upon lessons he learned as a child from his father, a juvenile probation officer and his mother, a schoolteacher. His parents had always tried to impress upon Tom and his two younger brothers that helping others was what life was about. They conveyed to him ways that a single interaction or a few kind words could make a difference in someone's life.

All season the boys played hard, but more importantly they had fun being together as a team. At each practice, although they were eager to get on the field, they also looked forward to Coach Tom's inspiring words. Little did they know they would soon have the opportunity to apply those lessons about baseball...no, about life...first hand.

It was a playoff game. The opposing team had a player named Eric, who had been born with a physical handicap that seriously affected his motor skills and thus his ability to hit, throw, catch and run. He wore a protective facemask so he would not be injured due to his impaired reflexes. Eric's father was the opposing team coach and as Tom's team had played against them in the past, they knew Eric did not bat often and had never scored a run. Eric's brother, on the other hand, was the star player on the team and possibly the best in the league.

That day, Coach Tom had an inspiration. He gathered his team together before the game began, and told them they may have an opportunity to put to use all they had learned about making a difference for others.

"Boys, we have a chance to make sure Eric scores a run," he said and then explained in detail. The team was not only receptive to the idea; they were enthusiastic about it despite the fact that they might lose the game as a result. Pleased that he had their support, Coach Tom asked the assistant coach of the opposing team to allow Eric to be the leadoff batter. Eric was thrilled. He had not expected to even bat in a playoff game.

After a couple of missed swings, Eric hit a grounder toward the third baseman. He was slow to react but the crowd encouraged him to run. As he ran a bit awkwardly to first base, the third baseman threw the ball just over the first baseman's head. The crowd cheered wildly as Eric ran to second base, and then, realizing the right fielder had only now retrieved the ball, to third. By now, the pitcher had the ball and threw it barely over the third baseman's extended arm. Eric stopped and stared at the fans for a moment in amazement. The crowd on both sides was cheering him on now, and Eric began the trek to home plate, where he arrived triumphantly. It seemed like slow motion as his teammates in the dugout ran to congratulate Eric at home plate. Tears filled everyone's eyes.

The pride Eric felt in that moment was shared by everyone at the game. In that short time a great event had transpired, an event that would transform the life of not only one young boy but of everyone there. Tom's dream to be a coach had turned out to be more fulfilling than he had ever imagined. His team did not win that game or the playoff series. But they did win.

Although the season was over, Coach Tom's team begged him to let them have one more practice. His last talk was a fitting one - about an indefinable thing called "class". He ended the session by saying, "You know, I don't know how much longer Eric will be able to compete in sports. But last week he hit a home run to leadoff a playoff game and that's what he will carry with him the rest of his life". Coach Tom explained that if the boys ever spoke of their undisclosed "errors", it would diminish what they had accomplished. He suggested instead that when anyone mentioned Eric's home run, they should just smile and say, "Yes, we're very proud of him".

"And that, team," Coach Tom told them, "is class".