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“We’re Going to the Super Bowl!” — Thinking About Coaches and Teams and Winning and Teaching and Learning

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“We’re Going to the Super Bowl!”— Thinking About Coaches and Teams and Winning and Teaching and Learning

I was at the NFC Championship Game between the Carolina Panthers and the Arizona Cardinals on January 24. It was an amazing, even a magical night. I have been at almost every Panther game since 1998, and this one was easily the most exciting. My fellow fans in the lower-level end zone stood for the entire game, cheering raucously, especially loud when Arizona had the ball.

In the fourth quarter, when Luke Kuechly (Luuuuuke!) intercepted a Carson Palmer pass and ran it in for a touchdown right in front of where we stood, I thought the stadium was going to explode. And then something happened. All at once, all of us realized something, and we all started saying it to each other:

“We’re going to the Super Bowl! We’re going to the Super Bowl!”

I know the Panthers already had a good lead even before Luke’s play, but nobody would allow the thought to become a

certainty, given the lead that shrank the week before against the Seahawks, not to mention in several regular season games, but at that moment, we all knew.

Strangers were hugging each other, and I saw several fans crying in happiness. “We’re going to the Super Bowl!”

I have sat through the good times, and even more, through the bad times. I was at every game in 2001, the 1-15 season, which was merely the worst of several very forgettable years. This particular Sunday night was the best of the best—so far.

It is a bit trite to think about a class in terms of a team sport, but trite or not, the comparison can give us some good lessons. If my class is a team, then I am the coach. What kind of coach am I? Am I a good coach or a bad coach?

When I think about the bad coaches I have had or

I have seen, I think about their characteristics. There is the angry coach who flies off the handle over even trivial mistakes, yelling at and berating his or her players, throwing things, going into tantrums. There is the stern disciplinarian, stern to an extreme, so rigid with rules that the rules begin to rule, robbing the team of its personality and its humanity, robbing the game of its fun.

At the other extreme is the lax coach who has no rules and lets the players run the team—and run him. There is the coach who plays favorites, who is uneven in her treatment of the players. The star players can do no wrong, while the lesser players are ignored.

There is the incompetent coach, the coach who is way over his head and really doesn’t know his sport, doesn’t know how to set up a team, doesn’t know how to deal with people. There is the coach who is past her time, who once was at the top of the game, but now has let the game evolve beyond

“What are the characteristics of a good coach? The good coaches I have known challenge their players, but they also nurture them. They are able to set up a clear plan and establish clear rules, but they know when to change the plan to adapt to changing circumstances, and they know when a rule has to be applied flexibly. They look to the good of the whole team, but they also deal with each player individually, from the star player to the bench warmer.”



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her—she was great 20 years ago, but now she is a dinosaur.

What are the characteristics of a good coach? The good coaches I have known challenge their players, but they also nurture them. They are able to set up a clear plan and establish clear rules, but they know when to change the plan to adapt to changing circumstances, and they know when a rule has to be applied flexibly. They look to the good of the whole team, but they also deal with each player individually, from the star player to the bench warmer.

Good coaches know their sport well, its history, its structure, its skills, and they know how to communicate that effectively to their players. Good coaches establish a clear and workable system, but they also innovate, finding new ways to deal with a changing and evolving sport. Good coaches inspire their teams, season after season, year after year, pushing each new group to be the best they can be. Win or lose, champions or not, good coaches enjoy the process of helping young people grow and learn.

Good coaches are not

necessarily born that way. Ron Rivera, the head coach of the Carolina Panthers, struggled in his first two seasons. He was widely considered to be on the chopping block early on, and many other NFL teams would have fired him. The Panthers stuck with him, and he went on to win NFL Coach of the Year for the 2013 season. He is likely to win that award again this year.

Dean Smith was burned in effigy in Chapel Hill in his fourth year as North Carolina’s basketball coach. (He knew the dummy the students had hung up was him because of the dummy’s big nose.) Dean Smith went on to become one of the greatest coaches of all time, in any sport. (When I thought of the attributes of a good coach, many of them came from my admiration for Coach Smith.)

And then there is the team. No matter how good the coach is, the team is the one who plays the game. The coach can’t be the quarterback, the coach can’t shoot free throws, the coach can’t be a defender. (Although sometimes we as coaches/teachers make the mistake of trying to be the coach, the quarterback, the running back, the wide receivers,

and the offensive line., all at the same time. Doesn’t work very well!)

My best classes have not necessarily been the smartest ones, but the ones who worked well together, who operated truly as a team. I put the structure in place, but it was the students who pulled together and made the class a good team.

I applied the analogy to a college class, but it applies to more than that we do in a university. The university itself is a team, with the president as coach, the administration, faculty, and staff as the team. Our individual colleges are teams, as are our departments, academic and otherwise. Many of us are coaches in those regards, and all of us are team members, on a variety of teams.

We play the game, year after year. We don’t literally go to the playoffs, we don’t win championships, but we play the game. Do we play it as well as we can? Do we continue to grow and strive? When it is our place to be the coach, are we the best coach we can be?



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Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

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The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

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Thought For the Week

"Adam and Eve had many advantages, but the principle one was that they escaped teething."

--Mark Twain, Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar