

Hi my name is “Tom” and Coach Nicollerat cut me twice about twenty years ago.

Coach, it’s all going to come out tonight buddy...

As Steve’s assistant coach for about 14 years, my primary job was to stay out of the spotlight, stay out of the way by coaching outfielders, lurk in the dark corners of the dugout or in the old computer lab, and beg Wehner to give us more baseballs from the imaginary “tree that grows baseballs” as he once told me after one of my requests for more game balls.

I enjoyed avoiding both the weird parent things you had deal with and the scheduling of games during spring in St. Louis. The life of an assistant coach was wonderful.

So... it’s very strange for me to be up here.

In fact, I suggested we get Wehner to give this speech because he loves the spotlight.

But alas, he declined since he is out of town. Dammit.

All joking aside...

I am truly humbled and grateful for the opportunity to talk about a guy I’ve spent countless hours with down at the field, holed up in the basement computer labs, gyms, warehouses, garages, and of course the environmentally hazardous St. Louis Armoury.

Forgive me for starting with an obligatory Jesuit reference to set this speech up, but if I had to summarize what made the Jesuits different from others both in the past and present, it was in fact that the they demanded to be different...

Ignatius and the Jesuits demanded to look at things in more depth, they challenged each other and their communities they served to be better...all for the greater glory of God.

How else do you explain all the Jesuit poets, biologists, mathematicians, astronomers, Pope Francis, Fr. Houlihan and Fr. Sheridan?

So it shouldn’t come as a surprise to see that Coach was and is the quintessential Jesuit educator and coach. After all he was educated and employed by the Jesuits!

Coach embraced and carried that Jesuit standard with him. He wanted to be different. A guy who didn't want to fit the typical mold or stereotype of a baseball coach.

It was rare if not unheard of Coach regurgitating two cent coaching cliches... the kind you'd hear on movies or read on Facebook memes.

We relished together on how we don't "look" like traditional baseball coaches with trendy gear and clothing... Coach always preferred warmth over style... let's be honest he had his own "look."

He never knocked his opponents. He always tried to be respectful and caring. For example, after a pre-game, Coach identified a potential weak spot in our opponents defense. During the team huddle, Coach then passed on this intelligence report to his players by describing the opposing left fielder as "a Good kid, but bad arm."

At times baseball coaches seem to be content with the knowledge they have, rarely changing major portions of their coaching because it's just too hard. Coach was different. He challenged himself to change. Throughout 39 years, he went from not teaching any hitting, to teaching squishing the bug and knob to ball in a converted warehouse hitting facility to becoming 1 of 6 Nationally Certified Master Epstein Hitting Instructors.

He constantly sought out advice and listened to all of his assistant coaches starting with Missey all the way through to Cruz. Always asking us...did I say that the right way? Or what am I missing? Or after a demoralizing season ending game, he would sit with all of his assistants and strategize for the next season, only interrupting this planning while taking bites of his salad with white French dressing at Biggies Bar and Restaurant.

After tough losses or setbacks, coach always spoke about putting things into perspective. He would talk about topics such as relationships, attributes of being a dad and grandfather, or illness and death... Coach always kept memories of Tommy Sullivan, Ray Mierisch, Timmy Hunt, Dom Palumbo and other loved ones central in these key moments.

In the last 20 or so years, Coach insisted on not posting a cut list, instead he wanted to talk to players one on one about who would be making the team as well as the ones he would be cutting. This wasn't the "norm"... Most coaches prefer posting a cut list. It's way easier. But then again Coach was different... I would sit with Coach in his office as each player came in. He wanted to provide as much clarity and care as he could deliver to each player. As the years passed, these "cut" conversations never grew easier for him. They began taking a toll on Coach. Each time a player left his office, I could see the emotional toll it was taking on him... when we talked about this, Coach spoke about how it's getting harder because he now sees himself more as a father and grandfather and less as a coach and how he was hurting someone else's son or grandson when he cut them.

Because Coach was different, his teams played different...

When asked about playing against SLUH, former players from other schools consistently said they had to alter what they normally do at practice just to prepare for Coach's SLUH team... practicing things like bunt defense, hitting the opposite way on 2-0 counts, or trying to defend the infamous delayed steal...which after all these years...they are still trying to find a solution...

No matter where Coach's teams practiced, whether it was the dark, leaky, and musky St. Louis Armory, the vast open grass fields of the Jewel box, the Muny parking lot, or the old and new gym, his teams always focused on the critically important fundamentals like:

Getting his pitchers to pitch backwards, emphasizing changing speeds rather than trying to "push the gun" and insisting they know the difference between pitching and throwing. He wanted every pitcher to know the answer to this question: what is the best pitch to throw on a 2-0 count?... A changeup right down the middle for a strike.

He believed in bunting to put pressure on the other team, something even parents couldn't comprehend at times... so much so that their only retort was to default to a "let them hit" cliché.

And who could forget the amount of time he scripted out in practice to force balk plays, Lefty moves, Red, Green, and Special, 1st and 3rd, run throughs, overthrow reads, team defensive plays 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, safety vs. suicide squeezes, double steal fake vs. double steal score, making sure outfielders backed up on cuts and relays while simultaneously demanding pitchers to go all the way back to the wall or fence.

These small yet critically important plays translated into the game... In addition to the record setting number of delayed steals against opponents, pitching duels, and stealing home, another classic example of Coach's SLUH teams was the shuffle shuffle base running play on a relay throw. This involved a runner rounding third and executing a precise pivot while reading the relay fielder with the ball. SLUH won a game against Chaminade on this play. The kids loved it.

And of course who will ever forget... the SLUH pregame...39 years of Coach's imagination and creativity. A tradition like no other. A masterpiece of baseball ballet that travelled at venues like Heine Meine, Forest Park, and Sheridan Stadium and among opposing schools fields across the region. About 10 balls simultaneously in the air all destined to somewhere different. Underneath those balls, infielders worked on making different plays orchestrated by the maestro himself.

Dangerous for everyone involved? yes... Beautiful even more so.

Off the field, Coach's players acted differently...

Coach insisted that there was to never be dugout chatter that drew attention to themselves, only for team support... and never towards the other team. Steve would be kneeling down outside the dugout and deeply focused on pitch selections or when he could get someone else into the game...and then hear something that wasn't right, he would pop up and correct that player for the kind of chatter he did not tolerate.

Coach set a standard never to retaliate or sink to a level that could be called into question...he never ordered to throw at someone because it wasn't right. Regardless of the circumstance. But still demanded to pitch inside. He always reprimanded players he thought retaliated towards opponents or even his standard.

For a guy with such fashion sense, coach insisted players to wear their uniforms the right way from the car to the field and back to the car after the game. If anyone violated this rule, Coach would do two things: first he'd remind them how long they have been with the team as a way to suggest that should have known better and second, he'd tell them to go back to their car or bathroom and get it right.

He talked to each player on the night of dances instilling fatherly and moral advice on how to treat others... way before the trends of today. Even the morning after dances... I remember a practice in the Armoury, yes Coach scheduled full practices the morning after dances, and one of our players...who may or may not have had too much fun the night before came to practice a little out of sorts. It turns out that the entire practice Coach and this player talked one on one just sitting on the steps together. There was no yelling, just talking. He was treating him with respect...like a caring adult. Because coach felt this was the right way to make progress.

When asked about his teams and how they played and acted... Steve's answer has always been very self effacing and humble:

We're able to do that because I have great kids, He would say. We can do different things because SLUH kids are different.

In my opinion, a great educator demands a standard that is both challenging yet accessible... someone who plants seeds of knowledge and expectations for their students and players to grow... someone who aspires themselves and others to be better tomorrow than they were today....

Steve has done that for 39 years. His program embraced and carried the standard that came before him. It was a program like no other in St. Louis... It didn't fit the "norms" or cliches of what others think what a "program" should be. His program was different.

So it should not come to a surprise that when Steve decided to step down that too was different... It was after his 39th year. Not his 40th. It wasn't after his 700th win But when he knew it was time.

As Steve has moved on from coaching at SLUH, he has now embraced a greater mission and calling...In addition to supporting his family and being a grandpa.

He is now teaching Organizations, Coaches, and Parents on how to transform the baseball experience through Coach Baseball Right, a website and company he co-founded.

That's Coach Baseball Right dot com.

In striving to be current and different, he even started a Coach Baseball Right podcast interviewing SEC coaches, MLB umpires and other national contributors to the game... by the way you can find this podcast on iTunes or anywhere you get your podcasts.

What a perfect example of Ignatius and the Jesuits... always adapting, changing, and demanding to be different.

Coach, I think I can speak on behalf of the folks in this room... Thank you for developing and maintaining a program that has continued the standard set a long time ago by Ignatius and his companions...

Thank you for your countless hours where you pushed yourself and all of us to be different, demanding all of us to be better people first and playing baseball the right way second.

Because of this, we truly are better friends, co-workers, husbands, fathers, and people because of you.

Thank you and we love you.