

Lamentations from a Volleyball Coach's Soul

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Abstract

Coaches often enter their profession in hopes of helping others and making the world a better place in which to live. In this narrative, the Author recounts a volleyball recruiting trip to Denver, Colorado. He stays in an area of the city plagued by homelessness and crime. What he saw and experienced made him question the real impact he has on others as a collegiate volleyball coach. How could working as a volleyball coach be important when so much pain, suffering, and misery exist? Each year intercollegiate coaches bring thousands of students to colleges and universities across the country. Many of the student-athletes prepare to work in helping professions that serve both individuals in need of help and the broader society as well. As such, coaches do indirectly assist in addressing social and health problems plaguing our society.

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Volleyball, Coaching, College Recruiting, Homelessness, Mental Illness, Drug Addiction

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Like many coaches, I held fast to the belief that through sport, I could help make the world a little better for someone else. I accomplished this goal for a time when teaching and coaching on the Navajo Indian Reservation in New Mexico. It was “common knowledge” that precious few of the children would leave the reservation to obtain a college degree. Several of the young people I taught and coached did earn their college degrees. Some had the opportunity to play sports as they did. The fact always provided me with a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.

Currently, I am a university professor but served my institution in other capacities over the years. I started the athletic program and acted as the director of athletics for twenty-three years. I also coached the volleyball team for twenty-one years. While serving in multiple roles, free time was rare, and the stress experienced seemed almost unbearable at times. Often, I wondered why I was doing so much and considered whether I was making a difference in the lives of others at all.

Certainly, I influenced the lives of college students and athletes on occasion. I imparted knowledge and helped many of them obtain jobs. I was there to occasionally offer support following the death of loved ones, break-ups with boyfriends, and I even helped prevent three suicides that I can recall. But as a general rule, I taught, coached, and administered day after day with seemingly no significant impact on others. That bothered me often.

When in the doldrums, I often found myself asking, what do coaches actually *do* to help enrich the lives of others? How do they serve to make the world a better place? The days of questioning seemed to multiply with the passing of each year. I probably would not have taken

the time to seriously consider the questions had I not stayed at a seamy hotel in downtown Denver, Colorado, while on a volleyball recruiting trip.

I have always been a bit of a penny-pincher, and the budget for my recruiting activities was paltry. A lot of coaches I competed against were staying at the volleyball tournament's host hotel. They could afford it. Because the better hotels in Downtown Denver are expensive and because I wanted to save money by not renting a car, I stayed at the "Econo-Inn". It was \$69.99 a night and was within walking distance of the Colorado Convention Center where the volleyball tournament was being held. I could save nearly \$300 by doing so. The savings would allow me to stay on the road an additional three nights during the recruiting season.

Not since I was in college had I stayed in an establishment like the Econo-Inn. I recall swearing that I would never spend the night in such a place again. My social mobility made it possible to make such decrees. But, the idea of saving money for future recruiting trips was both appealing and necessary. So, there I stayed from Thursday evening through Sunday morning. Whatever it takes.

As the shuttle driver brought me to within a mile of my hotel, Colfax Avenue seemed as congested as a rush-hour freeway. Rap music blared from automobile sound systems. People yelled to one another over the roar of music and speeding engines in various languages. Drivers leaned on their horns often. Numerous bars and adult entertainment establishments lined the street. Low-riders commanded their vehicles to violently bounce up and down as they waited for traffic lights to turn green.

I noted that some pedestrians were incapable of walking in a straight line. Others stood with the support of crutches or scooted about in wheelchairs because of injuries, illness, and loss of limbs. People walked the streets looking for sex, looking for Johns, looking for drugs, and

looking to make drug sales. I did not have a particular reason to believe anyone was looking for someone to mug, but I assumed somewhere nearby, someone was. The world was foreign to me. It was discomfoting.

As I stepped up to the Econo-Inn's registration counter, nobody was in sight. I politely rang the bell. After waiting for a reasonable amount of time, I rang it again. A short time later, an attendant appeared and blurted out a marijuana-induced, "Hey Dude! Welcome to the Econo-Inn!" Because I was exhausted after 15 hours of travel, I asked when things calmed down outside. He countered, "About 3:00, after the bars all close. It is pretty quiet Monday morning too." Great.

I was assigned to room 111. The walls were thin, and the sounds of carnal delights came from the other side of one of them. The heater was exceptionally loud as it churned out heated air two feet from my bed. A heavily-stained industrial grade indoor-outdoor carpet adorned the floor. The doorknob to the bathroom was loose and clung to the edge of the abyss by one loose bolt. Holes, poorly repaired, pocked the walls and stalactites in the form of peeling paint served to adorn the bathroom ceiling. Towles hung on the rack, dingy and stained. I trusted they were clean but did not dare to smell them. A stunning 25-inch television held a prominent position on the dresser. It had decent reception and offered a whopping ten stations to choose from. There was no lamp on the desk. I supposed it was the victim of a kidnapping.

The bed was the first I can recall sleeping on that appeared to have a water-resistant cover on it. It smelled of a poor attempt to sanitize away the smell of filth, and it offended my typically strong stomach. The mattress was unexpectedly uncomfortable. Between the smells, tossing and turning, and the noise supplied by rowdy drunks, screaming emergency sirens, and those of the honeymooners next door, I did not sleep much during the three nights I stayed in the hotel.

On Friday, in the crisp cool of the sunny March morning, I walked a little over a mile to the Denver Convention Center where the volleyball tournament was being held. I departed my room at precisely 6:30 A.M. I had a habit of drinking coffee each day, and the recruiting trip would not serve as an excuse for a change in routine. McDonald's supplied my morning fix just a few short blocks from the hotel. As I ate an Egg McMuffin sandwich and drank my well-creamed brew, I observed the homeless on the sidewalk through a large window looking out upon the shops and stores lining the street.

Just in front of me, a big burly man took a bag of pills and rocks of crystal meth from his pocket. He fingered the bag as he paced and repetitively looked wildly upon his treasure and into a void that seemed to have encircled him. A thin and wrinkled man picked a cigarette from the gutter, struck a match, and lit it up. He inhaled slowly, deeply, and thoughtfully, then shared a drag with his friend. A plump man held a smoldering cigarette in his hand. Carefully he wiped at the glowing ashes to extinguish it, thus reserving some enjoyment for later. The sound of new wave music played loudly throughout the warmth of the restaurant.

Several times, a short and elderly man walked past the window in front of me. I looked up a while later to find him standing on the left side of my table. He was staring eerily at me. I asked, "Can I help you?" "Is that a ham sandwich?", he inquired. Could he really have never before eaten an Egg McMuffin? I offered my take on the McMuffin, "Well, sort of. It has egg, cheese, and Canadian bacon that is sort of like ham." Without responding, he turned to order his own.

Many of the restaurant's twenty-five beleaguered patrons were there to take advantage of the heated environment and the free coffee being distributed as part of a promotion that weekend.

Oddly, there was no sign in the window advertising the promotion. Word had somehow spread on the street amongst the homeless.

After swallowing the last bite of my sandwich, I sipped on my free cup of coffee and again looked about the restaurant. I noticed that one of the homeless was watching SportsCenter. He wore ornate cowboy boots, a hot pink long-sleeved shirt, and a pair of striped pajama pants. Sport does indeed capture the imagination of America.

In the restroom, the music seemed unreasonably loud. I tried not to bother the man throwing up in the sink as I stood at the urinal. Instead, I stared at the wall and noticed that a loogie had streamed down it. The spittle had hardened, dark green, and was frozen in time. I imagined someone who did not care where he spat deposited it there. The street or a wall, what was the difference? Perhaps he fancied himself an interior decorator. The vomiting man stood motionless, spookily gazing at himself in the mirror as I exited the restroom.

Back on Colfax Avenue, another man and his *compadre* were walking a short distance in front of me. They were carrying on some sort of conversation. Casually, they stopped in front of a trashcan. Without a disruption in the banter, one of them propped up the lid and dug through it for breakfast, partially emptied alcohol containers, or buried treasures; I was not sure which. Passing by, I was seemingly unnoticed and sensed my insignificance.

A few blocks later, a tall man discovered the treasure of a half-smoked cigarette. He placed it into his pocket while displaying a wide smile. As the happy man passed me, he asked another passerby in the immediate vicinity if he had any spare change. Luck was not bestowed upon the tall man twice within the same block. His countenance fell.

Farther down Colfax Avenue, several people who had just awakened from their cold night's slumber in the park on the south side of the street had gathered. A small encampment of

forty or so campers seemed to consider the park home. A few were basking themselves in the relative warmth of the early morning spring sunshine. One interloper was swinging a bat and hitting pretend home runs. Perhaps he believed he was Reggie Jackson, as he appeared to be about my age. I imagined what the bat's function might serve at other times.

Trash glimmered conspicuously on the morning grass as did the morning dew. Vomit, empty bottles of beer, empty one-ounce bottles of hard liquor, and human feces provided me both obstacles and cause for reflection as I continued my trek to the volleyball tournament.

The Colorado Department of Education building sits on Colfax Avenue. As I walked past it, the buildings around me loomed taller. The illness, poverty, and waste grew farther behind. I crossed the street to find a man on the corner with one leg. In his hand, he clasped a ubiquitously common sign pleading for help. I offered some financial assistance. I am confident it was not enough, and I suspected that money was not what he really needed.

A monolithic sculpture of a head stood in front of a building at the corner where I would leave Colfax Avenue for the convention center. In the early morning sun, it was half dark and half illuminated as if what was right and what was wrong were divided at that very point. On the wall of the building, an inscription enquired, "What is the city but the people?" I had walked past and observed many people during my short time in Denver. They were people who would not have entered my consciousness had I not tried to save a dollar by staying at the Econo-Inn. Were these the people the inscription referred to?

Each morning, I saw more of the same. Each day as I continued toward the volleyball tournament, my spirit grieved. How meaningless volleyball seemed in comparison to drug addiction, mental illness, and homelessness. For a moment, I was grateful that I was not suffering from either.

I had traveled to Denver to find a couple of excellent volleyball players to fill my roster for the next season. So, in spite of the images and questions torturing my mind, I walked on. A few blocks from the convention center, I observed a long line of parents waiting to pay the parking tab for their cars, ten dollars a day.

Across the street from the convention center, I saw a small platoon of players marching in single file from the Hyatt. The Hyatt had a special rate for tournament participants: \$169 a night. Some parents paid \$5,500 a season for the opportunity for their daughter to play on their club, plus travel expenses. Others paid considerably more. Rare is the volleyball player who can play in college without parents making regular sacrifices to the sports god.

Players, coaches, and family members streamed toward the convention center doors as tributaries to a vast river. Ten dollars was the daily charge for parents and other spectators to get into the tournament for the day. It was a three-day event.

Six hundred twenty-three teams and six thousand three hundred athletes participated. It was not uncommon to see several family members supporting a player at the tournament. Teams came from throughout the United States and several foreign countries. Players were decked out in matching warm-ups, shoes, uniforms, kneepads, ankle braces, and team T-shirts. The spirits of Nike, Adidas, and Asics were all present. Was the convention center the epicenter of some populous religious cult? The thought made me chuckle out loud.

Undoubtedly, many of the athletes and their parents had fun during their stay in Colorado. However, the ultimate goal of a vast majority of them was to obtain an athletic scholarship. College coaches travel to these events to find players that might contribute to our programs. Tall enough? Quick enough? Skilled enough? Personable enough?

Might one of the players at the tournament graciously accept my offer to pay for her college education in return for playing for me? For most, the answer is no. "Your school is not big enough." "You don't have a football team." "You are not an NCAA Division I school." "Texas is too far from home." "I have already signed with another team." "If I can't start right away, I don't want to commit." The ability to accept rejection was a skill sharply honed over decades of recruiting activity. Of course, I had dished out generous servings of rejection to recruits over the years. Karma. I had always hated recruiting. Something about it is dehumanizing.

Many phenomenal players participated in the tournament. Some were consumed with the activity and displayed emotions typically reserved for the most intense moments of one's life... Like life and death. Others went through the motions and pretended as though they cared about the game and their performance.

I observed a player (many if the truth be told) who looked as though the whole event was simply an ordeal, an imposition. She looked as though she wished she could be doing something else, anything else, anywhere else. Then, I thought of the street I had walked earlier in the day. A blanket of sadness enveloped me. How could she be so ungrateful? Doesn't she understand how fortunate she is? Then my thoughts turned inward. It seemed that by coaching volleyball, I could really do nothing to address issues such as drug addiction, mental illness, and homelessness. The thought that I could be wasting the most productive years of my professional life suffocated me.

Though it was early in the first day of the three-day tournament, I was ready to leave. I could not get the thoughts out of my mind. I was also discouraged because I had not found an unsigned player that could help my team. But I told myself to suck it up. Athletes and coaches must, after all, persevere to be successful.

I evaluated dozens of players at the tournament from 7:30 am through 10:30 pm Friday and Saturday. By Sunday morning, only one unsigned senior from Arizona remained on my list of players to evaluate. I thought about getting an earlier flight home but decided to stay to see her play.

My perseverance paid off. The Arizonan seemed to meet the needs that I had for my team! She expressed a strong interest in my school, but most importantly, she knew what she wanted to do in life. She wanted to be a *social worker*. What were the odds? After witnessing all of the pain and misery I had seen on my treks to and from the convention center, the one, and only recruit I had spoken with wanted to be a *social worker*! The words released a flood of emotions that washed over me. I turned away from the recruit, for tears streamed down my cheeks. I had experienced an epiphany. Bringing young women to college to play volleyball is a means to prepare them to help others. The realization of the fact lifted me from my doldrums and discontent.

As we spoke, it was acknowledged that she would never make much money as a social worker, but she believed strongly in her passion for helping others. She did not come from a wealthy family and worked after school to pay the fees associated with her volleyball activity. I felt good about offering her a scholarship. It would mean something to her, to me, and down the road, perhaps to someone residing along Colfax Avenue.

I left the convention center hopeful and feeling much better about my journey. I felt better about what I did for a living. Perhaps the player would never matriculate to my university, but that was not the real point anymore.

The weather was satisfyingly warm as I walked up Colfax Avenue to the Econo-Inn one last time to retrieve my suitcase. More trash. More homelessness. More alcohol and more drugs.

A drag-queen dodged into the Monkey Bar. According to the sign on the wall, it was always open. A pimp and one of his workers had taken up their stations on the drag.

A small, and painfully thin man from Ethiopia drove the shuttle that took me to the airport. I slipped off of the step as I tried to enter the van and fell back into the street. That happens to many people, I thought. Chips, cracks, and a softball-sized spider web impact area decorated the windshield of the van.

Precious few teeth adorned the driver's gums. Those hanging on were deeply blackened. He was, however, a delightful fellow that had resided in the United States for twenty-five years. I handed him my voucher and a tip for \$5 in advance. I sometimes forget to tip. When I do, it makes me feel awful, and I did not want to feel awful again for a while.

The cost of my ride was \$16. The driver picked up another rider a few minutes later and charged him \$22. Nine more passengers joined us at a third stop, filling the van to capacity. They paid \$14 each. Over his phone, the Ethiopian made arrangements to pick up ten more riders later in the day for \$100. The passengers in the back of me expressed their outrage over being "ripped off." I found it hard to blame a guy for trying to make a living. Even the ancient Romans understood that buyers should beware. Hustling extended far past Colfax Avenue.

As the van full of us drove through the north part of downtown Denver, we passed about a hundred homeless near the Door of Hope Mission. I am not sure if my fellow passengers noticed, but I did. Pain, suffering, and hopelessness shrouded the area like an invisible fog. My heart ached. As we drove on toward the suburbs, the fog gradually subsided. My spirits lifted higher as my plane ascended to 35,000 feet, and I viewed the earth from greater heights.

In retrospect, I was privileged to have stayed at the Econo-Inn on Colfax Avenue. I was privileged because I had the capacity offer financial assistance to help those in need. I was able

to discern that the young people I coached would become members of the helping professions. They would serve others as teachers, social workers, doctors, and nurses. In doing so, I would indirectly assist in combating the pain and misery I witnessed on the recruiting trip that caused my soul to lament.