

As a happy, healthy junior here at Boston College, it would be easy to forget just how very fortunate I am. I hail from a cozy four-person family in Massapequa, a Long Island suburb. While a loving, supporting family and loyal friends provide the framework for a fulfilling and blissful life, I view them not as a comfortable support system into which I can collapse, but rather as a springboard to greater things. I refuse to become complacent with my enchanting life. There is always more to discover—another door to open, another chance to take, another opportunity to seize. They say the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence; if that is the case, then I like to see myself as traveling down the block, jumping from backyard to backyard. It is not because I am not pleased with what I have, or because I need to leave the yard I'm in, but because I know I owe it to myself to explore the property next door. I am sure to appreciate what I have without denying myself the chance to move on to greater frontiers.

When I think back to the roots of my current lifestyle and personal philosophy, one experience in particular stands out as a—if not the—defining event in my life. While it reached its climax at one particular moment, this experience spans the course of several months. And even though I didn't necessarily realize it at the time, this time period shaped a great deal of who I am today. In the spring of 2003, I was on the verge of giving up on the one thing that had captivated my childhood. I began playing baseball when I was six, and never before had I considered stopping. But after missing my school team's final cut each of the previous three seasons, the rigorous seven-to-ten-day tryout no longer seemed worth it. I was a sophomore, which meant I had to try out for junior varsity—a far cry from the middle school teams I had attempted to make in previous years (and for which, of course, I had been deemed “not good enough”). But after a few memorable conversations with friends and relatives, I realized the decision came down to a simple question: ‘What do I have to lose?’ The answer wasn't pride, or even confidence, but just a few hours after school—hours that, in all likelihood, I would otherwise have spent attached to a video game controller. In the coming years, ‘What do I have to lose’ became more than a question; it became a mentality. Before beginning any new venture, I now measure the drawbacks and the benefits, the possible risk and the potential reward. When I do this, I often realize how many great opportunities, were it not for this experience that I might have passed up.

After a week of tryouts, during which I certainly did not perform up to my potential, judgment day came. In past years, I had played as well as I possibly could and still missed the cut. This year, then, I had no chance. As the team engaged in a drill while Coach M revealed his decision to each player individually, I strolled around the gym aimlessly, baseball in hand. I was so certain that my tenure with the team was ending that I didn't even bother to participate in whatever it was the rest of the team was doing. Instead I packed my bag, stared into space thinking about all the things I had done wrong, and waited for my name to be called. When it was, and when I was told I was invited to stay with the team, my jaw dropped so quickly that the coaches couldn't stifle their laughter. What was perhaps even more amazing was Coach M's rationalization. He explained that he perceived me as coachable and a hard worker, and—ready?—that, although the results weren't great, he thought I had potential. He told me I could help the team just by challenging the starters for their jobs, thus pushing them to work harder. My mind was blown. Whereas so many coaches in the past had looked for reasons to cut players, Coach M had sought to justify keeping me around. For this reason and so many others, he was what my mother referred to as “a breath of fresh air.” Coach M's assessment of my abilities as a ballplayer transcended anything that could occur on a baseball diamond. I had always thought of

myself as a hard worker, but hearing it from a baseball coach—somebody from whom I had become accustomed to receiving only negative feedback—made me take it to heart. Being “coachable” was not something I had ever thought about, but the instant he said it, it became a trait to take pride in. I exuded a new sense of quiet self-assurance in my abilities to not only perform, but to please my instructors, teachers, and bosses. I was Kevin Ryan: the coachable second baseman with potential, the hardworking teacher’s favorite, the adaptable ambassador of the little people.

The time between the last day of tryouts and the first day of the regular season consisted of daily practices and routine drills. Having never had the privilege of playing this type of rigorous season, I enjoyed every minute of it. I don’t recall ever thinking about what my role with the team would be once the slate of games began. To be honest, I don’t think I expected to see much, if any, time on the playing field—especially because, on that fateful day in his office, Coach himself had told me it would take dedication and hard work for me to even have a chance of playing. But as things worked out, the best player at my position (who also happened to be my best friend, and is now my current housemate here at BC) developed a case of pneumonia days before the season began. But there were still plenty of other second basemen Coach M could have chosen from. Or perhaps he could have switched one of the more capable players over to the right side of the infield until our starter was healthy again. Regardless, on the day of the first game, in a steady rain with temperatures just above freezing, I found myself in the starting lineup. My teammates tried their best to hide their surprise at seeing my name at the top of the batting order, but their efforts didn’t matter. None of them were half as stunned by it as I was.

Day after day, Coach M penciled my name into the batting order, and day after day, I returned to the locker room without a single hit. It took me some time to realize that my coach was well aware of the fact that, from a baseball standpoint, I did not deserve to be in the starting lineup. For a while I thought that perhaps I was fooling him and that he actually believed I was as physically capable as the other players he regularly put in the lineup. It wasn’t until well into the season that everything clicked. After our star centerfielder jogged after a fly ball that ultimately dropped to the ground several feet in front of him, Coach M walked from the dugout to centerfield, sent his player to the bench, and inserted our backup catcher in his place. An inning later, he told me the centerfield job was mine for the rest of the game. As I stood out in that foreign position, I thought about what had just happened. I let the truth slowly wash over me: I was his serving as my coach’s example. I was Coach M’s mechanism for showing the rest of the team that, regardless of ability, nobody would step onto his field without some level of hard work. And I was fine with it.

I’m sure my teammates had plenty to say about the situation when Coach and I weren’t around, but I didn’t care. I had worked hard to earn a spot on the team, and now I had worked hard to earn a spot on the field. Coach M had instilled an important belief within me: hard work pays off. Of course, this is not always the case, and I recognized that. But Coach M restored my faith in the American ideology of a strong work ethic. In past years, coaches had fielded teams based purely on ability, with mixed results. Now our coach was putting those players who had worked the hardest—hustled during practice, shoved the most determination, and displayed the most heart—out on the ballfield. He was a renegade in the sense that, in a baseball program that prided itself so much on winning, he prioritized life lessons above statistical victories. As would be

expected, this caused him to fall out of favor within our school's system. The 27-year-old coach with the innovative mission statement was not someone our athletic director took kindly to. But none of that mattered to me—as long as he was my coach, I would respect him and appreciate whatever playing time he wanted to give me.

At various points throughout the season, I remember telling my mom how strange it felt to, for once, be the beneficiary of both fortune and favoritism. (Since my friend fully recovered from his bout with pneumonia, I can say without guilt that his falling ill was a speck of good luck for me.) She reassured me that I had nothing to apologize for. I had worked hard, she said, and I deserved it. Factors that I had no control over had paved the way for my increasingly more prominent role with the team, but this didn't mean I didn't earn it. By working hard, I had left myself in position to take advantage of such a situation. The opportunity was far from ideal, but I was ready for it. Today I realize how often this is the case. There are some things that are simply out of my hands, but I always try to leave myself in such a position that I will be able to capitalize should the ball bounce my way. I realize that almost all happenings are the result of a combination of luck and skill. For this reason, I try not to let my failures get me down, nor allow my accomplishments to go to my head.

The incident that defined the 2003 Massapequa High School baseball season, unfortunately, had nothing to do with baseball. While playing a tournament in Florida, the varsity team decided to use its free time to visit a local strip club. Weeks later, in early May, word of this excursion was leaked by a disgruntled parent. On Monday, I heard rumors of the incident; on Tuesday, the story appeared in the local papers, the varsity head coach was fired, and the fifteen varsity players involved were suspended for the remainder of the season on Wednesday, every major news channel and newspaper had a truck parked in front of our school. Players, parents, and reporters all simultaneously learned that instead of cancelling the remainder of the varsity season, the school had decided to use its J.V. players and coaches as varsity replacements. Our first game was going to be on Thursday. Within weeks I had gone from barely making my junior varsity team to being thrust into a game that was receiving national press coverage.

After finishing the J.V. season with exactly one hit (good for a whopping .059 batting average), I took a spot on the bench for our first game as “varsity” players. When Coach M called on me to pinch-hit in a key situation in the last inning, I would imagine that my facial expression was quite similar to the way it was when I learned of my fate on judgment day weeks earlier. Coach had showed confidence in me in the past, but this was entirely different. This time there were cameras, news trucks, scouts and reporters—a far cry from the motley collection of parents our games usually drew. Even more so, a permanent promotion to varsity head coach could have been on the line for Coach M. Never before had somebody put so much faith in me. It is one thing to tell somebody you have faith in them; it is something entirely different to actually call on them when the chips are down. My coach sent me to the plate, and I didn't fail him. I got a hit on the first pitch (a moment that, to my disbelief, would be replayed on NBC later that night), and almost immediately, I developed a sense of confidence that wasn't there before. As I stood on first base, I wondered: if somebody could put all his or her faith in me, why shouldn't I have faith in myself? In a situation with ten times the pressure I could have ever imagined, I had stepped up to the plate and succeeded. Over the course of those final games at the varsity level, Coach M continued to call on me, and I continued to perform. After my one-for-seventeen stint

at the J.V. level, I recorded three hits in four at bats against varsity pitching. There was no logical explanation for my success, except for confidence. Since then, I have never doubted my ability to succeed in the clutch—whether on a sports field, in the classroom, or in everyday life. And while I am very confident in my abilities, I refuse to let any degree of success inflate my ego. I approach things not with the expectation to succeed, but at least with the confidence that I am capable of doing so.

My experience reached its conclusion after our team of replacement players was able to get the varsity team to the playoffs. We had the privilege of going up against a pitcher two years our senior—he had already committed to play at the Division I level the following fall, and he threw a baseball harder than any person my poor 135-pound body had ever seen. Once again, Coach M called my name in the last inning. I handed over the scorebook I had so diligently been keeping and began to warm up. When I stepped into the batter's box, my goal was to reach base by any means necessary, whether by hit or walk. But after three pitches, the dream was over. I had been victimized by three straight strikes, none of which caused me to even lift the bat off my shoulder. I had gone down looking. We went on to lose the game, thus ending our season.

I am a firm believer that one should live a life without regrets. I try not to regret anything I do—the way I see it, even our worst actions aren't regrettable, because they teach us valuable lessons. At the very least, they let us know which mistakes we shouldn't make again. The only regrets, I say, are the things we don't do. Today, not swinging at any of those three pitches stands as my one true regret. My high school yearbook quote was, "You'll always miss one hundred percent of the shots you don't take." That incident on the baseball field is the one time I can recall having a shot and not taking it. So today, any time an opportunity presents itself and I am unsure of which path to take, I think back to how I felt on the walk back to the bus that day. Any time I have a decision to make, the empty feeling that accompanies missed opportunity stands 1km in my mind. *Carpe diem* has become an essential part of my vocabulary.

The next season, Coach M was not promoted to head coach of the varsity team, and he subsequently resigned from the Massapequa baseball program. I tried out for varsity, and after being cut, I decided it was finally time to hang up my uniform for good. There was one more lesson to be learned. Dealing with disappointment was something I had done many times in the past, but this instance was particularly painful. After such an eventful season the year before, I had to accept the fact that my playing days had reached their end. It was especially bitter to realize that my final appearance on a baseball field ended with the bat still on my shoulder, but dealing with this disappointment has made me stronger.

While those few weeks during my sophomore season seemed at the time like a sixteen year-old just playing some ball, I have since realized the extent to which they have shaped who I am today. As I grow older, it becomes clearer that even situations that once seemed minor have weighed heavily on my development. During that season, my experiences on the field, the lessons I learned from Coach M, and the support I received from my family all helped change my life for the better.

Kevin Ryan - November 8, 2007