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O WHAT does history teach us? Hopefully, we learn how to avoid making the same mistakes over and over again from one generation to another. When I think back to my own early professional experiences in athletic training, I shudder to recall the mistakes I made in my twenties.

One thing is certain. The number one priority for the National Athletic Trainers Association in May of 1972 was pretty much the same as it is today in 2008. Thirty-six years ago, I sat with my West Chester State College (PA) classmates on a beautiful spring day listening to a long-forgotten graduation speaker. In 1972, the NATA’s mission was to encourage us to go forth and preach the word to an uneducated world about who we were and what we did as athletic trainers. We spoke at local school board meetings on the value of hiring an athletic trainer, to local civic groups, to our own coaches, to athletes and their parents, to our physicians, to our politicians, and to anyone else who was willing to listen to our plea. Thirty-six years later, we find ourselves still doing the same things. Of course, there have been successes. Today’s athletic population has a better understanding of our value. Parents demand better care for their children. Yet, the public relations effort never ceases, and probably never will, as we continue to define our professional role to the public.

Just Getting Started

As a twenty-two year-old freshly-minted college graduate (1972), I landed a job as head athletic trainer, head baseball coach, and the youngest faculty member at a highly prestigious, private liberal arts college in upstate New York at an annual salary of $8,500 (I still have my original contract to show unbelieving graduate students). I arrived the first day at my Hamilton College office in a used VW beetle, where I noticed new BMW and Mercedes cars parked in front. I was thrilled to think that my new athletic department colleagues made enough salary to drive such expensive vehicles. Working at the collegiate level was going to be a good thing. Much to my disappointment, I learned that those cars actually belonged to students, and that my new coworkers’ cars were parked in a staff lot full of VW beetles like mine!

Lesson 1: You Don't Start at the Top

I would have to work many years, struggle, and grow professionally before even dreaming of such things. I always liked legendary West Point football coach Red Blaik’s book titled, You Have to Pay the Price. Like...
many others, I want a better world than the one we inherited for the next generation. Nothing dictates, however, that we have to hand the next generation a silver spoon. There is something to be said for hard work and looking back over a career that progressed from a humble beginning to something worthwhile. The greatest amount of self-satisfaction comes from a job done well under tough conditions. Military veterans recall their experiences during boot camp as the basis for a bond that held them together as a unit when facing adversity. I’ve listened with pride as former graduate assistant athletic trainers have “come alive” with a sense of accomplishment when telling stories of lean years when they learned life’s lessons under difficult circumstances. I have come to firmly believe the old adage that “adversity doesn’t build character, it reveals it.”

I am certainly a lot smarter today than when I started my career. Having hired approximately fifty graduate assistant athletic trainers from a wide variety of undergraduate education programs, I observed many young clinicians. A 4.0 grade point average or a “senior of the year” award does not take you very far in this profession if you do not have good interpersonal skills. I never fired a graduate assistant on the basis of inadequate technical knowledge. The BOC examination has proven its worth in this regard. Performance failures were always due to poor relationships with peers, coaches, administrators, or student-athletes.

Did you leave your job better than how you found it? What better way to describe a successful career than being able to answer the preceding question affirmatively. If we each accomplish this, we will have done much to advance the profession. My peers and I didn’t just mark time and accept our paychecks for three decades. This cuts to the very core of our purpose as athletic trainers, which I consider second only to our primary responsibility of providing high-quality healthcare for our patients.

Passion

Having a career is not the same thing as having a job. A wise football coach once described his long hours, stress, and uncertainty of success in the coaching profession to me as “it better be your vocation, not your avocation.” If you don’t know the difference between those two words, you had better go look them up. How can we work long hours, weekends, and nights without a passion for what we do? You can’t sustain a career in athletic training for very long without it. A lack of passion causes you to begin questioning why you are doing it. Passion sustains you and makes those long days worth the effort. Why would you invest your time, money, and sweat in something you choose to make your life’s work if you are not prepared to become engaged within your professional organization? You don’t have to agree with everything but you should work to make it better. I had a famous Emerson quotation above my desk for the first half of my career: “Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.”

Mentors and Founding Fathers

When I attended meetings of the Eastern Athletic Trainers Association and the National Athletic Trainers’ Association early in my career, I somehow gravitated to informal sessions of early athletic trainers, men like Otho Davis, Hobart’s Joe Abraham, Brown’s Frank George, Bowdoin’s Mike Linkovich, and many other Hall of Fame members. They all had a story to tell, and I never got tired of listening. These pioneers made up our first formal generation that followed the founding of the NATA in Kansas City in 1950. Twenty-two years later, I entered the workforce as a part of the “second generation.” Watching these giants of the profession work was pretty awe-inspiring to a neophyte. I listened to any tidbit or tip-from-the-field that I could somehow use, so as not to embarrass myself and show how little I really knew. My early self-preservation period helped me to avoid making a dumb mistake or stupid remark while I was learning from those with a wealth of experience. After all, they had been in the business long before I had entered the race and as the first generation of athletic trainers, they were the foundation on which the second generation built our careers.

I was very fortunate to go to a high school in the mid sixties that employed the original teacher/athletic trainer model. Dick Burkholder was my first experience on the receiving end of athletic training care at Carlisle High School in Pennsylvania. Even our arch-rival, Chambersburg High School, had a teacher/athletic trainer. Also located in Carlisle was Dickinson College, which employed NATA Hall of Fame member Bruce Vogelsong. Luckily my mother was the Dickinson athletic director’s secretary, and she introduced me to Mr. Vogelsong. I have never forgotten that first meeting. Mr. Vogelsong was treating a lone Dickinson athlete in a tiny closet of a room. It had a single table and