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Lessons from Soccer

When the snow melted, the plain scenery melted with it. The area acquired a new energy. As the energy passed through, it transformed the lifeless and colorless surroundings into a vibrant paradise. The trees became colorful with their blossoms. The rich fragrance of flowers filled the air. The birds added their voices to make a sweet harmony. Not only did the plants and animals come alive but the students were reborn. It was a day like this that we started playing soccer.

“I’m a forward,” Cade called out.

“I’ll a forward too!” exclaimed Taylor.

Positions were filling up rapidly. I didn’t want to be stuck as the goalie, so I shouted, “I’ll be a defender!” The enthusiasm rushed in our blood, through our bodies, and seemed to burst onto the field. The game began. But wait! “Aren’t we missing something?” I asked myself. “What about all the rules?”

In a flash, my mind went back several years when my cousins and I played soccer as kids. “Did we play by the rules? If so, what were they?” My mind was viciously and desperately looking for answers, analyzing every detail I could remember. Finally, what seemed like an eternity turned out to be a matter of seconds. I had found some rules. I opened the dusty box inside my brain labeled “soccer guide.” I didn’t have time to dust off the lid. Instead, I ripped the top off to see what information the box contained. To my surprise, there was only one sheet of paper. As I reached down to pick up the piece of paper, something didn’t feel right. Before I realized it, I was jerked back onto the soccer field. I was shocked and alarmed. Guys were running toward me with the ball. “What do I do?” I wanted to call a time out so I could read my

instructions first. Knowing that that wasn't going to happen I abandoned my box and focused on the ball.

Brad kicked the ball with his left foot, right foot, back to the left, and right past me. "Aren't you supposed to stop the guy with the ball? Yeah, I guess you're right. I should have done something. It's okay. You got it next time!" I reasoned with myself.

Once again the ball came towards me. "This is it," I reassured myself. Adam was dribbling the ball down the field, with the left foot, right foot, back to the left. I swung my leg hoping to make contact with the ball. I missed. Those who handled the ball seemed to glide effortlessly down the field guiding the ball wherever they wanted. It was proof that I didn't stand as an obstacle to them. For that reason, the opposing team kept running the ball to my side of the field for the remainder of the day.

The end of the day finally came. I started to walk home. As I walked, I could feel my tendons tighten up with every step. I looked down to see if anything was left of my legs. I saw what looked like muscle or at least some mass, but they didn't seem to feel right. I felt as though there was an overly stretched out rubber band attached from my hip to my foot, and it couldn't control anything in between. The energy I once had was evaporated. As I continued to walk I started talking to myself.

"How in the world could I get that ball?"

"Well, you could trip them." I mumbled.

"That's true, I could, but that wouldn't be very nice."

"Hmm, how about kicking them in the shin guard? It's there to protect them so it won't hurt too bad, but it would slow them down long enough to get the ball," I thought jokingly.

“No, just have patience. It’s only the first day!”

“Alright,” I agreed.

The next day came, and I was eager to do better than the day before. I arrived early so I had a little time to practice before everyone got there. I quickly stretched and ran on to the field. As I pulled my leg back to kick the ball, I felt my muscles reluctantly move to accommodate the movement. Though my muscles were stiff, I decided to kick the ball anyway. My foot made direct contact with the ball. It seemed as though I had just kicked a bowling ball. A shot of electricity passed through my leg making it completely numb. “Wow! I should have stretched more,” I told myself as I started to stretch more carefully. By the time I finished, most of the players had arrived.

“Hey Brett, do you want to be goalie today?” Taylor asked.

“Not really, I’ve never been a goalie and I don’t think I would be very good.” I replied.

“That’s okay, why don’t you start as the goalie and after a while we will switch you out with Tom,” Taylor insisted.

“Okay, I can try it out,” I answered halfheartedly. “Besides no one really gets too close to the goal, and if they do it’s not for very long,” I persuaded myself.

It didn’t take very long for the opposing team to score. One goal in particular became cemented in my mind. The defenders on my team were preoccupied with other players. Then, Matt broke free with the ball. I was the only thing between him and the goal. He swiftly and gracefully guided the ball right to the goal post. I stood there and watched him stop the ball, turn around, and kick it in backwards. It happened so quick that questions clouded my mind and paralyzed my body. My coach was as just as shocked as I was.

“Wow, that was pretty embarrassing,” she commented.

“Yeah, I’m used to it.” I replied.

Experiences like this filled the following weeks. Despite the dark and heavy chains of embarrassment and frustration, I felt there was still a little flame flickering inside. “Keep playing,” my mind continually encouraged me. Gradually, I started adding kindling to the flame. I studied other players and how they handled the ball in different situations. I asked teammates for advice and terminology. When I practiced, my skills at handling the ball improved considerably and the kindling turned into sticks. I was able to look up, dribble the ball, and pass to teammates. Suddenly, I started adding logs to the fire.

This became evident one hot afternoon. The sun’s rays beat on our faces until they were bright red. Occasionally, a light breeze would offer some relief as it pushed our sweat filled shirts against our bodies. The faint flavor of blood was evident in my mouth as exhaustion began to set in. Cade kicked the ball to me. I dribbled halfway down the field then quickly passed to Adam as I ran closer to the goal. “Cross!” I yelled. Adam kicked the ball across the field. It was a perfect pass. My heart skipped a beat as I kicked the ball toward the goal. After the ball left my foot, time seemed to almost stop. The ball headed for the corner of the goal in between the goal post and the Jake. Suddenly, my heart started to beat then pound violently. Will the ball hit the post, or will Jake block it with his out stretched arms? The ball slid past Jake’s fingertips into the goal net! I made my first goal. I started celebrating like I had just won the world championship. It never felt so good to play soccer than it was at that moment.

After I calmed down a little, a soft but powerful thought came affirming that I was a winner but not because I made a goal. Life has a funny way of teaching lessons especially when we least expect it. I’ve learned a couple of these unexpected but very valuable lessons in a big open field.