

HOW COACH MACK CHANGED MY LIFE

June 2013 and July 2014

The PostGame

I loved baseball from the start—but it didn't love me.

When I started in T-ball, I was so short that if the catcher put the tallest tee on the far corner of the plate, I couldn't reach the ball, only the middle part of the tee. Yes, I struck out—in T-ball.

Our first year of live pitching didn't go any better. One game we were beating the other team so badly, we were about to trigger the "Mercy Rule," and end the game. Coach Van pulled me in from my post in right field—where I kept company with the dandelions—and told me to pitch. I wasn't a pitcher—I wanted to be a catcher, like my hero Bill Freehan—but I'm thinking, "This is my chance." I walked three batters, but miraculously got three outs before they scored any runs. We won—and I figured that was my stepping stone to greater things.

I was surprised my dad wasn't as happy as I was. He knew better—but he didn't tell me until years later: Coach Van was not putting me in at pitcher to finish the game. He was putting me in to get shelled, so the game would keep going. He was hoping I would fail.

The next game, I went back to right field with my friends the dandelions, never to return to the infield the rest of the season. But when Coach Van and his family moved, our assistant coach, Mac Mackenzie, moved up to head coach—and my world changed almost overnight.

Coach Mack wore a baseball cap on his big, square head, with his big, square glasses. He looked tough, with a permanent squint and the underbite of a bulldog. When he was smashing ground ball after ground ball, sweat dripped off his pointy nose. He occasionally said the "s-word," which was novel then. We thought that was pretty cool.

He thought I was feisty, and funny. I can't say exactly why, but I could tell he wanted me to do well, and that he believed I would. Trust me, I was

no bigger, faster, or stronger than I was the previous season. But I had one thing I didn't have the year before: confidence. The effect was immediate, dramatic, and lifelong.

From the very first practice under Coach Mack, I started smacking the ball as if I'd been waiting years to do it—which I had been. Instead of playing back on my heels, hoping not to fail, I was up on my toes, swinging for the fences, eager to succeed.

Our first game that season he started me at catcher, and had me batting leadoff. I got two hits—the first of my life—and my teammates voted me captain.

I was on fire for baseball, playing some form of it every chance I had, whether it was a backyard game of "Pickle," "500," or home run derby. Didn't matter. I didn't *want* to play. I *needed* to play.

One Saturday morning practice was rained out. But, this being Michigan, the sun soon came out, so I biked down to our schoolyard to check it out. There were a few puddles here and there, but the biggest one was behind the plate, where I would be crouched, and it didn't look that bad to me.

I rushed home and called Coach Mack with my report. He told me if I made the phone calls, we'd have practice. After I convinced enough of my teammates to come down, I called Coach Mack, and his promise was good. We practiced, and I was in heaven.

After he'd hit ground balls to our third baseman, shortstop, second baseman, and first baseman, I'd say, "C'mon, Coach Mack—gimme one!" Meaning, bunt the ball, so I could scoop it up and throw the imaginary runner out at first.

He'd stare at me, break into a small, sidelong grin, and say, "There ya go," and tap one out just for me.

My newfound confidence proved to be transferrable. The next year I became a much better hockey player, too, and I don't need to tell you the central role sports have played in my life. But it all started with Coach Mack.

I've always been too dependent on my teachers, coaches, and bosses. When they don't believe in me, I don't go very far, but when they do, I'm capable of—well, more. And sometimes, much more. I'm sure this is why I've spent most of my adult life coaching and teaching on the side. I know how much difference it can make when you feel someone believes in you.

A couple years later, the MacKenzies moved to California. I have no idea where they are now. I don't even know if Coach Mack is still with us. But he's still with me.

July 2014 (One Year Later)

A couple days after I published the piece above, I got a full-page thank you letter from Coach Mack himself. Just getting it thrilled me, but his message was even better. It was direct, honest, and funny—just like the man himself.

He told me about his family, about moving to Scottsdale back in 1976, about his two bypass surgeries. In 1990, he received a heart transplant. He said he'd read my books and had every intention of writing years ago. But that day, when his wife found my story online, he was moved to write:

"I was blown away to see my name and the wonderful things that you had to say about me and my influence on you. I have had a very good and successful life with a few plaques, awards, and complimentary speeches given to me, but none compare to what you said and how you have honored me. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

I don't know if Coach Mack got choked up writing it, but I got choked up reading it. I promised him I'd write him a longer letter soon, and I fully intended to. But my fall filled up with a nationwide book tour, speeches, deadlines, and the class I was teaching on the side. I kept waiting to find enough time to write *The Perfect Letter*—and I kept waiting. I wrote down Coach Mack's name on my to-do list month after month.

On a Tuesday night in July 2014, a year after I wrote my story on Coach Mack, I was teaching my sports writing students at Northwestern University how to write a profile. I told them their subject doesn't have to be famous, it could even be a former little league coach. Then I spontaneously launched into my story of Coach Mack, right down to the sweat dripping off the tip of his nose while he smashed grounder after grounder to the infielders. I couldn't resist telling them how great it was to hear from Coach Mack—which provided just another reminder I still needed to write him. I scribbled his name down yet again that night.

The next day, I received an email from a friend of Coach Mack's, a man I'd never met before. He wrote, "We lost Mack yesterday."

This hit me harder than I had expected. After all, I didn't think he'd live forever, especially with a heart transplant. I was glad I'd written the story about him—and felt even better Coach Mack had read it and responded. But when I went back to read our correspondence, I was pained to realize I had never written him the longer letter I'd promised. I felt worse when I remembered he lived in Scottsdale. A couple months after he sent me his first letter, I was invited to give a speech in Scottsdale—and if I had kept in better touch, I would have put it together, invited Coach Mack to join us,

and he and I would have gone out afterward for a beer and told stories I would remember the rest of my life.

We don't have time to do everything we want to do. I realize that. And I'm lucky to have gotten back in touch with Coach Mack. I know that, too. But my regret was hard to shake. When I went for a run that day, around a few Little League baseball diamonds in Chicago, I wasn't ready for the tears streaming down from under my sunglasses.

After I drove back to my home in Ann Arbor on a beautiful summer night, right around our usual game time, I swung by our old schoolyard, where Coach Mack smacked those ground balls all those years ago. I was surprised to find the ball field had been replaced by a garden, with a shed in the middle of it. But when I crouched down into my old position, where home plate used to be, I could see it all—right down to Coach Mack, sweat dripping off his nose, tapping me another bunt to throw to first base.

Thanks, Coach. Sorry it took me so long to write.