Ron Zook at Florida was the first high profile head football coach to go down this Fall. By now, many more football coaches will have also changed or been changed, one way or another. This annual vocational bloodletting occurs either by them firing you (not enough wins fast enough, according to them), you pursuing a better position (seeking more pay and better work for yourself and your family), your being recruited away (others seeking more wins and a perceived better coach for themselves), your moving to other work (you finally ‘growing up’ and moving on to the adult real world of work), or you retiring (‘calling it a day’ because there is enough money to do so). Psychologists attribute these behavioral causes, or responses, to either an ‘internal’ or an ‘external’ source, or “locus” of control. So it is with pressure.

You have heard many coaches say, “all pressure is self induced.” Not really. More, perhaps in those high internally self-controlled men such as those who, for now, choose to be football coaches. These are people who thrive on being in the center of the storm. Pressure as used here is really an internal human anxiety response to factors in the work environment, a response to same. Did Pavlov’s dog salivate because of the food or the bell in Psychology 101? Remember Classic and Operant conditioning?

There was always pressure in the coaching world. What has changed are the external forces in the larger environment which influence whether or not the observers of the game are satisfied with what they perceive to be the coaches job performance and his role in winning, for “their” team. You see, others beyond you now take more ownership of the team you coach than ever before due to the various electronic mediums available to show it. It is more theirs than ever before. The legacy programs like Penn State and Alabama are gone, I fear. So are the Bobby Bowdens and the Joe Paternos of the profession going the way of the albatross. Fans and owners like parity, or uncertainty of outcome as a business strategy. It sells. It also ends careers. Coaches must not be anxious about this.

Whether it is boosters, faculty, alumni, fans or media, the folks Teddy Roosevelt called “those cold and timid souls who have tasted neither victory or defeat” are increasingly responsible for the coach’s retention because they vote with their aggregate ticket prices and emails. ADs and Presidents answer to this. Football, whether we like it or not, is increasingly part of the entertainment business. The only real difference between modern TV football and the entertainment product is delivered and priced. Save that analysis for another discussion.

For a coach to minimize this ‘pressure,’ contemporary coaches might take an object lesson from Coach Gaines, played so well by Billy Bob Thornton in “Friday Night Lights.” When confronted in various settings by the small town of Odessa, Texas boosters about winning everything and going to take the state title, he just shrugs, says little and goes back to his projector or team. Focus on those things that you can control, to some degree, at least, and ignore that which
you can not. St. Francis of Assisi taught us this in his prayer “to change that which I can change, not worry about that which I can not change, and to have the wisdom to know the difference.” Coaches can not control what fools will do on the internet to get them fired. Focus on your football team.

Sports psychologists call this ‘attenuation’ or focusing on those things that matter in terms of obtaining results. Reading what the newspaper says about you is counter-productive. Stay focused on what you can do, or as one of your coaches might have told you in youth baseball, “keep your eye on the ball” and do not be distracted by the cat-calls of the infielders. The top performers in the Olympics have an excellent ability to focus on the task at hand and to not be distracted by the noise in the arena.

It does not matter much but the root cause of much of this change in football coaching as a career is a result of what I have coined, “the monetization of modern sport,” a sport sociology phenomenon. As modern culture moves more and more toward materialism and consumption in the pursuit of the “good life”, this condition is just likely to get worse. The best thing for us to do as coaches is to simply adjust to this reality and to adapt to it. Money has a way of ruining human relationships, which is a Biblical idea, so just know that if you are in coaching for the players, you are in it for the right reasons. Just keep your head down and serve those players. They will take care of you too by performing as well as you have taught them to play. Results have a way of taking care of themselves if the human intentions have been honorable. Just be a good leader.

Whether you coach in the NFL, at DI-A, D2, JC or in high school, all football coaches have much in common. This game is about motivating through teaching and leading a group of young men through their personal rites of passage into their brave new worlds of life. You will make a lasting imprint on those lives that you touch which they will remember forever. The pay and the stadiums sizes may be different, but the pomp, the color and the accolades remain the same. So do the lessons you teach, which are salient.

As Grantland Rice so aptly observed decades ago, “when the one great Scorer comes to write against your name, He will not ask whether you won or lost, but how you played the game.” Teach this and the results will take care of themselves. You will always be able to find honest work coaching because some other coach who knows you and what you stand for will hire you to help him, that is, if your own ego does not get in the way. The NFL is filled with former head coaches teaching young players how to play and win. Just make a player you coach a better kid, every day, just as you would want someone to do for your child. This is the Golden Rule of being a coach and a teacher.

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