LESSON 6

"WIN THE DAY"

Don't Show Up to Win; Show Up to Compete

Champions behave like champions before they're champions: they have a winning standard of performance before they are winners.

—BILL WALSH

What we can do as coaches is just love our players, have them compete as hard as humanly possible, and have joy in the process.

—CINDY TIMCHAL

The year was 1995, and Cindy Timchal knew a little something was missing from her Maryland Terps women's lacrosse program. Timchal had already established her reputation as a top coach at Northwestern University, and in 1992, her second year as head coach at Maryland, the Terps had won the second NCAA title in program history. They had come agonizingly close in subsequent years to winning another title, and Timchal knew that to become more than a one-time champion, something had to change. That something was not simply wanting to win a championship. Everyone they played wanted

to win. They needed a competitive advantage, an identity and a way of doing things day after day that led to continual improvement and an edge that would see them through any situation. They had to take the focus off winning a title and turn it to something that would be within their control. They had to start, in her words, "Winning the day."

"You don't become a championship player or team simply by wanting to win," says Timchal, who currently coaches at the United States Naval Academy. "You step out onto the field every single day that you have an opportunity to practice and get better to win the day and to play as champions. When the whistle blew, we wanted to win, but it was more than that. We wanted to really prove how hard we work, how tough we are, how much we work together, and how much we love each other. And by doing that, the scoreboard should reflect all that love that we have for each other on the field."

Timchal, along with her assistant coach Gary Gait and sports psychologist Dr. Jerry Lynch, knew that they needed to find a way to compete every single day at every single moment. They knew that winning would be a byproduct of these marginal gains, compounded daily, and if they could create that type of culture and recruit players who would thrive in such a competitive atmosphere, the wins would take care of themselves. Their own practices needed to be the most competitive part of the week. Their own scrimmages needed to be the toughest games they played all season. They could not rely on their opponents to raise the bar; they had to raise it in house.

And raise the bar they did. From 1995 to 2001, the Maryland Terps women's lacrosse program won every single NCAA Championship, tying John Wooden's Division I record for consecutive championships at seven. "It's tough work, holding people accountable," says Timchal. "Holding your own teammates accountable isn't easy. It's not easy to demand of each other. We get players to buy in to the culture, how hard they work, and for something that is far greater than themselves. We may come up short. But we, in our hearts, know that we've put it all

out on the line and given it all we've got, so we can walk away feeling like okay, no regrets. There's zero regrets when you create a culture of giving to each other."

Timchal and her staff raised the bar by creating a "win the day" culture in the Maryland lacrosse program, one she has since replicated at the Naval Academy, which in 2017 became the first female team from a service academy to reach an NCAA Final Four. To date she has over five hundred wins and eight NCAA titles. She creates a culture that sets high daily standards and forces players to show up focused, engaged, and ready to compete. There is a high level of technical and tactical knowledge being passed on, without question. But there is something much more than that. They show up to compete, while others show up to win. And that makes a huge difference.

This chapter is all about creating a competitive, "win the day" culture in your program. To do so, we will cover three basic principles:

- Don't show up to win; show up to compete
- *Sisu*, the Finnish word for continuing to act in the face of repeated failures and extreme odds
- *Kaizen*, the principle of marginal gains and continuous improvement

Here we go!

Don't Show Up to Win; Show Up to Compete

In a 2009 story in *Esquire* magazine, then USC Football coach Pete Carroll was asked about his unorthodox energy and way of coaching. He told a crowd of program supporters that after being fired by the New England Patriots in 1999, he decided to study legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden. Wooden, of course, is known for being the quintessential winner, but he didn't win his first championship until his sixteenth year of coaching. That's when it hit Carroll. "It hit me just

like I got punched right in the forehead! Once (Wooden) got it, he just nailed it. Once he figured out what was right for him, how to engineer his program in the way that best exemplified his philosophy, nobody could touch him. He wins nine of the next eleven championships, and then he retires, just goes off into basketball heaven. How beautiful is that?"

Carroll continued, "I asked myself: What is my philosophy? What is my approach? And I came up with the thought that if I was going to describe me, the first thing I'd say is I'm a competitor. Just one simple line: I'm a competitor. That's my whole life since I was three, four years old. I tried to beat my big brother in every game we played. All of his friends would just laugh at how hard I'd try. I'd be fighting and scratching and crying and whatever it took, from the time I was a little kid. Reading Wooden, I realized, if I'm gonna be a competitor, if I'm ever going to do great things, I'm going to have to carry a message that's strong and clear, and nobody's going to miss the point ever about what I'm all about."

Next, Carroll explained to the assembled crowd that he was inspired by Jerry Garcia, front man for the Grateful Dead. "Jerry Garcia said that he didn't want his band to be the best ones doing something. He wanted them to be the only ones doing it. To be all by yourself out there doing something that nobody else can touch—that's the thought that guides me, that guides this program: We're going to do things better than it's ever been done before in everything we do, and we're going to compete our ass off. And we're gonna see how far that takes us."[1]

If there was a way to teach winning, a secret formula, don't you think everyone would teach it? Of course they would. But there is not. What people like Pete Carroll have figured out is that you don't show up to win. You show up to compete every day, and the winning eventually takes care of itself. As Dr. Jerry Lynch and I teach the teams that we work with, those who show up to win are:

- Focused on outcomes;
- Focused on uncontrollables (officials, weather, opponents);
- Tight, tentative, and tense; and
- Lacking confidence because so many things are out of control.

Showing up to win is *not* a performance enhancer. It harms your performance because you lose sight of the process. On the other hand, showing up to compete means a player is

- Focused on the process and all the little things it takes to get better;
- In control of the controllables and responding appropriately to everything as it happens;
- Calm and relaxed; and
- Playing with increased confidence.

Showing up to compete is *the* performance enhancer. It increases confidence because you have turned all your attention onto the things you control and off those things you cannot control. And the more often you show up to compete, the more marginal gains you make.

Sisu and the UNC Competitive Cauldron

In his book *Atomic Habits*, author James Clear recounts the story of the Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1939 and 1940. On November 30, 1939, the Soviets invaded Finland, dropping bombs on the capital of Helsinki and plunging Finland into World War II. Four hundred and fifty thousand troops marched upon the Finnish border, and six thousand tanks and four thousand planes bore down upon the vastly outnumbered and outgunned Finns. But while the Finns only had thirty-two tanks and 114 aircraft, they had something the Soviets did not: *Sisu*.

As Clear writes, "*Sisu* is a word that has no direct translation, but it

refers to the idea of continuing to act even in the face of repeated failures and extreme odds. It is a way of living life by displaying perseverance even when you have reached the end of your mental and physical capacities … It is a type of mental toughness that allows you to bear the burden of your responsibilities, whatever they happen to be, with a will and perseverance that is unbreakable. It is the ability to sustain your action and fight against extreme odds. *Sisu* extends beyond perseverance. It is what you rely on when you feel like you have nothing left."

Fighting in brutally cold temperatures and outnumbered nearly three to one, the Finns wore down the Soviets, who, by March of 1940, had suffered three hundred and fifty thousand casualties, forcing them to sign the Moscow Peace Treaty, ending their advance against Finland. "We will all face moments when our physical and mental resources feel tapped out," writes Clear. "There will always be times when we are hammered with failure after failure and are called to find a fire within. And perhaps even more frequently, there will be many moments when we want to achieve something, but it feels as if we face incredibly long odds. In those moments, you have to call on your *Sisu*."[2]

I love this concept of *Sisu* as it applies to creating a "win the day" culture. How many of our teams want to achieve something great, but we face extremely long odds? That happens all the time. Everyone wants to win at game time on Saturday. But does your team want to win and do the things it takes to be successful six months prior to Saturday, to show up again and again and create such a high standard that the results take care of themselves? This is when we have to find that fire within and create a place where, even on their bad days, our athletes are still competing at a very high level.

The University of North Carolina women's soccer program has their own version of *Sisu*. They call it the competitive cauldron, and it has led to unprecedented success. Under Head Coach Anson Dorrance, the Tar Heels women's soccer program has won twenty-two overall national titles and twenty-one NCAA Championships. His teams have

won over one thousand games, and many of his former players are amongst a who's who of women's soccer history. But to understand the true legacy of excellence Dorrance has established at North Carolina, one only needs to read a quote from another all-time great coach. In an interview with *Football News Magazine* in 1997 about UNC football's top-ranking, legendary UNC Basketball Coach Dean Smith was asked what it was like having another UNC program other than basketball ranked number one. "This is a women's soccer school," said Smith. "We are just trying to keep up with them."

At UNC, Dorrance and his team of coaches and graduate assistants make everything competitive and record the results of every activity, from one versus one games to fitness tests and full-field scrimmages. Everything is posted on a bulletin board for everyone to see. There is no hiding in the UNC women's soccer competitive cauldron. One way Dorrance has found to up the ante is by creating competition among what he calls the "small societies" in a team.

"I went on a tour of this fabulous facility in Argentina," Dorrance told me. "One of my favorite moments on the tour was to go through their main lobby area, and they had a great world championship coach by the name of Cesar Luis Menotti, and they had a quote from him that said the greatest teams in the world are teams where the field is riddled with collections of small societies. I asked my interpreter what this meant, and he was telling me that the way you form a great team is by the relationships that each of the people on the field have with each other."

Dorrance loved this idea and seeks to build those relationships by creating competitions between the small societies on his teams. "The left side of my team will play the right side of my team. The front line will play against the defense. We pair offensive midfielders with their defensive midfield counterparts. You can set up all these battles where you're forming these societies, and, for us, the chemistry between all these different platforms and small groups can have the biggest impact on our success on the field."

One of the greatest representatives of the competitive culture Dorrance seeks to create at Carolina was April Heinrichs. The 1986 graduate was a two-time national player of the year and also captained the US Women to the 1991 World Cup Championship. She later coached the US Women to the 2004 Olympic gold medal. The thing about Heinrichs that Dorrance loved was her competitive nature. "April Heinrichs, for me, was the consummate competitor, and I loved her," gushed Dorrance. "I loved everything about the way she competed. She competed without remorse, and that was the culture I wanted to build, basically collections of Heinrichs just competing like there's no tomorrow, which improves everyone." This is the key for Dorrance. When Heinrichs was a freshman at UNC, some of the upperclassmen complained that she was relentless and wondered what he was going to do about competitive nature. In Dorrance's mind, he had an idea. "All I was thinking was, *What are we going to do about her? How about we clone her!*'"

Dorrance also realized that in order to create a culture of relentless competitors, he also had to protect a player like Heinrichs. "I always pointed to her as an example of the way I wanted all of them to compete. If we value the competitive firebrand of a player, then we have to protect them because they're not going to be the players that are going to be universally embraced in most cultures. We have to protect these extraordinary competitors and then try to get the culture to be more like them. My model in those early environments when we were shaping the US national team was Heinrichs because she was ruthless in the most positive way. She wanted to win everything. It wasn't like there was a huge talent disparity between her and everyone else. We had some phenomenal players back then, but the quality that she brought every single time was she was going to win, and then all of a sudden you have these collisions between all of these great competitive personalities."

Timchal has had her share of Heinrich-type competitors over the years and continues to create the "win the day" mentality at the US Naval Academy. Timchal uses what she calls the "never, nevers,"

a concept that she and Lynch came up with years ago and he wrote about in his recent book aptly titled *Win the Day*. The "never, nevers" are as follows:

- Never give up, no matter what the score or situation.
- Never lose confidence by focusing on outcomes. Focus on controllables instead.
- Never let an opponent defeat your spirit, identity, or culture.
- Never be afraid of mistakes or losing as they are the greatest teachers.
- Never try to go too big; instead, do all the little things well over and over.
- Never fail to respond to a mistake with IPR (immediate, positive response).
- Never whine or create drama unnecessarily.[3]

"Win the Day," writes Lynch, "means coaches and athletes control what they can and let go of outcomes and results … it is about the physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental preparation and doing the little important things brilliantly in the present moment, rather than the big things marginally in the future. It's all about 'what's important now' (WIN)."[4]

Kaizen and the Aggregation of Marginal Gains

In August 2004, the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team was down and out, thrashed by South Africa forty to twenty-six and reeling from their elimination from the TriNations Tournament championship. The team management, along with leading players Richie McCaw and Tana Umaga, settled into a three-day leadership meeting to right the ship. They did not discuss tactics and technique so much as they discussed the culture of the All Blacks and the need to put a stop to the excessive drinking and partying that was dragging the group down. The

three-day meeting was later called by coach Graham Henry the most important three days of his career, for in those three days the group was specifically talking about a word that would lead to a period of unmatched success in world sport: *kaizen*.

The word *kaizen* is a Japanese word for "change for the better" and has become synonymous with the idea of continuous improvement. For the All Blacks, "Kiwi Kaizen" was the relentless pursuit of getting 1 percent better in one hundred different ways. From sleep to nutrition to how they select players and whom they invite into their culture, the All Blacks recognized that pursuing small gains in many areas would compound over time. They recognized that fighting back the instinctual drive to focus on outcomes and to be completely focused upon the process instead was the path to righting the ship.

Finally, they recognized that doing all the little things day after day, month after month, would aggregate. Small improvements are not necessarily noticeable on the day or over a week, but over time they become big things. By the same token, taking it a bit easy one day or training without focus or intensity will not break your team. But over time, those 1 percent declines start to add up as well, and pretty soon there is a massive gap between those who sought 1 percent improvement daily and those who allowed themselves to be less than the best version of themselves.

This is what we mean when we speak about the aggregation of marginal gains. In the words of author James Kerr, "Marginal gains are 100 things done 1 percent better to deliver cumulative competitive advantage." So, how have those marginal gains worked for the All Blacks? Since 2004, they have become the first ever back-to-back World Cup champions (2011 and 2015) and won 92 percent of their games heading into the 2019 World Cup, where they fell in the semifinals. *Kaizen* makes a difference.

The idea of marginal gains has become a popular one lately. It is all about accountability and the willingness of coaches and teammates to hold everyone accountable to the same standards that drive those 1

percent gains. Many people do not like to be held accountable or called out when they are not bringing 100 percent focus or effort. But when you don't make those tough coaching decisions or you look the other way, it sends a message. That which you don't condemn you condone. And people take notice when you let your best player give less than his very best or choose not to call out a top performer for a poor attitude. Changing behavior and making marginal gains is not easy, and it takes a lot of time. That is why the quickest way to do it, and the only way to do it, is to do it every day.

Activities to Establish a Competitive Culture in Your Program

Use Shorter Duration, Higher Intensity Activities

One of the things many of the top coaches I have spoken to have told me is that far too many teams go too easy on the hard days and too hard on the easy days. When they are recovering post competition, perhaps practice should be at a 50 percent maximum physical exertion as your marginal gains that day are to rebuild muscle and prepare for the hard days ahead. When they are fully recovered and three or four days out from a match, training should probably be 100 percent exertion if you are going to stretch your athletes physically and technically. Yet too many teams don't go all out on the hard days and go too hard on the easy ones. And pretty soon, every day turns into a 75 percent exertion, which is not a way to optimize performance. You never train at a high enough intensity to truly improve, and you never train at a low enough level to recover. You coast along, never stretching and never fully recovering, and eventually those who do it right pass you by.

In the fall of 2018, I conducted a coaching clinic with Garga Caserta, the strength and conditioning coach for the Portland Thorns of the National Women's Soccer League. The Thorns were the 2017 league champions and in 2018 fell in the championship game. One

of the secrets to their success and continuous improvement, believes Caserta, has been shorter duration of higher intensity activities. When Head Coach Mark Parsons was hired in 2015, he sat down with Caserta and showed him video clips of how he wanted to play. They were clips of a high tempo, high pressing style that would require a high level of fitness and athleticism. Parsons also knew that you could not roll out a ball and play eleven vs. eleven for sixty minutes on day one and expect that level of intensity. So, they started small.

Their first full-sided matches of pre-season would last four minutes. Four minutes! But in those four minutes, Parsons would demand a level of intensity that was extremely high. Once they could play at the requisite level, they would stretch the games to five minutes and so on. Now, of course, a ninety-minute soccer game has ebbs and flows, and you cannot play at the same intensity level for ninety minutes as you can for four, but the idea was that he wanted them to feel what their highest level of exertion felt like. He wanted to stretch them and ensure they did not hold back. Play four minutes the right way and you earn the right to play five. Play intensely for five minutes and you earn the right to play six. I have found this to be a very effective way to up the intensity level of my practices: short durations of high intensity games. When players know that games are not infinite, it creates urgency and effort.

Play "Last Goal Wins"

I also like to play games where it's "last goal wins." That way, even if a team is up two or three goals, they cannot just coast to the finish line, and the team that is losing still has a chance to pull it out. This creates situations where winning groups learn how to manage a game and see it out, and losing teams learn how to throw numbers forward and fight till the end. Throw in a couple of iffy "refereeing" calls from the coach as well and you can create more game-like adversity and intensity as well.

Establish Your Team Values and Your "Never, Nevers"

Come up with your own list of "never, nevers," similar to Navy lacrosse, and build team values and a culture that promotes relentless competitiveness (see lesson 13 for more on this).

Summary

If you are going to take your athletes to a place they have never been before and won't get to on their own, then you are going to have to create a culture and an environment where they are going to compete like crazy, just as coaches such as Pete Carroll, Cindy Timchal, and Anson Dorrance have. To do so, try the following:

- Don't show up to win; show up to compete and let the winning happen by itself.
- Teach them about *sisu* and the need to be unrelenting, even in the face of extreme obstacles.
- Establish your own "never, nevers" for your program.
- Teach them about *kaizen* and how continuous, small improvements add up over time into huge gains.
- Start small and compete at a very high intensity over short periods of time, gradually building the length of those activities once your athletes are able to compete at the requisite level.
- Manipulate the games and add adversity through bad officiating decisions or "last goal wins" games to keep them competing until the end.
- Ensure your team goes hard enough on the hard days and easy enough on the easy days.

If you want your team and your athletes to compete successfully on game day, then they must compete like crazy in training. Help them consolidate around an identity that makes practice their hardest days of the week. Compete like crazy, and see where that takes you.