

Preventing Family Violence and Promoting Healthy Relationships with Major League Baseball

I have loved the game of baseball my whole life.

I grew up watching Cubs games in the 1960's on WGN TV in Chicago with my mother Marion Gault and my bubbie Goldie Ferber, hoping against hope that our Cubs could win it all. While this did not happen in either of their lifetimes, I still hope...

In 1991, my dearest friend Russell Lederman took me to two World Series games in Minneapolis. In the bottom of the eighth inning of game two, the game winning home run ball, hit by Twins rookie Scott Leius, landed in my seat. As soon as I picked it up, I knew I would give him the ball, as my belief in the sacredness of the game told me that he had to have the ball he had hit at this most incredible moment of his career. All I asked of him in return was to have my son meet him -- in retrospect a funny thought, as my son Sam was four years old at the time and had no interest in or understanding of the game. But it allowed me to reach an unimaginable achievement for a young father: having my son meet a real Major League Baseball player.

This story is written in memory of my Mom and Bubbie and Russell, for all of us who love the game of baseball, and for each of us as we continue to seek and accept the challenge and grace of living our lives with dignity, care, and love. My lifelong relationships with the people I love, and doing the work which I describe in this paper, has helped me to learn more about baseball through life, and more about life through baseball. Three key lessons:

- As we work to live and promote healthy and peaceful lives, I think we can learn from the grace and skill, as well as the perseverance and humility needed to succeed over time in baseball.
- In life, as in baseball, past "failures" don't necessarily assure or predict future ones -- only giving up on ourselves and others can do that.
- Healthy relationships and great baseball may be more alike than we might think, in the degree to which they require practice, patience, and forgiveness.

Background

I worked for Saint Paul - Ramsey County Public Health from 1987-2016. For most of that time I managed the department's Healthy Communities Section, with my own work focused on developing and implementing innovative strategies to prevent family, community and workplace violence. Following my retirement from the County in early 2016, I have started a new organization, Building Peaceful Community, in the hope of continuing these efforts locally and nationally.

Also, since the early 1990's I have had the privilege of knowing and working with Gretchen Stein, President and CEO of Sand Creek Group, an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that provides exemplary EAP services nationwide, including to the Office of the Commissioner of Major League Baseball (MLB), a number of major league teams, and minor league teams nationwide.

Consultation on Development of MLB Policy

In June of 2015 Sand Creek was invited to meet with MLB's top legal, human resources, labor relations, health and safety, and communications staff to provide input into new policy and training requirements for the league concerning interpersonal and sexual violence prevention and response. Gretchen invited me to consult with Sand Creek both in meeting with the commissioner's key staff, as well as in developing and providing subsequent trainings for teams covered through Sand Creek's EAP program.

During the meeting at the Commissioner's Office, we combined Sand Creek's experience providing EAP services to baseball players and team staff (and myriad other employment settings) with violence prevention approaches developed during my work and time with Ramsey County. Key recommendations that we offered to MLB included:

- Starting with the assumption that most people in the baseball world and beyond want to practice healthy, nonviolent relationships with their loved ones -- that violence generally occurs when people feel powerless and stressed, and is less a conscious choice than a reaction to these challenging moments in our lives.
- Building prevention into MLB's policy and procedures by offering players, staff, and their families encouragement and tools to practice healthy, nonviolent relationships including promotion of EAP services, as well as intentionally modeling healthy relationships in the workplace.
- Taking a Restorative Justice approach to incidents of violence and abuse among players, staff, and families -- offering help and opportunities for amends to be made and for people to heal, restart, and continue their lives together when this outcome is safe and desired by all affected parties.
- Avoiding a "zero tolerance" approach, out of concern that such a strategy would make it more difficult and less likely for people in need of help with their relationships to come forward, for fear of losing their livelihoods and public/community respect.

In our discussion, the MLB leadership staff we met with seemed to be largely receptive to, and on board with, most of these ideas. At the same time, they needed to develop policy and procedures that would be accepted by political leaders, MLB players, and a public who expect MLB and other sports leagues to hold players and staff "accountable" for their actions. (Frequently, taking a Restorative Justice approach, as in seeking healing and growth after acts of family violence, is seen as "going soft on perpetrators" by politicians and many in the public and family violence intervention field.)

I believe the final policy (link below), announced soon after our meeting, did an excellent job of balancing and respecting the multiple interests and viewpoints surrounding these volatile and emotional issues, and laid the framework for responsible and effective family violence prevention and response initiatives on the part of MLB:

<http://m.mlb.com/news/article/144508842/mlb-mlbpa-agree-on-domestic-violence-policy>

Training with MLB Coaches, Trainers, Scouts, and Front Office/Team Leadership and Field Staff

Between June, 2015-April, 2016 I worked with Sand Creek staff to provide violence prevention training to team owners, staff and stadium employees in three major league cities, as well as to coaches, scouts, trainers, and minor league players at spring training in Arizona. The trainings, ranging in time from 60-90 minutes as prescribed by the Commissioner's Office, were built on the principles that had been offered to MLB leadership outlined above. In total, about 700 people from four teams participated in these league-mandated trainings.

Training sessions were designed to:

- be highly interactive, as opposed to lecture format;
- be based on the principle of Appreciative Inquiry, focusing more on what we seek -- healthy, positive relationships -- than strictly focusing on the problem of violence;
- offer clear awareness and understanding of healthy relationships and key factors that can lead to conflicts and violence in intimate partner and parenting relationships; and
- engage participants in brainstorming strategies to prevent and de-escalate potential violence and harm themselves, and be aware of and utilize the wide range of EAP services available through Sand Creek when additional help is needed.

Content and discussion items included:

- a working definition of violence;
- ways that violence in families, communities, and workplaces can occur;
- data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on the incidence and impacts of interpersonal violence in the United States;
- perspectives on why people act out violently, harming ourselves and those we love;
- development of individual and collective calls to action to promote healthy relationships and de-escalate situations of potential conflict and violence; and
- connection to a range of free and confidential resources offered to players, coaches, team staff and their families through Sand Creek, to help prevent and get through difficult personal and professional challenges and to maintain and/or rebuild healthy relationships.

These training sessions provided a number of challenges, including the fact that they were mandated trainings on domestic violence prevention, which is probably not high on the list of desired training for most people at work. In addition, each training session presented significant logistical problems, including:

- facilitating interactive discussions with groups ranging from 50-100+ people, larger than ideal for this purpose;
- squeezing our trainings in between numerous competing events including baseball games and more traditional baseball-related training; and
- the remarkable stress of the game itself, including avoiding and dealing with injuries and slumps, players trying to make and remain on the team, and stadium staff working with thousands of people and families on game days.

In spite of all of these obstacles, it was our experience as trainers that participants were remarkably engaged and interested in learning and talking about healthy relationships. (The one exception to this statement was when 150+ minor league players were crammed into a room

that would comfortably hold half that number for a 7:00 PM training, after having been out on the spring training field all day in the baking Arizona sun starting before 7:00 AM that day. While it might be a stretch to call that audience "remarkably engaged and interested," given these very challenging circumstances the participants stayed with us as best they could.)

At the end of each training session, participants were asked to fill out an evaluation providing feedback on what they had learned, how they would use and act on this information, and what could have been done to make the training experience better. Each time, the evaluations showed a remarkable depth of thought and interest in these often difficult topics, and a genuine desire to treat their families and one another with respect and caring, as demonstrated in the following sample responses.

Voices from Coaches, Trainers, and Scouts --Spring Training, 2016

What are the most important things you learned today?

- *How to manage and control your temper*
- *Going above the red line, which may only last a few moments in time, can have lifelong consequences*
- *To not define a person by their actions at their worst moments*
- *Self control - how to calm down to act and react in stressful situations*
- *The 4 key conditions that are common with abusive adults*
- *The meaning & intent of the word discipline. That had a big impact on my mindset, and will impact the way I deal with my children.*
- *How to channel stress, take time to cool off*
- *All relationships need to continue to be worked on*
- *Forgiveness and not reacting right away. Take time before reacting.*
- *Understanding getting to that boiling point, Learn to calm yourself*
- *(EAP) Programs are easy & confidential*
- *Clearing your head and speaking/acting with a clear/calm mind. Working at being better every day and not expecting perfection*

What next steps do you plan to take to promote healthier, more peaceful interactions and relationships in your personal and/or professional life?

- *To give athletes in stressful situations a sense of belonging and some perspective on self-awareness*
- *Talk more to friends and family; Get help for some family members*
- *Work on things and take a step back when I get to that breaking point*
- *Continue to see others for who they can be rather than who they are in the moment. They are not their performance.*
- *Learn my tipping point and learn what I can do to control a stressful situation*
- *Take more of an interest and reflection with those I care about. Continue to be more open minded*
- *Speak to my wife & children more when I begin to feel stress about things*
- *Step back and think before I act*
- *Communicate better with people. Focus on teaching*
- *Understand and try to know my co-worker better*
- *Discuss stressors. Find ways to decompress. Breathe - calm down before acting*
- *Communication. Defuse situations before they become an issue.*
- *Stepping away from situations before they reach a tipping point. Clearing my head*

What could have been done to improve today's discussion, and what additional resources would be useful to you based on today's discussion?

- *More discussion*
- *Good presentation, good mix of stories with information*
- *Better location with less outside noise*
- *More time*
- *More about understanding emotions*

What We Accomplished and Learned, and Next Steps

The past year has provided me the unique opportunity of combining my years of developing and implementing innovative violence prevention approaches with my love of the game of baseball. A common theme with being a lifelong Cubs fan and working for decades on primary prevention family violence is that both endeavors must be built on hope and genuine possibility, which sometimes seem to fly in the face of apparent evidence.

Because my violence prevention work is built on the Public Health principle of Primary Prevention, i.e. working to prevent violence before it occurs, these efforts are developed on an assumption that, at our core, humans are connected and seek peace and health in our intimate relationships. While there is empirical backing for this premise (for example, see *A General Theory of Love* by Drs. Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, and *Lost Boys* by Dr. James Garbarino), given the frequency and tragedy of family violence in our country and worldwide, let alone war, racism and all other forms of oppression today and for centuries, this viewpoint sometimes feels, even to me, like a stretch.

The remarkable opportunity of working with the leadership of MLB and hundreds of baseball team employees, coaches, trainers, scouts, and minor league players and Sand Creek has reinforced and strengthened my belief that, for the most part, we humans strive for and genuinely want to live and practice healthy, loving family and intimate relationships.

- While offered under challenging circumstances described previously, the vast majority of the 700+ participants in the league-mandated family violence trainings we provided at three major league stadium sites in 2015 and at spring training in 2016 were attentive, engaged, and genuinely interested in discussing and learning about healthy relationships. The depth of thought and feeling shared in training discussions, post-training evaluations, and follow-up conversations was truly remarkable.
- I believe that the consistent, highly positive evaluation results received indicate that participants appreciated the interactive, hopeful, and positive "Appreciative Inquiry" approach taken in which we intentionally avoided shaming and blaming participants and/or the people they love, as well as the reminder of the great range of services available to them and their families through the Sand Creek EAP.
- To my mind, the response of people throughout Major League Baseball to the problem of family violence demonstrates a sincere, genuine commitment that flies in the face of what I believe to be unfair and unfounded public perceptions of privileged, uncaring athletes. My experience was that we uniformly met and worked with men and women who deeply care about their families and friendships and try their best to balance these relationships with the inherent stress of playing a beautiful but incredibly difficult game, often removed from their families and support systems for much if not most of the year.

Major League Baseball has accepted the challenge and opportunity of working to prevent, and most appropriately and effectively respond to, the problem of family violence. It is my honor and true privilege to be a part of this work. Our early results have reinforced my belief that people can live together peacefully and respectfully, and increased my lifelong appreciation and love for the game of baseball.

Postscript: Learning More About Baseball Through Life, and More About Life Through Baseball

Postscript #1:

Being invited to a meeting at the Commissioner of Baseball's Office was, and will always be, a career and life highlight. The walls are paneled in wood similar to that used to make baseball bats, and conference rooms are separated by floor to ceiling glass etched with single season and lifetime individual and team achievements and records. Among other things, I learned:

- Ty Cobb holds the record for highest lifetime batting average in the game. Over 24 years of playing, he compiled a .367 batting average; the next highest is Rogers Hornsby at .359. Few players over the history of baseball have hit for this high an average in a single season, let alone over the course of a long career.
- Cy Young won more games than any other pitcher in the game. His lifetime record is 511 wins and 316 losses, a winning percentage of .618.
- The 1906 Cubs (!) are tied for the best single season won-lost record: 116 wins and 36 losses, a .763 winning percentage.

As I took in the majesty and history of the game in that amazing place, it occurred to me that as great as Cobb and Young and my Cubs of yesteryear were, constant failure, too, is inherent in the game of baseball. Ty Cobb made an out almost twice as often as got a hit; Cy Young lost four out of every 10 games he got a decision in; the 1906 Cubs lost about one quarter of their games in that record-setting season.

I believe that just as we cannot and do not expect perfection from the best ball players and teams, we cannot and should not expect perfection from others, nor ourselves, in our personal relationships. Ball players must learn to accept imperfection and mistakes, and try to do better in the next game or at bat. As we work to live and promote healthy and peaceful lives, I think we can learn from the grace and skill, as well as the perseverance and humility needed to succeed over time in baseball.

Postscript #2:

The 2015 World Series took place in between the time of our first set of trainings in the summer of 2015 and our work at spring training in the spring of 2016. Perhaps because of this I was more aware than I might have been of the incredible pressure all of the players and teams were under, and how incredibly well they handled it.

In particular, there was one inning when a Royals pitcher was trying to hold off the Mets in a close game. With runners on base and a dangerous hitter at the plate, the pitcher threw two

pitches that he was sure were strikes -- the commentators and I agreed with him. Both pitches were called balls by the home plate umpire. Each time, the pitcher looked at where he thought the pitch had ended up, in the catcher's mitt and in the strike zone, then turned around, gathered himself and threw the next pitch. He got out of the inning without giving up a run, and the Royals won the game and the series.

I could not help but think that the incredible composure and self-control exhibited by this pitcher, and by players, coaches, and umpires during the vast majority of games is something that we can all learn from as we find ourselves at challenging points of our relationships. In life, as in baseball, past "failures" don't necessarily assure or predict future ones -- only giving up on ourselves and others can do that.

Postscript #3:

A few years ago two friends from Thailand asked me to explain baseball to them. I started out by telling them that when a major league pitcher throws the ball, his slowest pitch is in the range of 70-80 miles per hour, while faster pitches come in at 90-100 miles per hour.

The regular baseball season begins in early April, and runs through early October. Over that span of roughly 185 days, each team plays 162 games, half at home and half on the road. No matter how good a team or individual player is, they will experience many bad days and nights, short or prolonged slumps where nothing works right.

Professional baseball players are so good, they make the game look easy. Infielders turning a double play look to me like ballet dancers. It is difficult to discern the speed and movement of a major league pitch if one is not standing in the batter's box trying to get a hit. "Routine" baseball plays require a level of individual skill and connection to teammates that few of us can begin to understand, let alone accomplish.

I think we often look similarly at people in "successful" relationships and make the assumption that they have the good fortune to be just right for each other -- that it's so easy for them to be in this perfect relationship now and over time. I think we sometimes mistake the need for continued work on, and attention to, relationships as a sign that people are not magically right for each other, that the relationship is not working. My belief is that we create the possibility for relationships to work out when we make the commitment to do the work necessary to allow for continued trust and growth together. I believe this holds true in personal as well as professional relationships.

Healthy relationships and great baseball may be more alike than we might think, in the degree to which they require practice, patience, perseverance, and forgiveness. Doing this work has helped me to learn more about baseball through life, and more about life through baseball.