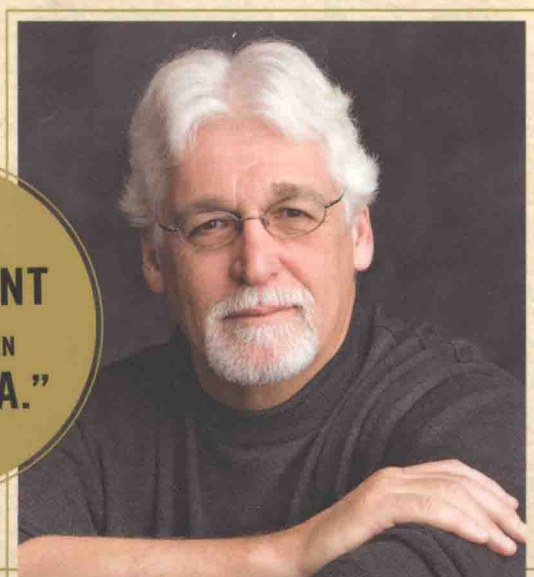


InSideOut COACHING

How Sports Can Transform Lives

"THE
MOST
IMPORTANT
COACH IN
AMERICA."

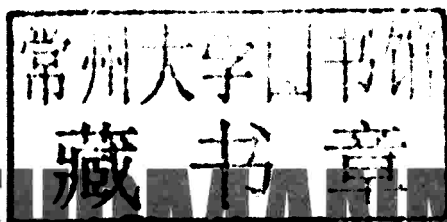
—PARADE
MAGAZINE



JOE EHRLMANN

InSideOut **COACHING**

How Sports Can Transform Lives



JOE EHRLMANN

WITH PAULA EHRLMANN AND GREGORY JORDAN

Simon & Schuster

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi



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This book could not have been written apart from
the love, strength, and wisdom of my wife, Paula.

Paula gave me the courage
to confront, articulate, and embrace my past
and then integrate these experiences into
my life mission to build a better world.

My children, Alison, Esther, Barney, and Joey,
have been my sustaining source of joy. I love you all.

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

The InSideOut Process

The black sky hung heavy over Baltimore that October night. Streetlights all over our neighborhood were burned out. Clouds clung to the tops of the row houses, and as I drove, the mist rose so thickly that it felt as if the car was colliding with it.

I was driving home with my four-year-old son, Barney, asleep in the seat beside me. He rested his head on the armrest. Ice cream stained his cheek. I turned off talk radio to savor his peaceful breathing.

It was my weekly father-son night with Barney. I had a speech scheduled that evening and thought it might be fun to take him along. My wife, Paula, dressed him up in the same outfit I was wearing—blue blazer, red tie, and khaki pants. She handed me his coloring book and crayons as we walked out the door.

I sat him in the front row and told him that if he behaved, I would take him to the local ice cream shop and he could order anything he wanted.

As I spoke from the podium, I realized that I couldn't concentrate. It was a few years into my ministry. I had started to enjoy public speaking and loved engaging my audience. It gave me a sensation like the single-mindedness and adrenaline rush that I got from sports.

But tonight I felt nervous and distracted. I kept watching Barney and he kept watching me. Even though my brain was sending the right words to my mouth, my deeper mind kept focusing on my son.

I was overcome with how great he looked and how much I loved him.

After the speech and handshakes, I went over to him and hugged him.

"Dad, that was really good!" he said.

My heart was touched. It was so like Barney to be thoughtful beyond his years.

I got him his ice cream—he ordered a hot fudge sundae and a chocolate milkshake. I just couldn't say no. As the bright light of the ice cream shop illuminated the ice cream covering Barney's chin and clothes, I thought about how Paula would react to my sweet indulgence. Far too much sugar, and the stains to prove it!

Outside, the city was empty and the mist was thick; a few roaming cats and random rats spooked me.

As we got closer to home, I looked down at Barney again. Suddenly, I began to have the most mystical and magical experience of my life. It seemed as though my soul left my body and connected with his. I had an overwhelming sense of how much I loved him, how special and important he was to me. Out of all the children in the world, this magnificent boy was my son. And I was his dad.

And in the throes of this spiritual connection, it seemed as if the mist started coming in through the car vents and engulfing us. I pulled over to the side of the road and stopped. A sense of being haunted came over me, a sense that maybe there were a few shadows and ghosts lingering in the dark that needed to come out into the light.

And then for the first time in my adult life, I managed to artic-

ulate something that had always eaten at me: “My father never saw me this way.”

I was acutely aware of the difference between the love I felt for Barney and what I had received from my own father. My father never felt this. Why didn’t I have a father who loved me the same way I love my son?

The car arrived home that night almost driving itself—and carrying two boys. One was sound asleep on my shoulder, resting in the strength and security of my love for him. And the other was me, a four-year-old “Joey” Ehrmann wrapped in a retired lineman’s body who was just starting to get in touch with the hole inside his soul.

I handed both boys to Paula. I told her about my experience and my wave of emotions—the sense of loss, grief, and abandonment that I associated with my father. Forty years of imprisoned emotion were being set free. I realized that night that a change was happening, the start of a permanent one. All the pain, hiding, and shame were ending as I saw my story laid out on the road right there in front of me. The days with my abusive father and my constant aching for his love, the debilitating sports culture in which I thrived as a teen in Buffalo, my manipulative coaches and my incessant need for their approval, and my junkie’s use of sports, fame, and drugs as medication for the grief. I was beginning to see it all clearly and knew it was time to put it to rest.

Laid out before me was my life as a sports story, a narrative with each mile marker underscoring a coaching relationship. I saw the transactional coaches: the kind of coaches who use players as tools to meet their personal needs for validation, status, and identity. They held their power over us to elicit the response they wanted. I obeyed these coaches out of necessity but I never accepted their belief systems or bought into their programs. Coach first, team second, and player’s growth and needs last, if at all, were their *modus operandi*.

I also saw the transformational coaches, who used their coaching platform to impart life-changing messages that I began to understand only decades later. Coach-power, like all forms of power, can be used

either for good or for bad, for self or for others. Transformational coaches are other-centered. They use their power and platform to nurture and transform players. I followed these coaches because I sensed their authenticity; they have affected me for a lifetime. Players first, team second, coach's needs met by meeting the needs of players.

I realized my sports career had been a lifelong, often desperate, search for acceptance and approval from adults who had power and authority over me. I had been a sports hero in high school, an All-American at Syracuse University, and a star in the NFL, but the profound impact that sports has had on my life has had little to do with my performance, my awards, or the number of games my team won.

It does, however, have plenty to do with the refuge and camaraderie, even the escape that a team and a game can provide. My personal journey through sports had a lot to do with my quest for empathy and validation—acting out in front of coaches trying to get it, destroying running backs to earn it, crushing offensive linemen to win it, and reliably playing the part of the affable wild man trying to score it. I was getting validation in bits and pieces but never really filling the void that was consuming me.

For several years, I had been haphazardly trying to piece together my story in a coherent way, trying to make sense of my life. But I kept going in circles, unable to get the pieces into a straight line. That night I finally solved a huge piece of the puzzle: My sports life had been full of transactions, doing this to get that, trying to satisfy my father and coaches who wanted something out of me, exchanging my performance for their praise and acceptance.

Instead of looking back in despair, I quickly decided, with Paula's help, to look forward with hope. I wanted to become the kind of coach I had craved all those years under transactional coaches. I wanted to be transformational. A transformational coach is dedicated to self-understanding and empathy, viewing sports as a virtuous and virtue-giving discipline. Transformational coaches believe young people can

grow and flourish in sports in a way that is more liberating and instructive than can be achieved through almost any other activity.

But we knew—Paula knew and kept reminding me—that moving forward would mean moving backward as well. I had to understand and accept my own story before I could understand and help transform the young people I coached. It was only as I came to understand the differences between transactional and transformational coaching that I fully appreciated the powerful influences of both in my life.

That night I started to realize that transitioning from a transactional coach to a transformational coach requires connecting the zigzagging dots of a scattered and struggle-filled life into a connected, coherent story. I could not become a transformational coach until connecting those dots and understanding my own story.

In her graduate work, Paula had come across profound research based on studies that looked at the common characteristics of parents who had raised children with healthy relationship patterns. What these studies indicated was that the parents' history, whether tumultuous or smooth, had little to do with the outcome. It was the parents' capacity to make sense of their history that determined their ability to raise children who could connect well to others. Parents who are able to make sense of their own lives can go on to help their children make sense of their lives, too.

I knew immediately that this insight translated to coaches as well. No coach could teach his players critical life skills until he learned those skills himself.

So many of my coaches were transactional: They operated on a quid pro quo basis to incentivize us to perform better; they looked for what they could get out of coaching and not what they could give; they ignored athletes' developmental needs and often manipulated and distorted the values of winning and losing. When I began coaching, I became one of them. I simply emulated what I knew.

The most compelling and durable glory of coaching, however, is to

use the whistle for its transformative and not its authoritative power. Outside of parenting there might not be a better platform than coaching to transform boys and girls into healthy and thriving men and women. A coach's responsibilities include helping young people to confront and comprehend the toxic culture that is trying to seduce and shape them. Coaches have the power to teach and to affirm and to convey empathy and compassion. And, I believe, there may not be a more influential group of leaders in the world than transformational coaches.

How we make sense of our lives dictates how we live them. Similarly, how we make sense of our personal sports history and the coaches in our past influences the way we coach. Today, without this self-understanding, sporting history will repeat itself—transactional coaching will perpetuate itself. But once we understand our history, with all its feelings and emotions, we can put ourselves in our players' shoes and begin to coach for them. We can remember what it was like to be that age, and all the conflicting messages we received. As coaches, we keenly feel the social, emotional, and psychological issues that many young athletes face. We can carefully calibrate our coaching, because we are finely attuned to the effect our words and gestures have on the hearts and minds of the players we coach. We can empathically place our players' needs above our own and become what I call InSideOut coaches.

An InSideOut coach is one who has done this sort of arduous interior work to answer such critical questions as, Why do I coach? Why do I coach the way I do? What does it feel like to be coached by me? How do I define and measure success?

The interior work consists of reflecting on both our glorious and our hurtful experiences with sports and coaches. It involves tracing the unfulfilled needs we felt as athletes and determining how those unmet needs can drive us as coaches, and, finally, understanding that our obligation is to coach for our players and not for ourselves. When coaches do this interior work they come up with some startling answers to the key questions I just posed.

An InSideOut coach's answers are radically different from the re-

sponses our contemporary sports culture expects, or rather, demands. An InSideOut coach resists the transactional impulse and asserts that the right way, indeed the only way, to coach young people is to seek to transform their sense of their own worth, talents, and value. An InSideOut coach sees a younger, developing version of himself or herself in every athlete and bases lesson plans, communication, and the very structure of the program on the obligation to transform the many young athletes who need connection, empathy, and guidance.

So after years of grasping at my own chaotic life narrative, I turned my scattershot personal story into a coherent narrative with the goal of becoming a better man, father, husband, and, albeit with my fair share of failings, an InSideOut coach.

Second to parents, coaches have enormous influence over young people's lives. InSideOut coaches can achieve the goal of instructing, mentoring, and sometimes even saving kids only with a thorough and daily devotion to certain principles—nurturing community, classroom-like instruction, empathic communication, joyful competition, and the spirituality of ceremony. These principles are every bit as important as the Xs and Os, the technical expertise, and even the hunger to win. I daresay that InSideOut coaches not only help young people grow but also leave a legacy more enduring for how they transform lives than for their wins.

During my own interior workouts something powerful dawned on me: Contemporary sports are our secular religion. Sports engage more individuals, more families, and more communities in a shared experience than any single cultural activity, organization, or religion in America. Twenty to 30 million kids play recreational sports, while another 10 million teens play interscholastic sports. This means that between 30 and 80 million parents are invested and involved in their children's sports. There are at least 5 million coaches with the potential to become one of the most influential adults in a young person's life. Forever.

Our beautiful challenge as coaches is to use this awesome and sometimes frightening influence to become agents of transformation in

athletes' lives. We are in a position to help them comprehend and negotiate the challenges of growing up in our culture. Because of the incompatibility of the daunting needs of our youth with the twisted culture of sports, there are many young people playing sports who feel diminished and discouraged by the very activities that should strengthen, encourage, and redeem them.

My intention in this book is to take back the spiritual and transformative side of the games our children play and restore sports to their original intent.

I believe that sports can offer the most universal and accessible venue in which to rejuvenate and embody the great virtues. And I believe that InSideOut coaches are charged with the task of virtuous instruction—not merely with offering their technical expertise—as primary agents of this social renewal.

Restoring sports as the method for nourishing and celebrating virtues and redefining coaches as virtuous instructors are the foundations of my coaching manifesto. Seeing the profession of coaching from the inside out shows us the transformative power that it holds to teach and uplift and to help athletes celebrate the joy of learning and growing.

CHAPTER 1

Stepping Inside

My recurring childhood memory is of my father holding up his bear paw of a hand and in his deep voice commanding me to snap my right wrist forty-five degrees clockwise at the end of each jab.

Upstairs, my mother nervously paced the kitchen floor. I could hear the creaking despite the rising tone of my father's voice as he instructed me. The cellar was hot from the furnace. He was swearing; I was sweating.

Having lived my life in sports, I realize it is only appropriate that my earliest childhood memory revolves around sports and coaching. This memory could have been about sports as a metaphor for fathers and sons and love, about the instruction, affirmation, and self-confidence that can come from sports, about the value of persistence and bonding and connection that good parenting and coaching can foster. It could have been a great memory.

But it wasn't. I was five years old and I couldn't snap my wrist at the end of my jabs. Or at least I couldn't do it to my father's satisfaction. The memory haunts me to this day.

My father grew frustrated. He dropped his right arm and held his hands by his sides while he stared at me. He shook his head in a way that felt like a body blow to a little boy. And then he spoke—lower, with disgust.

“How hard is it to snap your damn wrist?”

He raised his hand and jabbed the air inches from my face, snapping his wrist again and again.

“Like this! Like this! Like this!”

As each jab shot straight to my heart, tears started to come out of my eyes and run down my cheeks. I realized I was crying only when I felt how cold the tears were compared to the warm sweat dripping down my neck. Then my father started slapping my cheeks back and forth with both hands—not hard, to hurt me, but soft and silly, to mock me.

He stopped and stared into my teary eyes.

“Be a man!” he said.

I wanted to run up the stairs and grab hold of my mother, but I knew I couldn’t. I knew “a man” shouldn’t; therefore, I didn’t. I couldn’t risk being a “mama’s boy” on top of my boxing failure.

I stood there blinking. He turned and stomped up the stairs, brushed past my mother, and put on his coat. I heard him pause again at the stairwell and could feel his last look at me so deeply that I see his face now even though I never saw it then. I heard the door bang on his way out as he headed to the bar on that Buffalo night.

One of the great myths in America is that sports build character. They can and they should. Indeed, sports may be the perfect venue in which to build character. But sports don’t build character unless a coach possesses character and intentionally teaches it. Sports can team with ethics and character and spirituality; virtuous coaching can integrate the body with the heart, the mind, and the soul.

But as my first memory shows, sports can also beat up young people and break them down so profoundly that they barely recover as adults. I was one of those waylaid kids, and my recovery was a long, hard road.

My life in sports—being coached and coaching—was a search for