

Where To From Here? – A Baseball Commencement Address

John Pinkman

I know that I said in the closing of my last column I was going to talk about change management in this issue. But that can wait. I felt that the following observations were more appropriate at this special time of the year. And trust me, if this isn't change management, what is?

Many of you who are reading this just ended your playing career. It's depressing. It was so short when you look back. What do you remember? As much off field as on, I bet. Great memories. A glorious past, but suddenly there is no baseball future for you. You are somewhere between glory days and a roster spot on a 6-pack softball team. Or even worse, become what – a fan - yuk!

You'll never K another batter, steal a base, hit a dinger. You'll never hear the crowd roar for you again! Everyone is younger than you now and, what do you mean, I have no locker? As Cher said to Nicholas Cage in the movie Moonstruck, "Snap out of it!" We (and I mean everyone) have all been there.

In 1984 Denny Doyle told me that while your life in baseball as a player is finite, your life as a coach is infinite. As Roy Hobbs is lying in his hospital bed, Iris, his childhood sweetheart, (Glenn Close) said to him, "We have two lives – one we learn with and the one we live with after that." You will find this statement appropriate in a number of future life circumstances, but for now let's apply it to your vision of baseball next.

You will soon discover if you have a true love of the game. Will you walk away from it with memories or live your second life?

You're probably as sick as I am of hearing the phrase "give back to the game". That quip was probably invented by an agent who was justifying his client's high salary and lousy behavior. That player probably saw giving back to the game as penance. Many people with excess money truly see giving back as consoling the people they trampled on to get to the top. It's easy to give back to the game when you're making a million dollars a year! But let's put that aside.

Stay in the game. We need you. Use your talent, your education, your maturity, your experience, to make the game better. Teach, coach, write, manage, market or organize. All are choices, opportunities, for you to remain part of the game. Full time or part time, there's a place for you.

Your choices will continue. Yes, you do have choices. Do you see them? Opportunity rarely comes with a label.

Recently I sat down with Johnny Oates. The Skipper, as you may know, has been fighting brain cancer. The good news is he is winning! That clear sun-drenched Virginia afternoon was perfect for baseball. Virginia Tech had retired his number prior to the game. The stands were packed with former classmates including Frank Beamer, Tech's head football coach. Oates, a native Virginian, had come home.

The following day he gave a talk to the Tech team before their game. The talk was about choices. "Your life, my life is a series of choices", he said. Your success or failure, good fortune or bad, is a result of the choices you make. Your life will be "designed" by you in a series of choices. You want freedom and responsibility? Then come with accountability for the choices that lead you there. You are in control.

After his talk, I sat with Johnny and shared being in baseball - being able to live a life in baseball, being at a gorgeous field on a beautiful day. Our paths to that day were very different. There we sat, Johnny Oates, a famous major league player and manager, and me, working all my life to have an opportunity to run a full time baseball school. But you would never know the difference. We were just two guys with a love of baseball that afternoon - thankful of a life in the game.

So, please stay. We need smart people. The game is changing for the better with technology as in all aspects of life. BUT uniquely, it remains the same. The game is so much more than the major leagues. It is more than being on the winning team, too.

This is a hard life, your wife MUST be your teammate, you may get little recognition, you may not make much money. But it's baseball. And all the suits and offices and business perks can't match what is in the soul of a baseballman. No sir.

Hopefully your choices will lead you to what many of us have learned. True success, complete fulfillment is the result of creating and sharing in the success of others. It is in the smile of a child and the pride in the eyes of his parents. In many ways it is the definition of an American. All those corny teamwork statements you endured in your coaches' speeches are yours now to deliver - If you see the opportunity and make the right choice.

I rest this on you shoulders, your consciousness. There has never been a more eloquent phrase or a statement that so truly identifies a life style than Kevin Costner's.... "For Love of the Game."

I hope to see you soon,

John