

John Pinkman
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Collegiate Baseball
LSU

Did you ever wonder if one coach could make a difference? Do you ever want to discover how a losing team turns around and suddenly begins to win? Me too! This is our 4th article to investigate just that.

These are stories of great men. They define leadership. They see the mission clearly and take action. They are passionate about the success of others. All are teachers committed to creating developmental programs. And perhaps their greatest talent is that people believe in them.

Great To Poor.... Poor To Good.... Good To Great

is a roller coaster that many dynasties endure. Major shifts in fortune occur in all levels of team sport. It may be a natural re-birthing process through which all excellent organization must pass. Apparently no one knows why or they would fix it. It may never be solved. Change is constant, like it or not.

As have many programs, LSU had succumbed to this dynamic organization shift. However, LSU lopped off several years of the rebuilding process. How? That is the subject of this article. We are going to pick up on their history during the past two years with the hiring of Paul Mainieri. I met with Paul during an off day in Omaha last June. LSU had just won 25 games in a row.



As many of you know, Paul Mainieri left Notre Dame to coach at LSU. Notre Dame is a secure job at a highly visible, prestigious academic university. When Paul went to ND they had crowds of about 100; more like a large group. When he left, they were averaging more than 2500 per game in a stadium built for 2200. You can bet my first question was, why did you leave? Why throw yourself into the volatile atmosphere of Baton Rouge (collegiate sports New York City of the south). LSU has the largest attendance in collegiate baseball full of fans fully expecting the Tigers to win every game and go to Omaha and win that too, every year.

In fact, it is said that for many years former LSU coach Skip Bertman reserved an entire hotel in Omaha a year in advance for the team and fans. Today teams draw from a hat of participating hotels for accommodations.

Why move to LSU? I'm going to answer that question, but you'll have to stay with me and read the entire article. The major decisions we make in life are absolutely the result of the sum total of our life experiences.

Role Models

Paul Mainieri has had major role models. "My dad, Demie Mainieri was a legendary baseball coach at Miami Dade Junior College. When I was 14 I told my dad that if I cannot be a professional baseball player, I want to be a college coach."..... "As I grew up I watched my dad from the inside of the dugout at Miami Dade ...I saw the way the players responded to him and the impact that he had on their lives. I wanted to do the same. I grew up in a family where we were taught about service to others and trying to make the world a better place." Paul said. He spent so much time studying his dad's leadership.

Ron Mastrie, long time coach at the University of New Orleans was another mentor. UNO was a powerhouse in the south during the 70's and 80's. During those days LSU was out of the headlines. UNO was the first program in Louisiana to go to the CWS. Paul played for Coach Mastrie in his junior and senior years. "Ron was a real energetic coach who was always reaching out to the community building support for the program. He knew I wanted to be a coach and he would take time to explain things to me," Paul added. "Coach Mastrie became like a second father to me."

"Then I met Tommy Lasorda. The first time I met him he took me off to the side and spent four hours with me. We have stayed in touch for 25 years. When I was coaching at the Air Force Academy, the Dodgers would come up to play the Rockies. I'd drive up to Denver and sleep on his couch for four days and wear a uniform and sit in the dugout," Coach recalls. Paul would drive Tommy to the games and listen to how he dealt with the players, some of whom were given rides from the hotel to the stadium and sat in the back seat of Paul's car. Paul attended the press conferences and saw how he dealt with the media or as he puts it, "the world according to Lasorda!"



One day driving to the park, Tommy asked him, if they (Paul and Tommy) were to get into an accident would the game go on that night? Paul timidly answered, "I guess." Next he asked, what if the team bus were to get in an accident, do you think the game would go on that night? The obvious answer laid the foundation for Tommy's last comment, "remember this lesson.... *it's all about the players!*"

That was really just reinforcing what Paul's father had taught him. "Don't go into coaching to make money (isn't that an understatement?), you're there to be a teacher, an educator." Paul paraphrased his father and continues, "Today the profession has changed. Young coaches are going into the profession as recruiters, salesmen somewhat, and they lose perspective... (about what we are actually there to do)."

So let's recap. Paul what were the reasons that you came to LSU?

"**First** the passion for college baseball in Baton Rouge and LSU already existed; I didn't have to create it. The LSU community did not have to be educated on the benefits of being the best in college baseball. **Second** I wanted to measure myself at the highest level of competition." Coach shared.

The **third and perhaps the most important** reason is something that should be copied and posted on each coach's office. It is a rededication of self. It is why Coach Mainieri is such a great man.

The following should be copied and posted on each coach's office

"Coaches through the years have gone into coaching to make an impression on young peoples' lives through sacrifice hard work, working as a part of a team, to learn self confidence and how to deal with adversity, how to deal with success as well. All those things help a person to become successful in the bigger game of life in whatever endeavor they so chose to be involved in. I started to see a lot of coaches go into it (coaching) to make a lot of money. They were using and abusing kids for their own personal evolution in their careers. I didn't like that. You see a lot of that in the SEC because of the pressure to win. I came to LSU to prove to a generation of young coaches that you could win without sacrificing your integrity, without sacrificing ethics...that your focus could be on that and still have a very successful program."

I asked what will happen to this noble idea when Skip Bertman leaves? Because of Paul's personal relationship with Skip he has been given the authority to affect this cultural change. What happens if you get a new AD like the University of Florida's, who fires coaches for political or publicity reasons or because even though they went to Omaha they didn't win?

“Don’t get me wrong, Skip expects the program to win. He and the University have provided us with great resources. But (no matter who is here) we are not going to lie to recruits, cheat, or break the rules to win. We are not going to go outside the ethical boundaries that I believe are in place for everyone.”

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“The point is that if everyone sees that we can win here in the hot bed of competition, a pressure cooker, without breaking the rules, they can stand by their principles too. You know, John, another way to influence this is with assistant coaches. Five of my assistants are now D-I head coaches.” I know Coach Mainieri takes pride in training new coaches. I have known several of them for many years.

When I wrote the Turn Around story about the University of Virginia, Paul called me and said “you know when you asked Brian (O’Connor) a question I knew exactly what his answer would be! On second thought you may not want to write this article about us (LSU) because it will be exactly the same as Brian’s program!”

No, Paul, I could write about these kinds of programs all year.

Integrity is our values in action. By speaking out on and off the field, telling the truth, raising the ethical conversation, Paul sets an example for his players. “If they see me take risks they (the players) will play without the fear of making a mistake. If the play calls for a bunt I may hit and run; if they think we are going to take a pitch I’ll let him hit away cause I don’t want our kids to play afraid to lose. I want them to force the action. If they know their coach is not afraid to put his neck on the line they will play that way too. I don’t want them to be afraid.”

Confidence is the basis of winning

One year Paul was coaching at St. Thomas, a DII school. He had the opportunity to play University of Miami. The young Mainieri seriously thought they could win. They didn’t. His father heard him reaming out the team after the game. Later that night Paul’s dad said to him that a shot gun approach, yelling at all the players, was not wise. That shoe didn’t fit everybody and when a coach does that he loses respect from those players who are the fabric of the team. He should have taken into consideration that some players probably played as hard as they possibly could. Telling me that story Paul reminds me, “That lesson taught me to always treat players as individuals.”

I have written for many years that the most abused term in coaching is the word ‘teacher’. So many coaches identify themselves as a teacher because they think it is trendy, politically correct, and what parents want to hear. So many programs are run by those self described “teachers” who run the practices day in day out, year after year in the same manner, regardless of their current personnel. It’s expedient, it is what they learned many years ago. They think they can hide a ‘win at all cost’ program, by any means, behind the

label of a “teacher.” They never lift a page in a book or increase their education about teaching or leading. They accept the honors of winning and condemn the team for losing. But they’re “teachers”....of what?

A Quick Start

I asked Paul what did to make LSU so competitive so quickly. “I have always believed that a college team is based on pitching; you must have good arms to compete. But you have to have a good defense and hitting too. If you (excel) have one you can have a decent team. Two of those and you can compete for the conference title. If you have all three you can contend for a national title.

“But we had to build starting with pitching, then defense. Our first year our hitting was so- so, by the second year it came around and we hit .310 as a team with 97 home runs and 100 stolen bases,” coach added.

The First Year

“I had no reason to cut anyone if they committed to three simple rules...”

I was dying to hear how the first year went. I know from my own experience changing a culture can be at best stressful to shocking. I wanted to know how that first meeting went with the team. Would the players meet Paul’s new expectations? How would they react to this new culture?

Here’s what Paul said.

“My first meeting with the players I laid out my expectations. I told them I had no reason to cut anyone if they committed to three simple rules:

- 1. Commit to becoming the best player you can be.**
- 2. Commit to going to class and earning a degree.**
- 3. Commit to becoming a good citizen of the university.”**

Paul went on. “I said you have all a certain level of God given baseball ability. Now it is your responsibility to develop it to your fullest potential to become the player you can be. The coaches are here to help you do that.

I expect and demand that you go to class and graduate from with a degree from LSU. I have no desire to chase you around and make you go to class. Your baseball career will end some day, but your education will last a lifetime. If you are not interested in earning a degree you will not have a place in this program.” **(Mainieri's Notre Dame teams combined for a 100-percent graduation rate (71 of 71) among players who completed**

their eligibility. Twelve players who signed professionally after their junior year returned to Notre Dame to complete their degree requirements. - LSU Bio excerpt)

Finally I want you all to become good citizens. I want you to be proactive in going out into the community and making it a better place. I want you to visit people in hospitals and get behind good causes. You will learn that when you help others it comes back to you 100 times.”

Of the 32 LSU players 12 left.

The next year, with those rules in place, Terry Rooney, now head coach at Central Florida U, recruits 17 new players who want to do things the right way; that year, Collegiate Baseball’s number one recruiting class in the country.

The Mission

On the weekend of Oct. 4, 2008 LSU student-athletes combined their efforts, along with those in the community to make a difference in Baton Rouge and the surrounding areas.



Members of the LSU baseball, softball, gymnastics, and tennis teams banded together for three events: the ALS Walk for a Cure, Juvenile Diabetes Walk, and Buddy Walk for Down Syndrome.

“We believe that community service is part of the responsibility of being an LSU baseball player,” Coach Paul Mainieri said. “It’s important that our players interact with the public and attempt to make a positive impact upon their lives.”

Paul concluded our Omaha interview last June with this subtle but dramatic and revealing statement of why LSU was able to turn it around. “Today we are better than we should be. This team is synergetic. They all act for the good of the team. They play whatever role is needed. Every player on this team is motivated by knowing that they are a vital contributor to the success of the whole program. Subsequently, everyone feels that they are important and has an important role.”

I hope this story sounds familiar. Over a year ago when we set out to do these stories about turn around programs, I purposely had no preconceptions of what I may find. Now looking back along that journey I found virtually the same story at each school, University of New Orleans, Virginia, The Naval Academy, and now LSU; four schools that could not be more different in location, campus culture, and identity. Except for one thing - each school had outstanding leadership and an amazing similarity of recognizing the need for and achieving a major change in culture. This has been one of the most rewarding personal experiences in my career. By reading the stories of these great men, I pray I have told their stories in a manner that reflects the honorable life each has lived and the dynamic effect they have had on the lives they have touched.

“The Number 1 rule in management or leadership is simple... surround yourself with good people.” Coach Paul Mainieri, a Great Teacher.