



Lesson #30

Don't Take Anything for Granted

A man's accomplishments in life are the cumulative effect of his attention to detail.

—John Foster Dulles

Baseball requires attention to detail. If you take some things—no, if you take almost anything—for granted, the play or game may not turn out the way you planned and hoped.

You have to watch the ball from the time it leaves the bat till you see it in the web of your glove before you can begin to throw it. Coaches yell, “I need to see the button on the top of your cap.” The point is, of course, that your head and eyes need to be focused down, down on the baseball as it rolls into your glove. Even in major league games you will occasionally see a professional baseball player forget this and let a ball roll under his glove, between his legs, and into the outfield.

This sort of attention to detail also means that you will be prepared if something strange happens at the last minute. Ask Fred Lindstrom and Bill Buckner.

During the 2006 major league season, the Atlanta Braves had a promising first baseman named Adam LaRoche. LaRoche was a good player with a very relaxed and natural swing. He was playing first base, a position where the Braves did not have an established, veteran player. LaRoche had hit well that season, including a three-run shot against the Dodgers in his first at bat of the season.

In fact, he ended the season with almost 100 RBIs. But there had been a bad play that stood out over all his accomplishments.

In a game against the Washington Nationals in mid-May, the Braves were clinging to a one-run lead. With two outs and no one on in the bottom of the fifth, LaRoche fielded a slow roller to first. He took it for granted that the hitter would jog slowly down the line on the obvious out.

So after fielding the ball, it first looked as though LaRoche would tag the runner coming down the line. Then he turned and slowly headed over to first for the out at the bag. A funny thing happened, though. The hitter, Nick Johnson, tore down the line like young Rickey Henderson. It was a close play, but the umpire called Johnson safe. The inning extended. Not only did Johnson eventually score, the Nationals scored three more runs before the Braves managed to get the last out in the fifth. The Braves lost that day.

Braves manager Bobby Cox was not a happy man. (In fact, it turned out that LaRoche had attention-deficit disorder and he began taking medicine to help control it.)

One season when my son played in the machine pitch league, we had a good player on our team that we will call Bobby Smith. Over the season we noticed something strange about Bobby. He played great at the weekday games but was terrible on Saturdays. Because we played every Saturday, this was a problem. The coaches could not figure it out. Perhaps Bobby stayed up too late on Friday night. Perhaps he just didn't like giving up Saturdays to play baseball. But the questions we asked did not get the answers we expected.

Things came to a head after Bobby had played great at shortstop on a Thursday night but on Saturday let a ball roll past him in the outfield and then turned away from the plate at bat *after the umpire had put a ball in the pitching machine.* Somebody

had to talk to his parents, and as the scorekeeper and occasional third-base coach, I drew the short straw.

I called his mother and came straight to the point. You are probably way ahead of me on this one. It turned out that Bobby was ADD, and Mrs. Smith gave him his medicine on school days but not on the weekends. I stopped short of my first instinct, which was to yell into the phone, “*What in the name of Kennesaw Mountain Landis are you thinking?*” Instead, I just told her that Bobby could be a very good player, but I was concerned he was going to get hurt if he kept turning his back on the ball because he was not able to pay attention. I asked if for the few Saturdays we had remaining if she could give him his medication.

To her credit, Mrs. Smith was very nice and understanding. She started giving his medicine on Saturday mornings and Bobby made the All-Star team. I hope his mom gave him his medication before the All-Star game.

In baseball, as in life, ADD or not, you have to do what it takes to pay attention to the details.

Lots of people have said it—I think George Brett is the one I heard it from—“If you do a thousand little things right, the big things seem to take care of themselves.” Baseball is a good way to learn this. Making a sacrifice bunt looks like the simplest thing in the world when you watch someone else do it correctly. It’s a critical play to get a player into scoring position or even occasionally home from third.

Bunting, though, is harder than it looks. That is why you will almost always see even major league players congratulating a teammate who has successfully put down a sacrifice bunt. To do it right, you must hold the bat correctly, position yourself correctly in the batter’s box, bend your knees, focus on the ball, accept the ball with the bat at the right height and angle to put it where you

want it on the diamond, and be ready to run to put the necessary pressure on the defense. Where the bat hits the ball is crucial. Putting the ball in the air can be a disaster.

The batter must remember the game situation. If the pitch would not be a strike, it might be appropriate to pull back from the bunt.

One final thing: some pitchers tend to take it personally if a hitter tries to sacrifice, so the batter has to be alert in case the pitch is coming at his head. Taking care of all of these little things will make the sacrifice—the big thing—successful. Failing at any one of them can cost more than the bunt would gain.

Attention to detail is also necessary for other things you do in life, both the useful and the critical. For example, it is very valuable for cooking. Use the right ingredients, cook at the right temperatures, and keep careful track of the time, and you'll get much better results.

More critically, attention to detail counts in driving. Buckle your seatbelt, watch your speed, and signal and check your blind spot before changing lanes. Baseball is not the only place to learn that attention to detail is critical. Baseball may not even be the best place to learn that attention to detail is critical. However, baseball is a good place to learn this lesson and learn it well.

The second component of not taking anything for granted involves attention to detail too, but for a different reason. You shouldn't take anything for granted because nothing in this life is certain. Pay attention to and enjoy every detail of every day, especially the lucky days when you get to play baseball, because it'll be over before you know it.

This is one of life's hardest lessons to learn. When you are young, the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas seems like years. A lifetime seems endless. Life, though, like your chances

to play baseball, is not endless. Most kids just finally reach a day when the time and effort required to play baseball outweigh the joy and excitement, and without looking back (at least right then) they hang up their spikes.

For others, their league has progressed beyond their skill and it's almost a relief to look at other pursuits. An unhappy child is one who still enjoys baseball but has no other level to move on to. The local recreation league maybe lacks fields, coaches, or even just players his age who still want to play, and the school team is not an option.

The most painful class of kids, literally and figuratively, are the kids who still want to play and have a place to play, but their bodies won't let them—bad knees, repaired shoulders, whatever reason. We had one teammate who loved to play baseball but a failing liver cost him his chance between the white lines at an age when going back was a very difficult thing to do.

The point is not that you should play baseball as long as you can, though I believe you should. The point is that whenever you reach that time where you cannot or do not want to play any longer, be sure you have paid enough attention to detail that you will have a good stock of memories.

Of course, these memories don't have to be all game-winning hits, diving stabs at line drives, or championship celebrations on the mound. Some of those memories will just be the joy of being on a team, the impossible green of the grass under your cleats, the unending blue of the sky over your cap, and the indescribable feel when the sweet spot on the bat meets the dead center of the white part of a fastball and the contact is so perfect that it is almost as if the ball did not hit the bat.

It can be the whistle of wind through the ear holes of a batting helmet as you swipe second on a pitcher who plunked you on

that same helmet and put you on first. It may just be a coach who called you at home after a game-winning hit to tell you he was so excited after the game he forgot to shake your hand, but it was “a great hit you got, son, just great.”

Do not take any of those details for granted because—trust of’ Dad on this one—however it happens, they’ll be gone all too soon.