

Bring Diversity Off the Sidelines (And Into Play)

By **Michael Bortolotto**

SPORTS ARE THE METAPHOR FOR A LOT OF THINGS IN LIFE — business included. Regardless of the game, sport offers a lot of true life lessons that stretch from the playing field to the boardroom.

From Spectator to Game Changer

“The difference between the impossible and the possible lies in a person’s determination”. **Tommy Lasorda**

One of the things I have always liked about sports is how it inspires us. Spectators. We have all had times in our lives when we find ourselves standing on the sidelines watching the action and saying, “I’m just as capable as any player out there. If only...”

This is the point at which we either step back from the field or take the steps to move from being an observer to a successful game changer.

Those steps differ depending upon the sport and to a certain extent the position, but one thing is universal — the drive. It can work wonders on and off the field, in business as in life. Unfortunately, getting off the sidelines is more of a challenge for some of us.

Stepping Past the Boundaries

“Do you know what my favourite part of the game is? The opportunity to play”. **Mike Singletary**

I know Bec cause I stood on that sideline long enough to see it for what it was: an invisible boundary made of poor attitudes (some of them mine), lack of understanding, discrimination, and ignorance. These attitudes and boundaries were mine alone to change. How other’s defined my unique physical differences provided all the motivation I needed to get off the sidelines. I have Cerebral Palsy and I was determined to play football. As I came to discover, many of these boundaries were based on my assumptions of other’s assumptions.

My first opportunity to participate as a real player came when I started high school and was trying to find a way to fit into the social fabric of my new school. One morning I found myself on the soccer field watching 19 boys playing football at their end of the field. It soon became very clear and apparent the two teams weren’t even because one team was scoring almost at will. Watching the game in silence for approximately five minutes, I was wondering where they were going to get another payer for the team with only nine players.

Then one of the players shouted at me, “Can you play football?” I quickly yelled back, “What?” Another boy yelled back asking the same questions, “Can you play football?’ We need someone on our team to make the game fair.



Daring to Attempt the Impossible

“You were born to be a player. You were meant to be here. This moment is yours”. **Herb Brooks**

My answer was immediate and unequivocal “Yes”. That’s when they let know I would be playing wide-receiver. Suddenly I was in the game, but for how long I wondered? They had yet to see me in action and had no idea about my secret misgivings. Playing wide-receiver was an impossible position for me to play. Having Cerebral Palsy meant I couldn’t make my arms and hands in the coordinated fashion required to catch a football on the run.

What had I been thinking? Once they found out I was incapable of catching a football, I was sure they’d boot me off the field and my life would slide back into the reality of being a sideline spectator.

On the very first play, my “secret” was unveiled for all to see. I ran down field, past all the defenders, and into an open spot. The quarterback saw me standing alone and throw a bullet pass right at me. I raised my arms and hands to catch the football — and my worries became reality.

I dropped the pass. All the boys surrounded me. I waited for the inevitable excusal which surprisingly never came. What they wanted to know was my secret to running zigzags so fast?

Hitting the Bullseye on the Fly

“What you lack in talent can be made up with desire, hustle, and giving 110 percent all the time”. **Don Zimmer**

That’s when they began brainstorming new ideas to get me to catch the football. This was amazing, for the first time in my life, people were looking beyond my apparent physical condition and focusing on how they could access my unique and effective running abilities to raise the quality of their own game.

The teams came up with some really crazy ideas to utilize my unique running style and compensate for my inability to catch. The idea they settled upon

was to use me as a human bullseye. This involved running down the field, stopping, exposing chest and stomach to the quarterback, and letting the quarterback hit me with the football, “Bullseye”!

This sounded like a really painful and dangerous idea to me, but I was on the field and in the game. “Sounds good. Let’s give it a try”.

The plan was for me to run down field 25 yards, stop, turn around, and not move. So that’s exactly what I did and sure enough it worked without a hitch. Amazing, but just as I thought, the ball hurt when it hit me. Over the next three weeks every time we played football, I was unstoppable. That said, being on the field came at a punishing cost to me physically and that had to stop soon.

**“Leadership,
like coaching,
is fighting for
the hearts and
souls of men
and getting them
to believe
in you.”**

Innovation is Smart Play

“Stubbornness usually is considered a negative, but I think that trait has been positive for me”. **Cal Ripkin Jr.**

One morning I decided to change my stance. Instead of exposing my chest to receive the ball from quarterback, I switched to a Kung Fu position. The idea to protect my chest was both defensive and novel. While I was catching the ball, bruises were far from metaphoric.

The ball is snapped. I cross the line and run my pattern, stop, and turn around. When the ball comes towards me, my hands start moving in a

Circular motion to bat the ball away from me — my Kung Fu was limited. That's when I accidentally caught the football.

Every player on both team stopped and stood in silence over what had just happened. One boy yelled out, "You said can't catch a football and I just watched you do it". Another boy asked me, "How did you do that"? That I didn't know proved not to matter.

My quarterback quickly to me to stand 15 years away from everyone. The he pitched the football at me and I caught the ball. We repeated the experiment to repeat effect and a growing wave of incredulity. What I remember most are smiles on everyones faces continuing to grow until one boy yelled out: "Bullseye. We fixed him."

Shifting Mindsets and Achieving Success

*"Champion keep playing until they get it right".
Billie Jean King.*

Over the years, I spent a fair amount of time trying to figure out why and how my hands were able to catch the football. The conclusion it seems is quite simple. I had good team and enough success to encourage me to try another, less painful, approach to achieving my goal.

I had gained the field, caught the ball and achieved my goal of playing football. Given the opportunity to step off the sideline, I surprised myself and my team. Did they fix me? Insofar as I can still manage to catch most anything thrown my way, they did indeed. They also opened my eyes to the fact that some of the obstacles in pour path are of our own creation.

Deep down though, I know I did my bit to fix them too. I definitely, improved all of their coaching skills. Moreover though, I helped them hit a bullseye of their own.

When we mobilize people who are deemed different, when we collaborate beyond our traditional mindsets and silos, we grow more than just points on the scoreboard or figures on the bottom line. We come to realize and respect the benefits of the unique, sometimes latent and often hidden talents and abilities that define our future potential.

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