



**The Success Coaching Playbook**  
Motivational Insights from Famous Coaches  
How sports coaches get their teams to consistently  
perform at the highest level

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# **The Success Coaching Playbook**

## Motivational Insights from Famous Coaches

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# The Success Coaching Playbook

## Motivational Insights from Famous Coaches

### INTRODUCTION

Coaches are motivators. They take collections of players and mold them into teams with a shared goal of success. In order to make that goal into a reality, coaches have to inspire and motivate their players to perform successfully.

Some great sports “minds” have been complete failures as coaches. Although they were masters of strategies and technique, they failed to get their players motivated, excited, and committed to victory. The best coaches are often those who understand what it takes to reach goals and how to move others to do so.

That’s why anyone interested in self-improvement should consider the observations of the most successful coaches as they plot courses for success. These proven leaders have a lot to offer in terms of insight and recommendations about how to reach goals.

This ebook looks at some observations from noted coaches and explains how their comments can inform our perspective on success and goal-attainment.

It isn’t designed to argue that life and sports are analogous. There are differences. Life is not a game and there is a world of difference between scoring touchdowns or hitting home runs and becoming a genuinely fulfilled person. There are, however, parallels. Both sports success and personal success are often goal-driven and turn on many of the very same principles.

Some of the observations made by the coaching legends discussed herein will seem relatively obvious. Others may be quite thought provoking. Taken as a group, they provide some excellent direction. These proven motivators have some very valuable things to say about reaching full potential and meeting goals.

*“A man can be as great as he wants to be. If you believe in yourself and have the courage, the determination, the dedication, the competitive drive and if you are willing to sacrifice the little things in life and pay the price for the things that are worthwhile, it can be done.”*

*--Vince Lombardi*

## HAVING PURPOSE

George Halas owned and coached professional football's Chicago Bears for years. Under his leadership, they won countless games and championships, becoming icons of the sport. George "Papa Bear" Halas became a recognized symbol of success and of the growing game.

George Halas once said:

*"Many people flounder about in life because they do not have a purpose, an objective toward which to work."*

This volume starts with Halas' remark because it reminds us of the importance of setting goals from the beginning. Without a purpose, or a goal, success is always elusive because it is never defined.

Most of us are already familiar with the process of goal setting and how important it is to have clear aspirations and objectives. As such, we won't belabor the point here. We'll make the matter succinct.

If you haven't uncovered your goals and objectives, do so. It is a critical first step in developing a happier and more fulfilling life. Without clear goals and objectives, you may very well find yourself "floundering about."

George Halas recognized the importance of goals and how they play a role in reaching the pinnacle of success. The irascible "old man on the sidelines" embraced a fundamental concept of self-improvement long before many of today's motivational experts and self-help gurus took up the same mantle.

## THREE KINDS OF PLAYERS

Tommy Lasorda never set the baseball world on fire as a player. He was a fairly forgettable ballplayer. As a manager, however, he took the Los Angeles Dodgers to numerous championships while simultaneously becoming something of a media star himself. The portly manager appeared in diet aid advertisements, children's shows and elsewhere. His infectious attitude and love of baseball and the Dodgers (he's famed for claiming he "bleeds Dodger blue") have made him one of the games more beloved figures.

Along the way, Lasorda has offered some keen observations about success. Tommy Lasorda once said:

*"There are three types of baseball players: those who make it happen, those who watch it happen, and those who wonder what happens."*

The remark is representative of Lasorda's humorous style, but it contains a very large nugget of truth. One can divide the world into those three groups and most of us know which group in which we should be in order to reach our goals.

Lasorda reminds us that success is a participatory activity. It requires action and it requires direct involvement. You can bet that Lasorda tried to stock his Dodgers teams with players who make things happen and that the winning manager did his best to keep the bench cleared of those who were merely onlookers or completely disinterested in the happenings on the field.

You are reading this guide, which means you are certainly beyond merely wondering what happens. You are interested in building a better life for yourself and reaching your personal potential. You may still be watching, however, not yet ready to make a commitment and to take action to reach your individual goals. If that's the case, it may be time to step up the plate and to make something happen.

That willingness to become completely involved is the difference between spending some time in the bus leagues and wearing a World Series championship ring. It's the difference between wanting something better and having the life you deserve.

## PREPARING TO WIN

There are few coaching figures more controversial than Bob Knight. The college basketball coach has won national championships, but has found himself on the cover of newspapers just as often for his colorful disposition and argument-inspiring behaviors. Whether you love Knight's style or despise it, his record of accomplishment clearly illustrates that he knows more than a thing or two about motivating his players to succeed.

Knight once said:

*“The key is not the ‘will to win’ ... everybody has that. It is the will to prepare to win that is important.”*

We often imagine that all it takes to reach our goals is commitment. If we can motivate ourselves to “stick with the program” and to “keep on trying,” there is nothing we can't do, we like to think. Unfortunately, that common point of view overlooks the essential nature of preparation. If you want to reach your goals, you need to be prepared to do so. Knight's observation underlines that critical point.

You can't succeed without preparation. Although you might hear other motivators talk about willpower and conviction as the keys to success, there really is more to it than that. Those opinions either presuppose adequate preparation or represent a recipe for eventual disappointment. At the very least, approaching a goal without adequate preparation makes things far more difficult.

If you want to run your own business, for instance, you need to have an understanding of what that will entail and how you can handle the various issues associated with it. If you have a goal to lose weight, you need to mentally prepare yourself for a lifestyle change and to do the research necessary to provide you with the facts about healthy diet, exercise and other considerations. You can't hope to get the job done without preparation.

Preparation isn't sexy. It isn't fun. It often doesn't produce the kinds of immediate rewards we crave. That's why Knight is indicating that preparation is the one area in which a strong will is really necessary. Develop the will to prepare and you will be one very large step closer to success.

Preparation makes everything easier. The more prepared you are, the more able you are to tackle problems and to handle difficult situations. Preparation prevents us from being blindsided. Quality preparation allows us to avoid problems before they occur and gives us the ability to plot courses that avoid unnecessary obstacles. Developing a will to prepare may be challenging, but it does make every aspect of the journey toward our aspirations easier.

Balancing preparation with action is essential. This volume references another coach, Abe Lemons, and his observation that, at some point, you need to leave planning and preparation in favor of action. This is the balancing act that really lies at the heart of reaching goals. Preparation is essential, time-consuming, and ongoing. However, one should never seek refuge in preparation as a means of avoiding action. At some point, if you ever hope to reach a goal, you will need to step away from the practice court and into the game.

## **GIVE ME A LEAD...**

Frank Leahy was the head football coach at the University of Notre Dame. During his years as the head of the “Fighting Irish,” Leahy managed an almost incomparable 86.4% winning percentage. Although Leahy was a master of the “X’s and O’s” of football, a great deal of his success was undoubtedly a direct outgrowth of his ability to inspire his players and to imbue them with a winning attitude.

Leahy once said:

*“Give me a lead of 14-0 at halftime and I will dictate the final score.”*

That bold claim warrants our attention, for it teaches a valuable lesson about success in both practical and motivational terms.

Getting a lead has immediate, practical value. Leahy’s observation is interesting because it isn’t just an example of a bluster or overconfidence. He isn’t arguing that he can control the outcome of any contest. Instead, he is noting that if one can get on top, it is a lot easier to stay there. It’s a pragmatic lesson about getting ahead as a means of achieving final success.

Successful positioning from the onset of any endeavor is valuable. If you can enter any process and establish a strong initial position, you are better able to ward off challenges and to advance your interests. Although you can win when you are “playing from behind,” it is a lot easier to reach your final goals when you start from a position of authority.

That should remind all of us to conduct adequate preparation and planning before starting our march to any individual goal. We don’t want to begin at a disadvantage. Instead, like Leahy, we want to secure that quick lead so that we can dictate the terms of our journey as much as possible.

Getting an early lead is motivating. Once you “get off on the right foot,” you understand that you can succeed. Those early scores make it clear to you that you can get the job done and that success is possible. The early lead gives you a taste of victory and is a huge-confidence booster. You might already have the motivation necessary to start your quest, but if you can find ways to post early gains, it will fuel your efforts as you advance.

Building that early lead doesn't just give you more power to control situations. That advantage is hefty in and of itself, but the real strength of getting off to a hot start is that it creates something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. You gain an advantage, which gives you the inspiration to continue. In turn, your advantage grows. That's a nice loop in which to be stuck!

You can use the power of an early lead in your life. As we discussed in the introduction to this volume, none of these inspiring words and concepts mean a great deal, unless we can translate them into something concrete. Unless you plan on donning a gold helmet and suiting up for Old Notre Dame, Leahy's perspective on fourteen-point leads requires some real-world application.

Remember that if you can put yourself in a position--one in which you start to establish yourself firmly and in which you can get a taste of early success--you will be far better able to continue on track to meet your goals. That means that advance planning, organization, and a goal structure that allows some immediate positive feedback might just help you to post an incredible personal winning percentage.

## FIGHTING BACK

Paul “Bear” Bryant is the standard against which all other football coaches are measured. Famed as an innovator and motivator, Bryant’s name is now synonymous with the idea of a great coach and leader.

Bryant, the quintessential motivator, once said:

*“There is not a person alive who isn’t going to have some awfully bad days in their lives. I tell my players that what I mean by fighting is when your house burns down, and your wife runs off with the drummer, and you’ve lost your job and all odds are against you... What are you going to do? Most people just lay down and die. Well, I want my people to fight back.”*

Using an exaggerated tale of woe well suited for a country music song as a backdrop, Bryant underlines the importance of a “never say die” attitude. He wanted his players to be prepared to do their best regardless of the odds and the circumstances.

That kind of disposition may be easier to talk about than it is to develop. However, by illustrating a worse case scenario and arguing that it is possible to find that inner drive and determination that set you on the path to your goals in the first place reminds us that anything is possible.

There will be bad days. There will be times when your goals seem, at least momentarily, like pipe dreams. However, you cannot give up. Instead, you must fight back. Some people will tell you to make lemonade from life’s lemons. Bear Bryant might have advised picking up the lemons, throwing them right back in life’s eyes and carrying on with your plans, undeterred.

Success is, in the end, a matter of attitude. Helpful hints and positive reinforcements can help one to make their way through rocky patches toward their aspirations, but the difference between “making it” and falling short usually has one’s individual attitude--and willingness to fight back--at its core.

History is full of amazing stories featuring people who fought back from odds far greater than those in Bryant’s hypothetical. Illness, war, atrocity,

abuse and other negative influences have put countless future success stories in situations that would seem to be unbeatable. Yet those individuals managed to persevere in the face of remarkable peril. They were willing to fight back.

## TWO PLAYS

Colorful basketball coach Abe Lemons once said:

*“There are really only two plays. Romeo and Juliet, and put the darn ball in the basket.”*

Lemons’ humorous remark cut to the core of what winning basketball games was really about. If you wanted to win, you needed to score points. Put the ball in the basket. All of the rest--the endless strategizing, the complicated assessments, the trick plays, and the carefully plotted strategies--is meaningless if it doesn’t support that supreme objective.

Often, coaches can get lost in the “X’s and O’s.” Creative strategizing and complicated plotting can get in the way of actual results. In the business world, and elsewhere, people speak of “paralysis by analysis.” That’s the same idea. We can get so overloaded in thought and so focused on the minutiae of a situation that we lost track of what really matters. According to Lemons, there is really only one play in basketball--the one that puts the ball through the hoop.

The remark has value on a few different levels. It reminds us to worry more about achieving goals than about the elegance with which we do so. It also serves as an important reminder to cut through mental clutter and to take action.

It’s all about scoring baskets. Lemons dismissal of precision coaching and over-analysis of detail within the game of basketball was undoubtedly presented with a tongue firmly planted in cheek. Lemons did take great pains to coach his team on many of the game’s finer points, after all. However, his comment revealed a core truth about winning--it’s not always about how you get there, it is about getting there.

If your goals are important and you can find a way to reach them, that is what really matters. Whether your first plan worked, or it took three or four efforts to find a solution is meaningless. Accomplishing your goals with ease and elegance could be great for a lifetime’s “highlight reel,” but the most important thing is getting the job done (within the confines of the “rules,” of course). The only play that matters--the only strategy that matters--is the one that works.

Don't get lost in the details--take action. Lemons' coy remark was his way of reminding people that once you get past all of the detailed thought and consideration, the part that really mattered was finding a way to score points. Details are important--they can't be overlooked. However, it doesn't pay in basketball or life to become too nit-picky. At some point, we need to take action. If we are going to reach our goals, we will have to put the proverbial ball through the hoop.

## WINNING OR NOT LOSING?

Famed baseball personality Casey Stengel knew a great deal about both winning and losing. He secured world championships as a manager on more than one occasion and piloted New York Yankees teams filled with future Hall of Fame talents. He also navigated the fledgling New York Mets to the least successful season in modern baseball history. Over his decades in the game, his knowledge of what separated wins from losses grew.

Stengel was famed for his odd turns of language and press-friendly comedic remarks. Sometimes, though, some real gems of wisdom emerged from his mangled syntax. On winning and losing, Stengel once remarked:

*“Most games are lost, not won.”*

That’s an extremely powerful statement that can have a profound impact on how we look at competition and success. We generally tend to focus on the positive forces that lead to victory, but Stengel reminds us that the traits that lead to failure may often be far more powerful than those positive factors. You don’t get beat, according to his claim, as often as you lose. The difference is significant.

From a sports perspective, it means that one must remain vigilant at all times and to constantly work on performing the fundamentals as consistently and perfectly as possible. It means that avoiding costly errors and creating opportunities for one’s opponents must be avoided.

From a self-improvement perspective, it means that we need to be personally vigilant regarding any force--internal or external--that might lead us to slip into bad habits or to derail the pursuit of our goals.

Take for instance, someone who has a goal to quit smoking. She is prepared. She has a plan. She is committed to getting the job done. However, in a moment of weakness, she decides she can enjoy one cigarette at a social gathering. The next morning, she finds herself in line at the convenience store, anteing up for a pack of smokes. Did she lose? Well, she certainly didn’t reach her goal. Did the cigarettes win? No. The cigarettes didn’t take an intentional action designed to produce a certain response. They merely found their way back into her life because she

dropped her guard and lost track of her “fundamentals.”

Think about some of the disappointments you have experienced. Did they really stem from you “getting beat,” or did they happen because you allowed yourself to lose?

Developing proactive success strategies is a critical element of goal attainment. Finding ways to remain committed to them, and to avoid allowing bad habits or other forces to stop you is just as important. In Casey Stengel’s opinion, that might even be more critical.

## CONSISTENCY

Very few college football coaches have experienced the success of Joe Paterno. He's won more games than only a handful of coaches and has sent over two hundred of his college ballplayers into the professional ranks. "Joe Pa" is the game's elder statesmen and is widely recognized as one of the most successful and influential coaches in history.

Throughout his many years at the helm of Penn State football, Paterno has said more than a few memorable things. One of the most insightful was:

*"You have to perform at a consistently higher level than others. That's the mark of a true professional."*

Consistency isn't the most exciting topic. In fact, it's downright boring. Consistency means showing up every day, doing what needs to be done, and remaining steadfast in your commitment to taking action. Consistency is the opposite of excitement. It's a dull, "day in and day out" proposition. It is also the basis for success. One can't realize the thrill of obtaining his or her loftiest goals without it.

Paterno has seen more than his share of excitement. National championship games, last second wins and losses, and a host of other thrilling moments have happened with him on the sidelines, coaching. He apparently understood just how important a genuine commitment to consistency was to making those thrills come about.

As you work toward meeting your own personal goals, consider Paterno's observation. Separating the greatest successes from the rest is the willingness to do the foundation work. That requires consistency.

You can't hope to reach your maximum potential if you decide to live your life "off and on." You need to be prepared to keep your goals in mind and to do the things necessary to reach them. That means taking action every day, even when those actions aren't that thrilling, in and of themselves.

That doesn't mean sleepwalking through those actions, though. As Paterno notes, you don't just need to be consistent, you need to perform at a higher level than others do consistently. That means working hard, not just working. It means doing your best at every turn, day after day.

Joe Paterno has had more than one exciting afternoon on the gridiron and has surely met some, if not many, of his own personal goals. Those moments of glory stemmed from his and his players' hours spent performing at the highest possible level on a consistent basis.

Moments of accomplishment don't emerge suddenly and without warning. They come from consistency. They happen because of our willingness to spend time and effort creating the circumstances in which they can emerge. You have to be good. You also have to be consistent.

## CONCLUSION

Winning baseball games or scoring baskets may not have a lot to do with your life, directly. Most of us don't have sports aspirations. Our goals are different and as unique as each of us is. However, the professional motivators we call "coaches" know a great deal about what takes a person from any given starting point to the pinnacle of success. They understand the value of goals and the traits necessary to meet them.

As you continue your efforts at living a deeper, richer life, remember some of the valuable lessons from people like Casey Stengel, Abe Lemons, Paul Bryant and Joe Paterno. Those famed coaches may not have a great deal in common with you on the surface, but when it comes down to what separates those who reach their goals from those who do not, they know a great deal.

*When you're playing against a stacked deck, compete even harder. Show the world how much you'll fight for the winners circle. If you do, someday the cellophane will crackle off a fresh pack, one that belongs to you, and the cards will be stacked in your favor.*

*--Pat Riley*

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