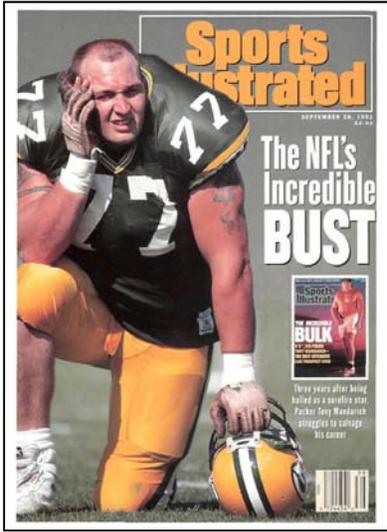


Owning Your Failure

It's Part of the Human Journey



We live in a time of extensive institutional failure accentuated by a disturbing trend of an ever-fading sense of personal responsibility. If you want proof of how important leadership is review the excuses put forth daily by our political, educational and corporate leaders. Examine how they whitewash over mistakes, refuse to take responsibility, shift the blame, find a scapegoat, or simply lie. If our leaders lead in this manner, how are followers supposed to respond?

Good leadership is always a matter of character. Effective leadership hinges on trust and is cultivated in the words and deeds of the leader. Dishonesty and disrespect are incompatible with honorable leadership.

Authentic leaders own their failures. Admitting ownership of one's problems and failures open's one up to understanding how their actions impact and affect others. It brings the opportunity to teach others how to do better learning vicariously by others' failures. And at the simplest level, if a mistake has no owner it is likely to be repeated. Every mistake can be corrected and serve as inspiration to better solutions.

I recently sat down for a conversation about

student-athletics, leadership and responsibility with Tony Mandarich. Mandarich was the second pick in the 1989 NFL Draft and the subject of a Sports Illustrated article that featured him on the cover. The SI cover hailed Mandarich as *The Best Offensive Line Prospect Ever*.

Shortly after being the number two pick in the draft, failure entered Mandarich's journey. For the first time in his life, Mandarich felt true defeat. He never played in a Pro-Bowl game and the Green Bay Packers, the team that drafted him, let him go after his contract ended.

In his book, *My Dirty Little Secrets: Steroids, Alcohol & God*, Mandarich reflects on his career in Green Bay as "the beginning of four years of shame, embarrassment and disgrace...I was so constantly doped up by drugs that the reality of the humiliation didn't hit until much later, when the drugs were finally wiped out of my system."

Mandarich, who admits to steroid use during his college years, found himself in the NFL with the responsibility—self-imposed and media driven—to live up to his billing as the greatest prospect ever.

I asked Mandarich, a two-time All-American at Michigan State what kind of leader he was and what kind of leader he was willing to follow during his playing career. "I felt I was a leader. I led by example. I did what I felt was above and beyond the call of duty. "I didn't want average results. If you want average results you do average things. If you want greater results you have to go beyond what's asked of you. And I felt that I did. I feel I do that today in my business."

An effective leader knows the capacities of each team member. Knowing one another's strengths and weaknesses is vital to maximizing a team's potential. "I guess I've always been blessed with the understanding that no one person has all the

The Academy for Sport Leadership's underlying convictions are as follows: 1) the most important lessons of leadership are learned in real-life situations, 2) team leaders develop best through active practice, structured reflection, and informative feedback, 3) learning to lead is an on-going process in which guidance from a mentor, coach, or colleague helps facilitate learning and growth, and 4) leadership lessons learned in sport should transcend the game and assist student-athletes in developing the capacity to lead in today's changing environment.

answers and I applied that to myself” Mandarich stated regarding team leadership. “I led more by example though at times if I saw something that was wrong or going to become a cancer I addressed it right away.”

As for the type of leader he was willing to follow Mandarich stated clearly that “Mostly guys that led by example.” “There were a lot of talkers but not a lot of walkers.” “Guys that led by example were way more impressive to me. Some of those guys were also vocal, but not in a screaming kind of a way.”

Today we see professional athletes quick to shift blame and refuse to take responsibility. Mandarich’s story, in the end, is counter to the sport culture—he actually takes responsibility for his struggles, for his failures. During the course of our conversation it became obvious that Mandarich has become a very humble man willing to share his story knowing that it can have a positive effect on people.

Mandarich initially didn’t accept responsibility for his failures. “I blamed the team, blamed the media, blamed the fans, blamed the expectations, but I had to come to the realization that I was the problem.” Mandarich has learned that it’s his responsibility to own his failures. He stated, “I was the problem. It wasn’t the organization or that geographical location. Wherever I was, I was the problem until I chose to change it. How you live, how you act on a day-to-day basis becomes your character. If you were to do your research and look at my character before 1995 and look at my character after 1995 you’d see a huge difference. A 180 degree turn.”

A vital element necessary for a sports team to reach its potential is so often found in the leadership provided from team captains and team leaders. Mandarich feels many young student-athletes may resist leading because of self-induced fear. “I think fear may be part of it, also, ability,” said Mandarich.

The nature of competitive athletics is in many ways like white-water rafting. Periods of calm interspersed with sudden frenetic confusion and disorder. Responsibility, accountability, reliability, dependability and trustworthiness are a part of the world of athletics. Each is a vital factor in positive and effective leadership.

“There’s no way of getting around it,” Mandarich said. “You either take responsibility now or later. It’s guaranteed you’re going to have to take responsibility. I’m of the school that I’d much rather deal with it now.”

Mandarich’s experience reinforces the notion that high-performing teams maximize their potential because they do things differently than those that underachieve. Mandarich elaborated on how important ownership is to the core of what makes leaders successful, and thereby affecting their team.

“Each year the dynamic (team) was different. How we held each other accountable and responsible. The year we went to the Rose Bowl we were extremely accountable to each other. Whether it was film study, weight room, assignments on the field.” “You miss a block on Tuesday and you’re like ‘Okay’ I’ll get it. You miss the same block on Wednesday and the guy next to you says something. That kind of stuff, when your peer is holding you accountable it carries a lot of weight.”

It’s been twenty years since Mandarich graced the cover of SI and was deified by the press. He’s changed. His story is compelling and provides insights that many young coaches and student-athletes should find relevant to their situation.

The challenges of coaching modern athletes are many. However, as a coach you have an opportunity to develop team leaders capable of impacting and influencing their teammates. Sports can be a powerful laboratory in which young people learn how to lead.

“The game of life and the game of a sport are very close,” Mandarich exhorted. “One of the greatest things that football taught me was how to deal with other people. Because you’re going to get a huge range of emotions. Not only from yourself, but from your peers and teammates, you’re going to see them at their highest highs and lowest lows. When they get in trouble, how you stick together, how you fight and bleed together. How you work out together how you sweat together. A lot of that you can take and put right into life.”