

Coach Fitz's Management Theory

By BY MICHAEL LEWIS MARCH 28, 2004

When I was 12, I thought that when The New Orleans Times-Picayune wrote about the "struggle for control of the West Bank," it meant the other side of the Mississippi River. I thought that my shiny gold velour pants actually looked good. I kept a giant sack of Nabisco chocolate-chip cookies under my bed so that they might be available in an emergency -- a flood, say, or a hurricane -- that made it harder to get to the grocery store. From the safe distance of 43, "12" looks less an age than a disease, and for the most part, I've been able to forget all about it -- not the events and the people, but the feelings that gave them meaning. But there are exceptions. A few people, and a few experiences, simply refuse to be trivialized by time. There are teachers with a rare ability to enter a child's mind; it's as if their ability to get there at all gives them the right to stay forever. I once had such a teacher. His name was Billy Fitzgerald, but everybody just called him Coach Fitz.

Forgetting Fitz was impossible -- I'll come to why in a moment -- but avoiding him should have been a breeze. And for 30 years I'd had next to nothing to do with him or with the school where he coached me, the Isidore Newman School in New Orleans. But in just the past year, I heard two pieces of news about him that, taken together, made him sound suspiciously like something I never imagined he could be: a mystery. The first came last spring, when one of his former players, a 44-year-old financier named David Pointer, had the idea of redoing the old school's gym and naming it for Coach Fitz. Pointer started calling around and found that hundreds of former players and their parents shared his enthusiasm for his old coach, and the money poured in. "The most common response from the parents," Pointer said, "is that Fitz did all the hard work."

Then came the second piece of news: after the summer baseball season, Fitz gave a speech to his current Newman players. It had been a long, depressing season: the kids, who during the school year won the Louisiana state baseball championship in their division, had lost interest. Fitz grew increasingly upset with them until, following their final summer game, he went around the room and explained what was wrong with each and every one of them. One player had wasted his talent to pursue a life of ease; another blamed everyone but himself for his failure; a third agreed before the summer to lose 15 pounds and instead gained 10. The players went home and complained about Fitz to their parents. Fathers of eight of them -- half the team -- had then complained to the headmaster.

The past was no longer on speaking terms with the present. As the cash poured in from former players and parents of former players who wanted to name the gym for the 56-year-old Fitz, his current players and their parents were doing their best to persuade the headmaster to get rid of him. I called a couple of the players involved, now college freshmen. Their fathers had been among the complainers, but they spoke of the episode as a kind of natural disaster beyond their control. One of the players, who asked not to be named, called his teammates "a bunch of whiners" and explained that the reason Fitz was in such trouble was that "a lot of the parents are big-money donors."

I grew curious enough to fly down to New Orleans to see the headmaster. The Isidore Newman School is the sort of small private school that every midsize American city has at least two of -- one of them called Country Day. Most of the 70 or so kids in my class came from families that were affluent by local standards. I'm not sure how many of us thought we'd hit a triple, but quite a few had been born on third base. The school's most striking trait is that it was founded in 1903 as a manual training school meant largely for Jewish orphans. About half my classmates were Jewish, but I didn't know any orphans. In any case, the current headmaster's name is Scott McLeod, and, he said, the school he'd taken charge of in 1993 was different from the school I graduated from in 1978. "The parents' willingness to intercede on the kids' behalf, to take the kids' side, to protect the kid, in a not healthy way -- there's much more of that each year," he said. "It's true in sports, it's true in the classroom. And it's only going to get worse." Fitz sat at the very top of the list of hardships that parents protected their kids from; indeed, the first angry call McLeod received after he became headmaster came from a father who was upset that Fitz wasn't giving his son more playing time.

Since then McLeod had been like a man in an earthquake straddling a fissure. On one side he had this coach about whom former players cared intensely; on the other side he had these newly organized and outraged parents of current players. When I asked him why he didn't simply ignore the parents, he said, quickly, that he couldn't do that: the parents were his customers. ("They pay a hefty tuition," he said. "They think that entitles them to a say.") But when I asked him if he'd ever thought about firing Coach Fitz, he had to think hard about it. "The parents want so much for their kids to have success as they define it," he said. "They want them to get into the best schools and go on to the best jobs. And so if they see their kid fail -- if he's only on the J.V., or the coach is yelling at him -- somehow the school is responsible for that." And while he didn't see how he could ever "fire a legend," he did see how he could change him. Several times in his tenure he had done something his predecessors had never done: summon Fitz to his office and insist that he "modify" his behavior. "And to his credit," the headmaster said, "he did that."

Obviously, whatever Fitz had done to modify his behavior hadn't satisfied his critics. But then, from where he started, he had a long way to go.

When we first laid eyes on him, we had no idea who he was, except that he played in the Oakland A's farm system and was spending his off-season, for reasons we couldn't fathom, coaching eighth-grade basketball. We were in the seventh grade, and so, theoretically, indifferent to his existence. But the outdoor court on which we seventh graders practiced was just an oak tree apart from the eighth grade's court. And within days of this new coach's arrival we found ourselves riveted by his performance. Our coach was a pleasant, mild-mannered fellow, and our practices were always pleasant, mild-mannered affairs. The eighth grade's practices were something else: a 6-foot-4-inch, 220-pound minor-league catcher with the face of a street fighter hollering at the top of his lungs for three straight hours. Often as not, the eighth graders had done something to offend their new coach's sensibilities, and he'd have them running wind sprints until they doubled over. When finally they collapsed, unable to run another step, he'd pull from his back pocket his personal collection of Bobby Knight sayings and begin reading aloud.

This was new. We didn't know what to make of it. Sean put it best. Sean was Sean Tuohy, our best player and, therefore, our authority on pretty much everything. That year he would lead our

basketball team to a 32-0 record; a few years later, he'd lead our high school to a pair of Louisiana state championships; and a few years after that, he'd take Ole Miss to its first-ever Southeastern Conference basketball title. He would set the S.E.C.'s record for career assists (he still holds it) and get himself drafted by the New Jersey Nets -- not bad for a skinny six-foot white kid in a game yet to establish a three-point line. Sean Tuohy had fight enough in him for three. But one afternoon during seventh-grade basketball practice, Sean looked over at this bizarre parallel universe being created on the next court by this large, ferocious man and said, "Oh, God, please don't ever let me get to the eighth grade."

As it turned out, eighth grade was inevitable, though by the time we got to it Fitz had moved on to coach at the high school. My own experience of him began the summer after my freshman year -- after he quit the Oakland A's farm system and became the Newman baseball and basketball coach. I was 14, could pass for 12 and was of no obvious athletic use. It was the last night of the Babe Ruth season -- the summer league for 13-to-15-year-olds. We were tied for first place with our opponents. The stands were packed. Sean Tuohy was on the mound, it was the bottom of the last inning and we were up, 2-1. (These things you don't forget.) There was only one out, and the other team put runners on first and third, but, from my comfortable seat on the bench, it was hard to get too worked up about it. The first rule of New Orleans life was that whatever game he happened to be playing, Sean Tuohy won it. Then Fitz made his second trip of the inning to the pitcher's mound, and all hell broke loose in the stands. Their fans started hollering at the ump: it was illegal to visit the mound twice in one inning and leave your pitcher in. The umpires, wary as ever of being caught listening to fans, were clearly inclined to overlook the whole matter. But before they could, a well-known New Orleans high-school baseball coach who carried a rule book on his person came out from the stands onto the field and stopped the game. He, the ump had to listen to: Sean Tuohy had to be yanked.

Out of one side of his mouth Fitz tore into the rule-book-carrying high-school coach -- who scurried, ratlike, back to the safety of his seat; out of the other he shouted at me to warm up. The ballpark was already in an uproar, but the sight of me (I resembled a scoop of vanilla ice cream with four pickup sticks jutting out from it) sent their side into spasms of delight. I represented an extreme example of our team's general inability to intimidate the opposition. The other team's dugout needed a shave; ours needed, at most, a bath. (Some unwritten rule in male adolescence dictates that the lower your parents' tax bracket, the sooner you acquire facial hair.) As I walked out to the mound, their hairy, well-muscled players danced jigs in their dugout, their coaches high-fived, their fans celebrated and shouted lighthearted insults. The game, as far as they were concerned, was over. I might have been unnerved if I'd paid them any attention; but I was, at that moment, fixated on the only deeply frightening thing in the entire ballpark: Coach Fitz.

By then I had heard (from the eighth graders, I believe) all the Fitz stories. Billy Fitzgerald had been one of the best high-school basketball and baseball players ever seen in New Orleans, and he'd gone on to play both sports at Tulane University. He'd been a top draft pick of the Oakland A's. But we never discussed Fitz's accomplishments. We were far more interested in his intensity. We heard that when he was in high school, when his team lost, Fitz refused to board the bus; he walked, in his catcher's gear, from the ballpark at one end of New Orleans to his home at the other. Back then he played against another New Orleans superstar, Rusty Staub. While on second base, Staub made the mistake of taunting Fitz's pitcher. Fitz raced out from

behind home plate and, in full catcher's gear, chased a terrified future All-Star around the field. I'd heard another, similar story about Fitz and Pete Maravich, the basketball legend. When Fitz's Tulane team played Maravich's L.S.U. team, Fitz, a tenacious defender, had naturally been assigned to guard Maravich. Pistol Pete had rung him up for 66 points, but before he finished, he, too, had made the mistake of taunting Fitz. It was, as the eighth graders put it, a two-hit fight: Fitz hit Pistol Pete, and Pistol Pete hit the floor. But it got better: Maravich's father, Press, happened to be the L.S.U. basketball coach. When he saw Fitz deck his son, he ran out and jumped on the pile. Fitz made the cover of Sports Illustrated, with Pete in a headlock and Press on his back.

And now he was standing on the pitcher's mound, erupting with a Vesuvian fury, waiting for me to arrive. When I did, he handed me the ball and said, in effect, Put it where the sun don't shine. I looked at their players, hugging and mugging and dancing and jeering. No, they did not appear to suspect that I was going to put it anywhere unpleasant. Then Fitz leaned down, put his hand on my shoulder and, thrusting his face right up to mine, became as calm as the eye of a storm. It was just him and me now; we were in this together. I have no idea where the man's intention ended and his instincts took over, but the effect of his performance was to say, There's no one I'd rather have out here in this life-or-death situation. And I believed him!

As the other team continued to erupt with joy, Fitz glanced at the runner on third base, a reedy fellow with an aspiring mustache, and said, "Pick him off." Then he walked off and left me all alone.

If Zeus had landed on the pitcher's mound and issued the command, it would have had no greater effect. The chances of picking a man off third base are never good, and even worse in a close game, when everyone's paying attention. But this was Fitz talking, and I can still recall, 30 years later, the sensation he created in me. I didn't have words for it then, but I do now: I am about to show the world, and myself, what I can do.

At the time, this was a wholly novel thought for me. I'd spent the previous school year racking up C-minuses, picking fights with teachers and thinking up new ways to waste my time on earth. Worst of all, I had the most admirable, loving parents on whom I could plausibly blame nothing. What was wrong with me? I didn't know. To say I was confused would be to put it kindly; "inert" would be closer to the truth. In the three years before I met Coach Fitz, the only task for which I exhibited any enthusiasm was sneaking out of the house at 2 in the morning to rip hood ornaments off cars -- you needed a hacksaw and two full nights to cut the winged medallion off a Bentley. Now this fantastically persuasive man was insisting, however improbably, that I might be some other kind of person. A hero.

The kid with the fuzz on his upper lip bounced crazily off third base, oblivious to the fact that he represented a new solution to an adolescent life crisis. I flipped the ball to the third baseman, and it was in his glove before the kid knew what happened. The kid just flopped around in the dirt as the third baseman applied the tag. I struck out the next guy, and we won the game. Afterward, Coach Fitz called us together for a brief sermon. Hot with rage at the coach with the rule book -- the ballpark still felt as if it were about to explode -- he told us all that there was a quality no one within five miles of this place even knew about, called "guts," which we all embodied. He threw

me the game ball and said he'd never in all his life seen such courage on the pitcher's mound. He'd caught Catfish Hunter and Rollie Fingers and a lot of other big-league pitchers -- but who were they?

A few weeks later, when school started again, I was told the headmaster wanted to see me in his office. I didn't need directions. (My most recent trip, a few months earlier, had come after I turned on an English teacher and asked, "Are you always so pleasant or is this just an especially good day for you?") But this time the headmaster had good news. Fitz had just spoken to him about me, he said. There might be hope after all.

But there wasn't, yet. I had thought the point of this whole episode was simple: winning is everything.

I confess that the current headmaster didn't clarify matters for me. Fitz had modified his behavior -- he was, the headmaster agreed, mellower than before -- and yet his intensity was more loathed than ever. Anyway, his unmodified behavior is the reason his former players want to name the gym for him. The school had given me a list of every player Fitz ever coached, most of whom I didn't know. I called up about 20 of them to ask them how they felt now about the experience. Their collective response could be fairly summarized in a sentence: Fitz changed my life. They all had Fitz stories, and it's worth hearing at least one of them, to get their general flavor. Here is Philip Skelding, a 30-year-old student at Harvard Medical School, who played basketball for Fitz:

"I wasn't a natural athlete -- I had to work at it. It was my junior year -- the first year we won the state championship -- and no one thought we'd be any good. We had just finished second in the John Ehret tournament. When we got back to the gym, Fitz was pretty quiet in his demeanor and jingling the coins in his pocket, as he always would. He had our runner-up trophy in his hand. 'You know what I think about second place?' he said. 'Here's what I think about second place.' And he slammed the trophy against the floor, and we all flinched and covered our eyes, because these tiny shattered pieces were flying all over the place. The little man from the top of the trophy landed in the lap of the guy next to me. I loved that moment. We took the little man and put him up on top of the air conditioner. We touched the little man on our way out of the locker room, before every game. Second place: yeah, that wasn't our goal, either. . . . I still think about Fitz. In moments when my own discipline is slipping, I will have flashbacks of him."

The more I looked into it, the more mysterious this new twist in Fitz's coaching career became. The parents never confronted Fitz directly. They did their work behind his back. The closest to a direct complaint that I could tease from the parents I spoke with came from a father of one of the team's better players. "You know about what Fitz did to Peyton Manning, don't you?" he said. Manning, now the quarterback of the Indianapolis Colts and most valuable player of the N.F.L. last season, played basketball and baseball at Newman for Fitz. Fitz, the story went, had benched Manning for skipping basketball practice, and Manning challenged him. They'd had words, maybe even come to blows, and Manning left the basketball team. And while he continued to play baseball for Fitz, their relationship was widely taken as proof, by those who sought it, that Fitz was out of control. "You ought to read Peyton's book," the disgruntled father says. "It's all in there."

And it is. Manning wrote his memoirs with his father, Archie, and understandably, they are mostly about football. But it isn't his high-school football coach that Manning dwells on: it's Fitz. He goes on for pages about his old baseball coach, and while he says nothing critical, he does indeed reveal what Fitz did to him:

"One of the things I had to learn growing up was toughness, because it doesn't seem to be something you can count on being born with. Dad . . . says he may have told me, 'Peyton, you have to stand up for this or that,' but the resolve that gets it done is something you probably have to appreciate first in others. Coach Fitz was a major source for mine, and I'm grateful."

Of course you should never trust a memoir. And so I called Peyton Manning, to make sure of his feelings. He might be one of the highest-paid players in pro football, but on the subject of Fitz, he has no sense of the value of his time. "As far as the respect and admiration I feel for the man," Manning said, "I couldn't put it into words. Just incredibly strong. Unlike some coaches -- for whom it's all about winning and losing -- Coach Fitz was trying to make men out of people. I think he prepares you for life. And if you want my opinion, the people who are screwing up high-school sports are the parents. The parents who want their son to be the next Michael Jordan. Or the parent who beats up the coach or gets into a fight in the stands. Here's a coach who is so intense. Yet he's never laid a hand on anybody."

It was true. Fitz never laid a hand on anyone. He didn't need to. He had other ways of getting our attention.

It had been nine months since I'd established, to my satisfaction, my heroic qualities. I was now pitching for the varsity, and we had explicit training rules: no smoking, no drinking, no drugs, no staying out late. We signed a contract saying as much, but Fitz had too much of a talent for melodrama to leave our commitment to baseball so cut and dried. There were the written rules; and there were the rules. Over Easter vacation, half of adolescent New Orleans decamped for the Florida beaches, where sex, along with a lot of other things, was unusually obtainable. Fitz forbade anyone who played for him from going to Florida and, to help them resist temptation, held early-morning practices every day. Once, he discovered that two of our players had driven the eight hours to Florida and back, in the dead of night, between morning practices. He herded us all into the locker room and said that while he couldn't prove his case, he knew that some of us had strayed from the path, and that he hoped the culprits got sand in an awkward spot where it would hurt for the rest of their lives.

Graduating from Babe Ruth to the varsity with only the slightest physical justification (I now resembled less a scoop of vanilla ice cream than a rounder hobbit) meant coping with an out-of-control hormonal arms race. A few of our players had sprouted sideburns, but their players retaliated by growing terrifying little goatees and showing up at games with wives and, on one shocking occasion, children. I still had no muscles and no facial hair, but I did have my own odor. I smelled, pretty much all the time, like Ben-Gay. I wore the stuff on my perpetually sore right shoulder and elbow. I wore it, also, on the bill of my cap, where Fitz had taught me to put it, to generate the grease for a spitball that might, just, compensate for my pathetic fastball. Everywhere I went that year I emitted a vaguely medicinal vapor, and it is the smell of Ben-Gay I associate with what happened next.

What happened next is that, during Mardi Gras break, I left New Orleans with my parents for a week of vacation. I had thought that if I was a baseball success -- and I was becoming one -- that was enough. But it wasn't; success, to Fitz, was a process. Life as he led it and expected us to lead it had less to do with trophies than with sacrifice in the name of some larger purpose: baseball. By missing a full week of practices over Mardi Gras, I had just violated some sacred but unwritten rule. Now I was back on the mound, a hunk of Ben-Gay drooping from the brim of my cap, struggling to relocate myself and my curveball. I didn't have the nerve to throw the spitter. I'd walked the first two batters I faced and was pitching nervously to the third.

Ball 2.

As I pitched I had an uneasy sensation -- on bad days I can still feel it, like a bum knee -- of having strayed from the Fitz Way. But I had no evidence of Fitz's displeasure; he hadn't said anything about the missed practices. Then his voice boomed out of our dugout.

"Where was Michael Lewis during Mardi Gras?"

I did my best not to look over, but out of the corner of my eye I could see him. He was pacing the dugout. I threw another pitch.

Ball 3.

"Everyone else was at practice. But where was Michael Lewis?"

I was now pitching with one eye on the catcher's mitt and the other on our dugout.

Ball 4.

The bases were now loaded. Another guy in need of a shave came to the plate.

"I'll tell you where Michael Lewis was: skiing!"

Skiing, in 1976, for a 15-year-old New Orleanian, counted as an exotic activity. Being exposed as a vacation skier on a New Orleans baseball field in 1976 was as alarming as being accused of wearing silk underpants in a maximum-security prison. Then and there, on the crabgrass of Slidell, La., Coach Fitz packed into a word what he usually required an entire speech to say: privilege corrupts. It enabled you to do what money could buy instead of what duty demanded. You were always skiing. As a skier, you developed a conviction, buttressed by your parents' money, that life was meant to be easy. That when difficulty arose, you could just hire someone to deal with it. That nothing mattered so much that you should suffer for it.

But now, suddenly, something did matter so much that I should suffer for it: baseball. Or, more exactly, Fitz! The man was pouring his heart and soul into me and demanding in return only that I pour myself into the game. He'd earned the right to holler at me whatever he wanted to holler. I got set to throw another pitch in the general direction of the strike zone.

"Can someone please tell me why Michael Lewis thinks it's O.K. to leave town and go . . . and go . . . and go? . . . "

Please, don't say skiing, I recall thinking as the ball left my hand. Or, if you must say skiing, don't shout it. Just then, the batter hit a sharp one-hopper back to the mound. I raised my glove to start the face-saving double play at the plate, but with my ears straining to catch Fitz's every word. And then, abruptly, his shouting stopped.

When I regained consciousness, I was on my back, blinking up at a hazy, not terribly remorseful Fitz. The baseball had broken my nose in five places. Oddly enough, I did not feel wronged. I felt, in an entirely new way, cared for. On the way to the hospital to get my nose fixed, I told my mother that the next time the family went skiing -- or anyplace else, for that matter -- they'd be going without me. After the doctor pieced my nose back together, he told me that if I still wanted to play baseball, I had to do it behind a mask. Grim as it all sounds, I don't believe I had ever been happier in my adolescent life. The rest of that season, when I walked out to the pitcher's mound, I resembled a rounder hobbit with a bird cage on his face; but I'd never been so filled with a sense of purpose. Immediately, I had a new taste for staying after baseball practice, for extra work. I became, in truth, something of a zealot, and it didn't take long to figure out how much better my life could be if I applied this new zeal acquired on a baseball field to the rest of it. It was as if this baseball coach had reached inside me, found a rusty switch marked Turn On Before Attempting to Use and flipped it.

Not long after that, the English teacher who had the misfortune also to experience me as a freshman held me after class to say that by some happy miracle, I was not recognizably the same human being I'd been a year earlier. What had happened? she asked. It was hard to explain.

I hadn't been to a Newman baseball game since I last played in one. On a sunny winter day this February, Fitz had arranged for his defending state champions to play a better team from a bigger school, 20 miles outside New Orleans. His hair had gone gray and he was carrying a few more pounds, but he retained his chief attribute: the room still felt pressurized simply because he was in it. "I definitely have a penchant for crossing the line," he said in his prison cell of an office before the game. "And some parents definitely think I'm out of control." The biggest visible change in his coaching life was a thicker veneer of professionalism. His players now had fancy batting cages, better weight rooms, the latest training techniques and scouting reports on opposing players. What they didn't have, most of them, was a meaningful relationship with their coach. "I can't get inside them anymore," he said. "They don't get it. But most kids don't get it."

By "it" he did not mean the importance of winning or even, exactly, of trying hard. What he meant was neatly captured on a sheet of paper he held in his hand, which he intended to photocopy and hand out to his players, as the keynote for one of his sermons. The paper contained a quote from Lou Piniella, the legendary baseball manager: he will never be a tough competitor. he doesn't know how to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. "It" was the importance of battling one's way through all the easy excuses life offers for giving up. Fitz had a gift for addressing this psychological problem, but he was no longer permitted to use it. "The trouble is," he said, "every time I try, the parents get in the way." About parents, he knew more

than I ever imagined. Alcoholism, troubled marriages, overbearing fathers -- he was disturbingly alert to problems in his players' home lives. (Did he know all this stuff about us?)

Fitz's office wasn't the office of a coach who wanted you to know of his success. There were no trophies or plaques, though he'd won enough of them to fill five offices. Other than a few old newspaper clips about his four children, now grown, there were few mementos. What he did keep was books -- lots of them. He was always something of a closet intellectual, though I was barely aware of this other side of him. I remember: when I first met him, he taught eighth-grade science and had a degree in biology. There were other clues that, as easily as he could be typecast as the Intense Coach, he had other dimensions: he was a devoted father. His wife, Peggy, was so pretty she made us all blush, and more to the point, she didn't seem to be the slightest bit intimidated by her husband. He had friends who didn't bite, and he even made small talk. Away from the game he had the ease and detachment of an aristocrat. But as a boy, I paid no attention to how he was away from the game. All I knew was that he cared about the way we played a game in a way we'd never seen anyone care about anything. All I wanted from him was his intensity.

"What really happened in your fight with Pete Maravich?" I asked him.

And he laughed. He never beat up Pete Maravich. (The truly brave thing he did was ask his Tulane coach for the job of guarding Maravich.) And though he did appear with Maravich on the cover of Sports Illustrated, he was guarding him, not throttling him. He never chased around after Rusty Staub either. Why would he be chasing Rusty Staub? he wondered. They'd gone to the same high school, though not at the same time; Staub was a senior when he was in the eighth grade. He never walked home after his high-school team lost -- they seldom lost -- though he had once, at Tulane. ("I got to the parish line and thought, hmm, is this really a good idea?") So where did they come from, these stories we told one another? They came from the imaginations of 14-year-old boys, in search of something even well-to-do parents couldn't provide.

In the corner of his office lay, haphazardly, an old stack of inspirational signs, hung by Fitz in the boys' locker room and removed for the current renovation -- the one that will leave the gym named for him. I picked one up and brushed the dust away: "What is to give light must endure burning. -Viktor Frankl."

He laughed. "I don't think we'll be putting that one back up."

Later, at the ballpark, a few of the fathers who had complained about Fitz clustered behind home plate. On the other end of the otherwise empty bleachers sat another man. His name was Stan Bleich, and he was a cardiologist who had grown up in Brooklyn. Both details were significant. He wasn't, like a lot of the dads, a lawyer. And he'd lived in New Orleans only 20 years, so by local standards he was an arriviste, an outsider. "I've had three kids go through Newman -- I have 39 school years of Newman parent life," he said. "And I've never once called the headmaster."

That changed last summer. One of the fathers, upset about Fitz's speech to his son, called Stan to encourage him to join the group and file a formal complaint. Instead, Stan went to see the headmaster and make the case for the defense. "The story had gotten so exaggerated," he told me.

"One parent said, 'Fitz called my kid fat.' But all Fitz said to that kid was, 'You promised me you'd lose 15 pounds, and you gained 10.'" Bleich said the parents told the headmaster that because of Fitz, the kids left with a bad taste in their mouths. "I said: 'Wait a minute, shouldn't they leave with a bad taste in their mouths? They skipped practice. They didn't try.' The game when Fitz missed his grandson's christening, three of the kids took off for Paris." Stan said Fitz reminded him of a college professor he had -- and was grateful that he had. "Ninety percent was not an A. One hundred percent was an A. Ninety percent was an F." He motioned to the group of fathers on the other end of the bleachers. "A couple of those guys won't talk to me," he said, "because I defended Fitz. But what can I do? My goal in life is not for my son to play college ball. Fitz has made my kid a better person, not just a better athlete. He's taught him that if he works at it, anything he wants, it's there for him."

What was odd about this little speech -- and, as the game began, it became glaringly apparent -- was that Stan Bleich's son was far and away the team's best player. At last count more than 40 colleges were recruiting Jeremy Bleich to play baseball for them -- and he was still only a junior. The question wasn't whether he would be able to play Division I college ball; the question was would he skip college to sign with the Yankees out of high school? He was a 16-year-old left-handed pitcher with a decent fastball, great command, a big-league change-up and charm to burn. He had no obvious baseball social deformity, other than his love for his coach, but that fact alone, it seemed, alienated him from his teammates. Someone had recently pelted the Bleich home with eggs. The older kids on the team poked fun at Jeremy but, in keeping with the spirit of their insurrection, never directly. "I've never had anyone say anything to my face," Jeremy told me later. "It's all behind my back. Like, last year, they started calling me 'J. Fitz.' I'm 15 years old and the seniors are making fun of me. I had no idea how to deal with it. They don't like me because I work hard? Because I care about it? I'm like, I can't change that." He never knows exactly what the other players might be saying about him, but he knows what they say about Fitz: "They think his intensity is ridiculous." And maybe they do. Of course, one fringe benefit of laughing at intensity is that it enables you to ignore the claims that a new kind of seriousness makes upon you.

An invisible line ran from the parents' desire to minimize their children's discomfort to the choices the children make in their lives. A week after my trip to New Orleans, two days before the start of the 2004 regular season, eight players were caught drinking. All but one of them -- two team captains, two members of the school's honor committee -- lied about it before eventually confessing. After he handed out the obligatory school-sanctioned two-week suspensions to the eight players, Fitz gathered the entire team for a sharp little talk. Not two days before, he had the patience for a long sermon about the dangers of getting a little too good at displacing responsibility. ("You're gonna lose. You're gonna have someone else to blame for it. But you're gonna lose. Is that what you want?") Now he had the patience only for a vivid threat: "I'm going to run you until you hate me." The first phone call, a few hours later, came from the mother of the third baseman, who said her son had drunk only "one sip of a daiquiri" and so shouldn't be made to run. She was followed by another father who wanted to know why his son, the second baseman, wasn't starting at shortstop instead.

There was always a question about whether Fitz controlled his temper, or his temper controlled him, or even if it mattered. In any case, the summer of 1976 was especially uncomfortable. Fitz

had entered us in a new league, with the bigger, Catholic schools. Defeat followed listless defeat until one night we lost by some truly spectacular score. Twice at the end of the game Fitz shouted at our baserunners to slide, and perhaps not seeing the point when down by 15-2 in getting scraped or even dirty, they went in standing up. Afterward, at 11 o'clock or so, we piled off the bus and into the gym. Before we could undress, Fitz said, "We're going out back." Out back of the gym was a surprisingly low-budget version of a playing field. The dirt was packed as hard as asphalt and speckled with shell shards, glass, bottle caps and God knows what else. Fitz lined us up behind first base and explained we were going to practice running to third. When we got there, we were to slide headfirst into the base. This, he said, would teach us to get down when he said to get down. Then he vanished into the darkness. A few moments later we heard his voice, from the general vicinity of third base. One by one, our players took off. In the beginning, there was some grumbling, but before long the only sound was of Fitz spotting a boy coming at him out of the darkness, shouting, "Hit it!"

Over and again we circled the bases, finishing with a headfirst slide onto, in effect, concrete. We ran and slid on that evil field until we bled and gasped for breath. The boy in front of me, a sophomore new to Fitz, began to cry. Finally, Fitz decided we'd had enough and ordered us inside. Back in the light we marveled at the evening's most visible consequence: ripped, muddy and bloody uniforms. We undressed and began to throw them into the laundry baskets -until Fitz stopped us. "We're not washing them," he said. "Not until we win."

Well, we were never going to win. We were out of our league. For the next few weeks -- seven games -- we wore increasingly foul and bloody and torn uniforms. We lost our ability to see our own filth; our appearance could be measured only by its effect on others. In that small community of people who cared about high-school baseball, word spread of this team that never bathed. People came to the ballpark just to see us get off the bus. Opposing teams, at first amused, became alarmed and then, I thought, just a tiny bit scared. You could see it in their eyes, the universal fear of the lunatic. Heh, heh, heh, those eyes said nervously, this is just a game, right? The guys on the other teams came to the ballpark to play baseball -- at which they just happened to be naturally superior. They played with one eye on the bar or the beach they were off to after the game. We alone were on this hellish quest for self-improvement.

After each loss we rode the bus back to the gym in silence. When we arrived, Fitz gave another of his sermons. They were always a little different, but they never strayed far from a general theme: What It Means to Be a Man. What it meant to be a man was that you struggled against your natural instinct to run away from adversity. You battled. "You go to war with me, and I'll go to war with you," he loved to say. "Jump on my back." The effect of his words on the male adolescent mind was greatly enhanced by their delivery. It's funny that after all these years I can recall only snippets of what Fitz said, but I can recall, in slow motion, everything he broke. There was the orange water cooler, cracked with a single swing of an aluminum baseball bat. There was a large white wall clock that hung in the Newman locker room for decades -- until he busted it with a single throw of a catcher's mitt.

The breaking of things was a symptom; the disease was the sheer effort the man put into the job of making us better. He was always the first to arrive and always the last to leave, and if any kid wanted to stay late for extra work, Fitz stayed with him. Before one game he became ill. He

climbed on the bus in a cold sweat. It was an hour's drive to the ballpark that day, and he had the driver stop twice on the highway so he could get off and vomit. He remained sick right through the game and all the way home. When we arrived at the gym, he paused to vomit, then delivered yet another impassioned speech. A few nights later, after a game, in the middle of what must be the grubbiest losing streak in baseball history, I caught him walking. I was driving home, through a bad neighborhood, when I spotted him. Here he was, in one of America's murder capitals, inviting trouble. It was miles from the gym to his house, and he owned a car, yet he was hoofing it. What the hell is he doing? I thought, and then I realized: He's walking home! Just the way they said he'd done in high school, every time his team lost! It was as if he were doing penance for our sins.

And then something happened: we changed. We ceased to be embarrassed about our condition. We ceased, at least for a moment, to fear failure. We became, almost, a little proud. We were a bad baseball team united by a common conviction: those other guys might be better than us, but there is no chance they could endure Coach Fitz. The games became closer; the battles more fiercely fought. We were learning what it felt like to lay it all on the line. Those were no longer hollow words; they were a deep feeling. And finally, somehow, we won. No one who walked into our locker room as we danced around and hurled our uniforms into the washing machine and listened to the speech Fitz gave about our fighting spirit would have known that they were looking at a team that now stood 1-12.

We listened to the man because he had something to tell us, and us alone. Not how to play baseball, though he did that better than anyone. Not how to win, though winning was wonderful. Not even how to sacrifice. He was teaching us something far more important: how to cope with the two greatest enemies of a well-lived life, fear and failure. To make the lesson stick, he made sure we encountered enough of both. I never could have explained at the time what he had done for me, but I felt it in my bones all the same. When I came home one day during my senior year and found the letter saying that, somewhat improbably, I had been admitted to Princeton University, I ran right back to school to tell Coach Fitz. Then I grew up.

I'd gone back to New Orleans again. The Times-Picayune had just picked the Newman Greenies to win another state championship. The only hitch was that after the drinking suspensions, they didn't have nine eligible ballplayers. It was a glorious Saturday afternoon and they were meant to be playing a nonleague game, but the game had been canceled. Fitz said nothing to the players about the cancellations but instead took them onto the field out back and began to hit ground balls to the infielders and fly balls to the outfielders. His face had a waxen pallor, he was running a fever and he was not, truth to tell, in the sweetest of moods. He was under the impression that he was now completely hamstrung -- that if he did anything approaching what he'd like to do, "I'll be in the headmaster's office on Monday morning."

Nevertheless, a kind of tension built -- what's he going to do? what can he do? -- until finally he called the team in to home plate. On the hard field in front of him, only a few yards from the place where, years ago, another group of teenage boys slid until they hurt, they formed their usual semicircle. Fitz has a tone perhaps best described as unnervingly pleasant: it's pleasant because it's calm; it's unnerving because he's not. In this special tone of his, he began by telling them one of Aesop's fables. The fable was about a boy who hurls rocks into a pond until a frog

risers up and asks him to stop. "No," says the boy, 'it's fun,'" Fitz said. "And the frog says, 'What's fun for some is death to others.'" Before anyone could wonder how that frog might apply to a baseball team, Fitz said: "That's how I feel about you right now. You are like that boy. You all are all about fun." His tone was still even, but it was the evenness of a pot of water just before the fire beneath it is turned up. Sure enough, a minute into the talk, his voice began to simmer.

"When are you consciously going to start dealing with the fact that this is a competitive situation? I mean, you are almost a recreational baseball team. The trouble is you don't play in a recreational league. You play serious, competitive interscholastic baseball. That means the other guy isn't out for recreation. He wants to strike you out. He wants to embarrass you . . . until your eyeballs roll over."

The boys were paying attention now. The man was born to drill holes into thick skulls and shout through them. I was as riveted by his performance as I'd been 26 years ago -- which was good, as he was coming to his point:

"One of the goodies about athletics is you get to find out if you can stretch. If you can get better. But you've got to push. And you guys don't even push to get through the day. You put more effort into parties than you do into this team."

He cited a few examples of parties into which his baseball players had put great effort. For a man with such overt contempt for parties, he was distressingly well informed about their details -- including the fact that, at some, the parents provided the booze:

"I know about parents. I know how much they love to say, 'I pay \$14,000 in tuition, and so my little boy deserves to play.' No way. You earn the right to play. I had a mom and dad, too, you know. I loved my mom and dad. My dad didn't understand much about athletics, and so he didn't always get it. You have to make that distinction at some point. At some point you have to stand up and be a man and say: 'This is how I'm going to do it. This is how I'm going to approach it.' When is the last time any of you guys did that? No. For you, it's all 'fun.' Well, it's not all fun. Some days it's work."

Then he wrapped it up, with a quote he attributed to Mark Twain, about how the difference between animals and people, the ability to think, is diminished by people's refusal to think. Aesop to Mark Twain, with a baseball digression and a lesson on self-weaning: the whole thing took five minutes.

And then his mood shifted completely. The kids climbed to their feet and followed their coach back to practice. He faced the most deeply entrenched attitude problem in his players in 31 years. His wife, Peggy, had hinted to me that for the first time, Fitz was thinking about giving up coaching altogether. He faced a climate of sensitivity that made it nearly impossible for him to change those attitudes. He faced, in short, a world trying to stop him from making his miracles. And on top of it all, he had the flu. It counted as the lowest moment, easily, in his career as a baseball coach. Unfairly, I took the moment to ask him, "Do you really think there's any hope for this team?" The question startled him into a new freshness. He was alive, awake, almost well

again. "Always," he said. "You never give up on a team. Just like you never give up on a kid." Then he paused. "But it's going to take some work."

And that's how I left him. Largely unchanged. No longer, sadly, my baseball coach. Instead, the kind of person who might one day coach my children. And when I think of that, I become aware of a new fear: that my children might never meet up with their Fitz. Or that they will, and their father will fail to understand what he's up to.

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