

The Soul of a Sports Machine

Fast Company, From: [Issue 75](#) | October 2003, Page 100 By: [Don Wallace](#)
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Attention must be paid when someone upends the laws of competitive gravity. What you should know about Bob Ladouceur is this.

On December 7, 1991, the De La Salle Spartans lost a football game, for the North Coast Section championship. The next season, they stopped losing -- period. No losses at all, nada, zilch. Since then, Coach Ladouceur has led his team to 11 straight unbeaten seasons: 138 victories, 0 defeats.

A sports junkie will recognize that this is a pretty special streak -- longer than the pro-football record of 17, the college-football record of 47, the 88 consecutive games won by John Wooden's UCLA basketball teams, and 400-meter hurdler Edwin Moses's 107 consecutive finals victories. In fact, it is quite possibly the world's longest streak at any level, in any sport.

But leave the stats to the guys on ESPN. Ladouceur's accomplishment is best savored by those far removed from the halcyon days of high-school gridiron glory. Anyone sweating over the realities of running a business in today's environment will relish how this coach does it.

For one thing, De La Salle is small (1,000 students), with almost 100% "employee" (read: student) turnover every four years. It's located in Concord, California, far from the madding chic of San Francisco, out in the sprawl of bedroom communities. The majority of Concord's citizens do not turn out for De La Salle's games; the private parochial school (of the Christian Brothers order) is resented by some vocal residents. Nor is the area an athletic hotbed.

And yet, year in and year out, the Spartans keep winning, all the while continually seeking higher levels of competition despite their annual changeover of players, who are called "undersized" and "less talented" every year and are often disparaged by their elite rivals.

In other words, here is a model for all of those who are outmanned, underfunded, and outgunned -- which fits a lot of us these days. So pipe down and listen up, because you'll want to take a page from the Ladouceur playbook. You're getting a blueprint for, yes, a sports machine, but one with the soul of a great business.

The System

Start with process. In 1979, Ladouceur sized up his few small, dispirited players, who hadn't had a winning season in the school's history. "My approach was all about process," he says. "I didn't have any long-term goals. I just said to myself, 'Let's teach these guys how to win and what it takes to win, and then make it a day-to-day process.' "

Create small victories.

Facing his players, Ladouceur said, " 'All I ask is this: by the time each practice ends, for you to be better than you were two or three hours ago.' Whether it was in the weight room or on the field, I asked them to walk off a little bit stronger, to understand the game a little more, or at least to have the plays that we were running down more."

Share the pains (and gains).

Ladouceur put his players on a grueling year-round strength and conditioning program. It was a way to change the culture, to weed out those predisposed to quitting, and to build a team bond. School legend has it that he sweated and lifted alongside his early teams (he was only 25 when he took the job). After 25 years, Ladouceur no longer lifts and runs with the boys, but he still shows an intense, existential concern for getting things right "not just mechanically or athletically," he says, "but in a spiritual sense."

Win with what you have. In business, as in football, size matters and talent makes a difference. But in a team sport such as football, as in business, size and talent gaps can be offset by intelligence and quickness. The mistake is to try to meet an opponent's strength where you are weak.

De La Salle's talent pool was thin, so Ladouceur installed two offensive plays, the "option" and the "veer," both of which don't require a top-flight quarterback, giant linemen, or large, fast running backs. The option depends on misdirection: The quarterback fakes to three running backs on every play and always has the choice to keep it himself or pass.

Trust your team, but help them to become trustworthy.

The veer offensive requires the quarterback to make the decision to run or hand off the ball even faster. In business terms, Ladouceur delegates to his line manager. This means trusting players to do what is required.

Trust isn't automatic. Coach Ladouceur doesn't just throw people into tight situations and expects them to prevail. " I try to be smart about it," he says dryly. "If someone doesn't have the speed or talent level, I always think they can make up for it by being smart, by being cagey, and by playing with common sense."

He doesn't just go by faith. He expects those qualities to be demonstrated in practice. For instance, the quarterback must run play after play to make sure that he knows his options cold. "The kids think I'm difficult to please," he admits. "But the flip side is, they think I believe in them. Which I do."

Be yourself.

Ladouceur took care to establish and preserve his own credibility. "I never tried to pattern myself after a coach or any one person," he says. "You have to be yourself. If you're not who you say you are, the people you're with, in my case the kids, will find out quickly." When it comes to making decisions, his authority is based on authenticity, not on rhetoric, threats, or charisma.

Be a teacher who creates teachers.

During practice, Ladouceur teaches techniques, getting down in the stance, talking about first steps. It's also about the complementary thinking that goes into game situations. After a few repetitions, he steps back. "I expect the kids to lead themselves." Indeed, in the weight room, players supervise one another and think nothing of stopping a teammate's exercise if his form is wrong. "They self-correct," he says.

Love their mistakes.

A De La Salle practice is precise but unregimented, with plenty of laughter, water breaks, and mistakes. Ladouceur loves the mistakes his players make; they give him an opening to do what he does best. "It's all about teachable moments," he says, "and being aware of teachable moments when they occur." He has no shortage of raw material. "The fortunate thing about having 50 kids: There's a teachable moment every day."

Be about something bigger than work.

These teachable moments aren't restricted to football either; far from it. "The kids have to see that you're about more than just football," he says. "I don't think they respect you otherwise." This is what elevates the teaching moments above the mundane. "It's not just about getting better physically, it's about how we're getting better as people: in terms of courtesy, respect, how they treat their bodies, how they treat their teammates, and how they respect themselves."

Build a team with soul.

Doesn't sound like the stereotypical football coach so far? Then hang on, because we've come to the heart of the matter. The De La Salle team culture is one of commitment and responsibility. Over the years, he has institutionalized the process of building bonds and intimacy among his players -- the X factor that makes each year's team a worthy successor to the previous un-beaten squads.

"If a team has no soul, you're just wasting your time," he says. When the Spartans show up in the weight room in January, after just four weeks off from the previous season, it's not just to get strong physically but to strengthen the bonds of community. During the off-season, players go camping, raft rivers, or volunteer for community service. During the season, the team regularly attends chapel, for readings and songs. And each player fills out a commitment card that lists specific expectations for the next game.

After every practice, there's a dinner at a player's home, followed by another, more intense chapel visit. Amid growing tension, players speak their hearts, confess their shortcomings, and reveal the promises on their commitment cards. Their obstacle is the same each week: to speak the most difficult word of all, particularly for American teenagers. To say the L word.

This is his ultimate goal every season. His winning streak is a national obsession, but keeping it going seems to mean less to him than getting 45 boys to say the L word out loud to one another. That's why, on Thursday nights before Friday games, you'll never hear a typical locker room speech. What does he talk about?

"Love," Coach Lad repeats. "Why is that word so hard to say?" He stares out over the bowed, shaved heads. "What is it with us that we find it so hard to say it to each other?"

Ladouceur will stop and listen. He will wait for as long as it takes. And each week, enough players will overcome their embarrassment to say the word that begins with an L. And then, each week, as they have for every season in the past 11 years, the Spartans will come home winners.

Don Wallace's book *One Great Game: Two Teams, Two Dreams, in the First-Ever National Championship High School Football Game*, was published last month by Atria Books.