

The Transition Economist: From Athlete to Doctoral Mentor

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Abstract

Athletic coaches devote countless hours to strategizing about how to motivate their players. Academic mentors spend much less time thinking about how to motivate their students. Peter Boettke is a former athlete and an active basketball coach as well as a professor of economics. This brief paper relates how his background in athletics influences his mentoring of economics doctoral students.

JEL Codes: A23, B53

Keywords: Coaching; Graduate teaching; Mentorship

I. Introduction

Academic economics is highly competitive.¹ So is athletics. Thousands of books have been written on coaching strategies for how to motivate players and get them to play as a team.² Yet, in the world of competitive academic economics, little attention has been paid to the topic. Peter Boettke is a rare academic who does think about how to motivate his students and get them to fit together as a “team” to advance libertarianism.

When I first met Pete he was seated behind a pile of books wearing sneakers and a windbreaker suit. He took me to lunch and

* I thank Edward Stringham for some helpful comments on previous drafts. However, any excessive scholarliness that does not advance the arguments in the paper is also a result of satisfying his comments.

¹ For instance, there are hundreds of applicants for each job listed in the JOE, only a small fraction of the profession will ever publish in the “top” journals, and the profession even tracks rankings of the “top” young economists (see <http://ideas.repec.org/top/top.young.html>).

² A search on Amazon.com for “coaching books” finds 10,632 matches. Rainer Martens’ *Successful Coaching* is the all time best-selling coaching book. It’s now in its third edition and has sold more than 500,000 copies since it first came out (<http://www.amazon.com/Successful-Coaching-3rd-Rainer-Martens/dp/0736040129>).

the conversation ranged from Rothbard, to Rand, to the strengths and weaknesses of various zone defenses, and back to Austrian economics again. At the time I was interviewing for a fellowship to attend George Mason University and I had no idea how much that first meeting was indicative of him as a scholar, mentor, and person.³ He has wide-ranging interests with a tremendous breadth of knowledge and the drive of a competitive athlete, and he is always strategizing how to advance mission of the “team” around him.

I imagine most people reading this know that Pete played tennis and basketball in college, was a tennis pro before attending grad school, and over the last decade has coached numerous high school and AAU basketball teams. Less known, perhaps, is how the lessons he learned as an athlete are applied to his mentoring of graduate students. In each of the following short sections, I summarize one lesson from athletics and how Pete applies it to academic mentoring. The final section concludes.

II. Know and Compete Within the Rules of the Game

Any successful athlete knows the rules, both formal and informal, of their sport, and they compete to win within those rules. These formal and informal rules and norms of the economics profession are rarely taught in classes and, with the exception of David Colander, rarely written about. In fact, as Colander describes it,

Where one learns about institutional realities is in late night, informal discussions with older economists. In these conversations, the older economists take down their guards and tell younger economists how the economics profession really works. Unfortunately, many graduate students and young assistant professors have not spent enough time in bars (2010, p.1).

As a graduate student and a young professor, I have certainly spent my share of time in bars. Although it is not unusual to entice Pete into a conversation over beers, it’s not necessary in order for him to let his guard down and describe how the profession works. He freely and frequently shares his successes and failures with his students.

³ It’s quite likely that Pete was more impressed with my knowledge of zone defense than he was with my knowledge of Austrian economics at the time.

Whether it's how to frame an argument, how to satisfy a journal editor or referee, internal struggles to get someone hired or external struggles to place another graduate student, the latest drama in the think-tank world, raising money and working with donors, or simply getting along (and sometimes not) with colleagues, Pete opens himself up to his students. No formal lessons are given, but his frankness and openness allow students inside the profession to learn how it works before they are truly part of it.

Knowledge of the rules of the game is important. But that's not the point of the mentoring. It's to help the students "win" in the game, which leads to another principle.

III. Your Failures Are Your Own Fault

Successful athletes do not complain about the rules of the game or how the referees interpret those rules. They strive to be the best they can within those rules. When they come up short, they blame themselves and go back and practice harder so they can succeed in the next competition. If a referee makes a bad call in the final moments that cost them the game, a successful athlete knows they should have played better the rest of the game so they didn't leave the referee a chance to change the outcome. Pete's instillation of this ethic in his graduate students is particularly important because almost all of us are heterodox economists to one degree or another.

There is always a temptation to blame a misguided mainstream profession or statist political views among other scholars for your own failures. But these are just part of the institutional environment we operate in. They may, or may not, be true, but if we are to succeed, obstacles simply have to be surmounted by working harder and making better arguments. If the bar is set higher, and it's harder to get into a top journal or school with heterodox views, so be it. Don't complain. Work to become that much better so that they can't turn you down.

IV. Play to Your Strengths

Pete's mentoring of grad students in this area might best be summed up by Bob Knight, "It all starts with understanding yourself. Learn your strengths and weaknesses and play away from your weaknesses and toward your strengths... Some of you don't drive with the ball really well. Don't drive. Give it up and play without it..."

It's a very simple thing, just paying attention to the abilities you've got" (Schilling and Garfinkel, 1993, p.58).

In the language of economics, this is simply doing what you have a comparative advantage in. Pete realistically informs students what the job market is like for those who do fields like history of thought or methodology, but he always encourages students to do what they have a comparative advantage in. For many of us, applied Austrian economics has been the right blend given our comparative advantage and the institutional environment we operate in.

V. Be Part of the Team

Among most of Pete's students, there is a great sense of camaraderie and a desire to make each other better. There is a notion of "us" against "the rest of the profession" and that we need to work together to advance our arguments. This by no means implies nepotism between us. But instead, like members of a basketball or other athletic team, we succeed as a group by making everyone around us better. During my days at GMU, my most vigorous debates were with Stringham, Beaulier, Coyne, and Leeson (Boettke too). We frequently held private seminars together and tore each other apart – but never in the style of academic one-upmanship. The goal was always to make each other's arguments better.

I think the teamwork among our cohort, and as far as I can tell those that have followed, stemmed from a common goal that we all shared with Pete. As a result, we are never jealous of others' success but instead share in the sense that it will help us all achieve a common goal.

VI. The Player-Coach

Bill Russell was a rare athlete who could be both a player and a coach simultaneously. Boettke is that rare academic when he mentors his graduate students. There is never any doubt of his knowledge and talents and that he is, in fact, the coach. But he also allows his graduate students to be his peers engaged in common inquiry. I always felt free to debate economic ideas with him, both inside the classroom and outside. Stringham, Coyne, and Leeson also often questioned and or attacked Boettke's ideas and/or interpretations of Austrian economics. Although Pete might have known more, he was always open to the possibility of learning from us. His mentoring of

us had a lot in comment with how Red Auerbach coached the great Celtics teams of the 1960s. According to Auerbach,

Players are people, not horses. You don't handle them. You work with them, you coach them, you teach them, and, maybe most important, you listen to them. The best players are smart people and a good coach will learn from them. Sometimes when guys came to me with ideas, I knew they couldn't possibly work. But I didn't just say no, because they would see that as a sign that I didn't respect them (Auerbach and Feinstein, 2004, p.28).

Like Auerbach, I'm sure Pete encouraged many of our debates as a method to teach us. But it's a rare scholar who will tolerate, let alone encourage, a cohort of graduate students to attack his own views and positions regularly, yet still be those same students' biggest supporter.

VII. Know Where the End Zone Is

No one should ever interpret the above lessons as Pete instilling a "careerism" in his students. From day one there is a knowledge that we are all trying to advance to a common end zone. For Pete, and many of us, that end zone looks something like Rothbard's vision of libertarianism circa 1973. The question is what "plays to call" to get to that end zone.

Pete has a strong belief that establishing credibility in the academy is a key to obtaining more universal acceptance of Austrian ideas and a social change movement toward a more libertarian world. He often points out that Kuhnian paradigm shifts occur when led by people with heterodox views but "insider" standing (Kuhn, 1962). Academic success is a means to an end, not a goal in and of itself. The point is to get to the commanding heights of academia in order to influence broader public opinion and public policy toward a more libertarian world.

VIII. Conclusion

Pete's athletic background influences his conversations and his mentoring methods. Much more could be written about his depth and breadth as a scholar, his role as a teacher in the classroom, or other aspects of his mentoring, as is done elsewhere in this collection.

But I close with a story told by Mike Krzyzewski at a Five Star Basketball Camp.

Duke guard Tommy Amaker came to meet with Coach Krzyzewski after a tough loss in the NCAA tournament and asked, “Coach, how can I get better?” Coach K thought that was “an unbelievably simple and yet so unbelievably important statement to make.” He closed his lecture at the camp by saying,

I wonder if you have the courage or the sense to ask that same question of the people who teach you. Do you have the courage and the sense to listen to those people? Not just on the basketball court, but in the classroom. And do you have the courage and the sense to make something of yourself on the court and off the court. All you have to do is ask that simple question to your teachers: “How can I get better?” Then work your ass off doing what they say (Schilling and Garfinkel, 1993, p.152).

Pete never hesitates to ask that question himself, and he always made it easy for his graduate students to ask it of him. Thanks coach!

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