
FORUM

Some Notes on Failure in Researching Sport and Coaching Writing

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When I was thinking about ideas for my April talk as part of the 2005 Honors Invited Lecture Series on campus, I ran some by my officemate and friend, Boyd Benson. He perked up only when I said I might talk about failure. “That’s good, something Honors students don’t know much about,” he said. “Something you have a lot of experience with,” my “friend” added.

Around the same time, a discussion I overheard involved one student trying to convince her boyfriend to go to Nobel Prize Laureate Wole Soyinka’s poetry reading. She kept repeating, “But *Travis*, he won the *Noble* Prize.” This got me thinking about “noble” prizes, that although they may be more readily available than Nobel Prizes, they are not less important.

I am an English teacher, but in high school I was placed in remedial English classes. Just recently I handed my undergraduate transcript to my daughter, who is about to be a college freshman. *That* was an enlightening experience, especially when she read off my undergraduate cumulative average: 2.61. “Oh I see the P.E. classes kept your average right up there,” she said. “Here’s a B in basketball, another in field hockey, and soccer. Look, an A in lacrosse. And choir and piano helped a little too.” She especially enjoyed the entry that read “Psych 306, Personality: F”—something a lot of 17-year-olds may think about their parents, but rarely get to see in writing. By my junior year, I’d wandered into a creative writing class and from there on I could show my daughter a scattering of A’s.

At the end of this semester, I will have taught for twenty years here at Washington State University, yet I am part of the growing cadre of adjunct faculty, teachers who have none of the perks—such as sabbaticals—of tenure-line faculty. In fact, some of the tenured faculty don’t even say hello to me in the hall or on the elevator. A past dean of the College of Liberal Arts told me my position was temporary; a

“dead-end job “ she called it, but one I’ve been doing for—as I’ve said—going on twenty years. By the standards of the Academy, I am a failure.

I am also a sports fan. I love to watch baseball and basketball. I love to do reading and research about those sports. It is through my reading and researching about sport that I have come to see that I am not a failure, but a small success. Sport has become a metaphor for me to understand myself and my job here.

Recently I have been thinking back on my early writing teachers, three in particular. You may have heard of them: David Huddle, Richard Hugo, and Madeline DeFrees. None of them have received—or will receive—the Nobel Prize in Literature. They have all known rejection and failure, but they all have a few solid books out in the world. What I remember most about them is showing me that it was all right to be passionate about researching, and reading, and writing.

My husband Ron played college basketball and baseball for one year. He left college sports when his coaches told him that his passion for anti-Vietnam War protests was not as important as the passion he should have for his sports. At 26, he played one year of minor league, Class A baseball for the Boise Buckskins. His earned run average in professional baseball is a whopping 8.18. But I do not see him as a failure either because, like my writing teachers were passionate about writing, Ron is passionate about his games. He knows baseball and basketball at their deepest levels like my writing teachers know writing.

When Ron coaches he tries to bring out the best in each of his players, to put them in roles in which they will, most likely, succeed. He stresses fundamentals and the need for getting in, in a practice, as many cuts on the ball—with whiffleballs, dimpleballs, Incrediballs, and hard balls—as each player can. He hits grounders over and over, always telling his players to let him see their beanies, which means he wants his kids looking the ball into the glove, something he knows they’re doing if he can see the beanie on the top of their cap.

Watching baseball practices is always enjoyable for me. There is something about the continual ping of aluminum bats, the crack of the fungo, the slap of ball against leather and the ripping silk sound of the fastball which bring me comfort. (Sitting in the stands when Ron’s coaching is not as easy: listening to little Norman’s father complain about Ron not leaving Norm in to hit with runners in scoring position and knowing that little Norm hit .082 with runners in scoring position.)

The writing teachers who taught me the most had their share of whopping ERAs and .082 batting averages too. They shared their failures with me and taught me through these offerings. I saw their rejection slips far more than I saw their work published in the glorious literary journals of their day. Recently David Huddle reminded me of the harsh criticism an editor had given him on his second book

manuscript, a collection of poems. The criticism was still something emotionally laden for him—over 25 years and several books later. But as a student, I appreciated my teachers' struggles to capture a character realistically on the page or to create another startling and fresh image. It was because of their "failures" that they were able to teach me so effectively. Just as Ron, who wrecked his arm throwing the curveball prematurely, can tell a young pitcher that his arm isn't strong enough to throw the curve, Richard Hugo could show me how to make my line breaks stronger because he'd practiced at it for years; or Madeline Defrees could tell me I'd used that trick one too many times, that it was time to find a new one; or David Huddle could direct me away from the harsh, confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath to the subtle flame of Robert Hayden. Hugo, Defrees, and Huddle had all been where I had been. They knew how to work through the problems more efficiently. They had found a way to write through their failures to the passion for words on the page.

Several years ago, I spent about a year researching and writing an article on women's basketball for a profile on an Idaho Lady Vandal player, Alli Nieman. SLAM magazine had told me that they were very interested in this article and I'd worked hard on a 14-page piece that SLAM eventually rejected. The rejection felt like a major set-back to me at the time, so I wrote about it. It emerged as a short essay about what I learned from that rejection and helped me to recognize that "failure" as a mark of success for me, and something I carry with me into the classroom. The piece is called "Chicken Feed."



We have a pair of peafowl that my husband just recently named Fred and Ethel. The Mertzes, as we now call them, play a role in our country life. They are curiosities which, rather remarkably, survive our mountain winters of three and four feet of snow. They like catfood, but will eat dogfood if they're hungry, and occasionally enjoy a treat of sunflower seeds or salad left over from a few nights past. And when it comes on sale at the Grange Supply, we've even bought them a bag of chicken feed. Just like Fred and Ethel Mertz on *I Love Lucy*, these birds play a quiet, but supportive role in our world. They are minor distractions from the important things we do all day and they seem appreciative when we stop to notice them.

Last night my little family and I enjoyed a special moment in sports achievement. And pretty soon my husband will bring home the Sunday paper to let us read about that moment and to see what the three or four photographers present took time to notice. No doubt the article and the picture(s) will be buried in the sports section; today is Super Bowl Sunday and a shining moment in women's college basketball isn't what the majority of the local newspaper's audience will be interested in. After

a year of working on stories about the University of Idaho Lady Vandals' premier player, 6'1" Alli Nieman, lack of interest should come to me as no surprise. But it's my own disappointment that I can't contain.

I'm not an athlete. At one time I may have been naïve enough to imagine myself an athlete. But I enjoy a good baseball or basketball game most of the time. We started attending Lady Vandal games three years ago, when we discovered the cost of admission to the men's games. We tried a Lady Vandal game then, reminding ourselves that our friends' daughter, Kelli Johnson, played for the Idaho team.

The atmosphere in the University of Idaho's old Memorial Gym was inviting, even the creaky wood bleachers semi-comfortable. The crowd was small, well under a thousand, and allowed our little girl to roam about freely without us worrying we'd lose sight of her. She even caught one of those little, silver, plastic basketballs the cheerleaders tossed into the crowd at half-time. I can remember little of the game except my enjoyment of it. It was neat to see Kelli Johnson take charge on the court. We appreciated how she'd grown up over the years: from a gangly girl to a graceful, young and determined woman. But I found myself distracted from Kelli's metamorphosis, from how years pass, by the play of another Vandal woman: Alli Nieman. The program told me she'd been the Big West Freshman of the Year the previous season. My husband pointed out she was an Idaho native, from Sandpoint. Her smooth, effortless shot made me think she was pretty talented. I wasn't just being ignorant of "the game" was I? I asked my husband: is she as beautiful to watch as I think she is?

The answer to my last question has been a resounding yes for the past two and a half seasons. Last year I began my Alli Watch in earnest. For the second time in my life—the first when my husband was playing pro-baseball—the sports page become most important to me. I thought I should get that section first. I mean, Alli Nieman was *my* favorite player. Everyone else and everything else could wait. I totaled points. I looked at rebounding. I began to appreciate assists and understand assist vs. turnover ratios. I found beauty in the zone defense. And I felt compelled to get us to every Lady Vandal home game an hour and a half or two hours before game time.

Even though twenty bucks got my husband, my daughter and me into the games with change for a pizza afterward, we enrolled Jessi in the Junior Joe Vandal Club which offered free admission for members, a tee-shirt, and various sports clinics with the Idaho players. Jessi's first Junior Joe Clinic was with the Vandal basketball players. My husband and I were pleased to see the class act the clinic was: well-organized, friendly, upbeat. We watched as our daughter preceded from station to station, receiving instruction on passing, rebounding, defense, and ball-handling. When Jessi

reached the shooting station, Alli Nieman was her instructor. “My mom’s jealous,” she told Nieman. “She wishes she was out here. You’re her favorite player.”

I’d played sports in high school—a lot of sports. And I’d started to play in college. With the advent of Title IX, I learned my role was in the stands and I’ve grown more comfortable there. As I began researching women’s basketball more and more and interviewing folks around the Lady Vandal program, I noticed some startling changes in women’s sports, maybe in college sports in general, such as prescribed workouts and warm-ups, strict diets, and . . . well, the level of play. I began to think that Title IX, gender equity, had made a big difference for women. And I began to realize that if I had been younger and wanted to get on the court, I could have swept the floor between halves. But I reminded myself at 46 that I was still pretty good with a pen.

I queried *SLAM* magazine about an article on Nieman. They e-mailed me immediately that they were interested: a story meeting in a few weeks, send more info. I contacted the University of Idaho Sports Information people and began an e-mail correspondence with Andrew Longeteig whose enthusiasm for Nieman’s style of play went well beyond company line. I searched the internet for information and statistics on Nieman. I found a quote from NCAA tournament qualifying UCSB coach Mark French: “For anybody to stop Alli Nieman, you have to have a whole defense playing really well. We play a pretty tough schedule and we see some good players. She’s as good as anybody we’ve played this year.” I interviewed Vandal head coach Hilary Recknor who’d helped the Washington Huskies to three NCAA tournament appearances and had then gone on to play pro-ball in Belgium and Norway. To Recknor, “Alli is so incredibly gifted offensively and physically, the way she’s built. She’s got good moves. She’s strong, not blazing speed, but a quick first step. And she has so much power. I just love watching her because you should love and be able to enjoy the game and be the game.” Then I talked with assistant coach Mavis Washington who echoed Recknor’s enthusiasm for Nieman. “It’s refreshing. I’ve seen kids that try to do things [for awards and recognition] and then become selfish. She cares about awards, but it doesn’t consume her. The awards will find her. It’s *refreshing* to see someone play for the pure pleasure of the game.” Washington’s stories of when she’d played at UC Riverside in the early seventies also accentuated some of the changes I’d seen in women’s sports. “We didn’t have scholarships. When I was going to school we had to have bake sales for uniforms and stuff like that. I used to wonder how come we had uniforms all pitted out. We tried to find the best one and use it. We saw boys’ teams get new uniforms every year. We had an issue with facility use. Boys had four teams: freshman, sophomore, j.v., and varsity. They wanted the girls to practice outside so the boys could have the gym.”

I became totally consumed with the Alli Nieman story: small town, Idaho girl, excellent student (4.0 gpa), family centered, modest, and talented enough to make it to the WNBA. I had a story all right, I thought.

Then *SLAM* said it wasn't interested. Too remote, Idaho was. No media attention. I e-mailed back a "Thanks" and a semi-snotty "I *know* this is a good story. I'll keep following it. Let me know when you're ready."

I interviewed Nieman and found her to be the modest young woman everyone had told me she was. And a funny, gum-snapping college kid too, who cares deeply about her family, who cares deeply about her friends and teammates, and who loves the game of basketball the way I thought athletes *ought* to love their sport.

I sent queries and manuscripts to lots of magazines: *Sports Illustrated* and *Women's Sport and Fitness* at the top of the list. I sent stuff to syndicates and women's magazines. I sent stuff to coaching tabloids. And I always got the same results: "Thanks. It's a good story but. . . ." Fill in the blank with "Who cares about Idaho?" or "Who cares about women's college sports?" It was always one or the other.

Last night my husband Ron and I went to the University of Idaho Lady Vandal game. They played North Texas in front of 813 people. They played in Memorial Gym across the street from Idaho's main athletic facility, the Kibbie Dome. Our daughter, a ball girl, hung a banner she'd made on the west end of the court. "Gold discovered in Idaho! Alli Nieman!" complete with her cartoonish figure of Alli—red-dish hair popping out of a loose bun, big hands at the end of very long arms. With 810 other people, we watched Nieman break the all-time Vandal scoring record of 1935 points on an assist from her friend and fellow prankster Kelly Bartleson. The game was halted to allow everyone to congratulate her. Coach Recknor gave her a high five and a long hug. The Vandal A.D. presented Nieman with the game ball. And we were standing and clapping and hooting and, I admit it, a little teary-eyed when Alli Nieman turned to give a shy wave to us all. She seemed more embarrassed by the attention than anything, maybe a little relieved, but anxious to get on with the game. Play resumed. Nieman scored another nine points for her game total of 21 and the Vandals beat the Lady Eagles 86-68.

We came home. I got the mail: another rejection, this time from an alternative newspaper in the Pacific Northwest. "Thanks so much for your interest! I enjoyed the piece but. . . ."

Nieman currently ranks ninth in NCAA Division I scoring. She's fifth on the Big West career list, bidding to become the first player in the Big West to collect 2,000 career points. When my husband arrives home with today's paper, I find the story is longer than the usual five or six column inches, but buried on the fourth

page of the sports section, after local high school sports and Super Bowl promo. There is no photo.

I was there last night. I saw what pressure to break a record can do to a player. Nieman had played a little tighter than usual. And I saw the smile of relief when the record-breaking lay-in eased through the net. And just as they've done after every home game, I saw the Lady Vandals line up to jog around the court to slap the hands of 25 or 30 fans lining the black.

The NPR commentator has told me that today's Super Bowl game will be an exciting one, maybe *the most* exciting ever: two unknown teams, a lot of unknown faces to be introduced to the millions of fans watching.

I won't be watching. I won't be listening either. I'll be remembering that I was at a game last night. I saw a 17-year-old record broken by someone who actually cares about a game and loves it. I high-fived the team and the players who made that possible. I was a part of something.

Through watching women's college sports, I have found an answer to those who often ask how our peafowl make it through the winter: they keep close to home. They keep on keeping on. They live off anything we throw out the door that will nourish them. And when I stop to notice them—out on a snow bank or huddled in the woodshed—I often catch the iridescence of their feathers.



Experiencing the “failure” of that piece, the project and its long researching process now seems to me a success. I remember my old writing teachers and how they taught me out of their reaching for success and their failures. I remember how they took the time to notice my seemingly insignificant iridescences. But what I remember most about those teachers are their comments, suggestions that came from their failures and their continuing passion for the work itself. They were not concerned with their own successes as much as they were concerned for having me find that the reward for good writing is the writing itself. Nothing more. Not the “A”, not the publications, not the awards. But the love of the research and the writing and the desire to say something important even if no one is listening.

And now as I walk into my classrooms filled with so many bright and capable young Honors students, I look to find those moments of passion in them, those moments when they get angry or frustrated enough to get up, dust the ego off, and write about what it is that holds their passion. I am happy to see the great revision of a thesis statement. I appreciate the smooth move of laying in the perfect semicolon. I love the resounding thwack of one of their terrific ideas being belted back

right at me. Because I *know* nothing about writing is easy. Because I *know* there is only the satisfaction of feeling deeply about something enough to commit that feeling to words.

Each year, at the end of a semester in “Baseball English” I have my students autograph a baseball for me. I keep these on a shelf above my desk. I’ve collected a lot of autographs, but these are my most valuable. They represent signatures on my life and I remember moments of passion, of iridescence: Trisha Howe, Matt Grimes, Griffin Guess, Ahmad Bayomy, Jeff Raun, Robbie Cowgill, Dallas Rawlins, Molly McIntosh, Ronnie Wideman, Steven Weaver, Brittani Avalon, Cassie Malecha, Kathryn Troxel, Carmen Palmer, Crystal Philes, Melissa Wu, Ethan Smith, Anne Tuttle, Tom Reinhardt, Catherine Schuck, Andy Brownson, Troy Bienenman, Clara Detzel, Kasey Vogel, Brittny Jarman, Amberly Kent, Shane Johnson, Ariel Moore, Kasey Vargo, Lyden Henderson, Jennifer Law, Scott Parsons.

You are my Noble prizes. ✨