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### Behind the Iron Curtain

Walking into the Bettendorf High School weight room for the first time, I was quite confident, to say the least. I had been a great athlete in middle school, already knew many of the high school coaches, and was excited to finally join one of the best football programs in Iowa. As I walked through the double doors into the weight room, a somewhat familiar, muscular man was standing in front of me. “Wow, did you just get off the train from Auschwitz?” he asked me. I had heard that Coach Kevin Freking often made jokes to his players, so I laughed nervously and took a seat near my friends who were stretching near the treadmills. After a few minutes, Coach Freking ordered us to run two laps around the track. We obliged, but I was surprised by the number of criticisms we received from him for either running too slowly or with improper form. Returning to the weight room, we began learning a lift previously foreign to us, the hang clean. As I awkwardly jerked the bar from my knees to my shoulders, Coach Freking walked by and laughed, saying, “Jesus Dunlavy, I thought your family was athletic.” As I left later that day, I wondered why he criticized his players so much and how any player could ever like this man. It wasn’t until years later that I realized Coach Freking was actually a very caring, dedicated, and motivational coach who would teach me many lessons not only about sports, but also life. Although he was often strict and critical of his players, Kevin Freking was the best coach I ever got to play for.

Although many students thought Coach Freking was heartless due to his harsh criticisms, he is an incredibly selfless person. For example, during the summer before my senior season, Justin, a defensive lineman on our team, had severe family issues. Just weeks before the school year and football season began, Justin's father was sent to prison and his mother began abusing alcohol in response of her husband's conviction. Coach Freking heard about his troubling home life and offered Justin a place to stay. Justin accepted and lived with Coach Freking, his wife, and their three kids. Coach Freking bought Justin school supplies and new football cleats because he knew that he could not afford these items himself. Also, he drove Justin to school each day and made sure that he had something to eat for lunch. Justin ended up staying with him for over a month until a family friend of Justin offered to take him in permanently. This is just one of the numerous instances when Coach Freking cared enough about his players' well-being to sacrifice his time and money to help out young men deeply in need. Coach Freking is one of the most selfless people I have ever met.

Looking after not only his current players, but also his former ones, Coach Freking is very caring of others. For instance, this past winter break, Keaton, a very good friend of mine and former player of Coach Freking, was drinking heavily and smoking weed daily. His safety and health were severely in jeopardy. His father passed away from a long battle with ALS just a year before, and he was having a difficult time coping with the loss. Keaton would go out and drink every night, passing out where no one could find him. My friends and I were very worried about him and tried talking to him about being careful with his decisions. Unfortunately, we could not convince him to give up drinking, but one of my friends told Coach Freking about Keaton's actions and our fear for him. Even though Keaton was no longer a player of his, Coach Freking immediately gathered other coaches and parents who Keaton looked up to and went to

his house to talk to him. They sat him down and told him about all the damage he was doing not only to himself, but also to his family and friends. Luckily, Keaton listened to Coach Freking and began to clean up his act by avoiding parties with alcohol or drugs. We were very fortunate that Coach Freking was willing to step in and help us out before we may have potentially lost a friend. Even though Keaton was no longer his responsibility, Coach Freking cared enough about him to act as a father figure and help him out in his time of struggle.

Technically, Coach Freking is an unpaid, volunteer coach, but this has not stopped his strong dedication to the football team and program. Coach Freking treated all athletes equally, so students who were not used to his personality and his criticisms often told their parents. These parents, who also did not know Coach Freking at all, would complain to the school, and this eventually caused Coach Freking to be taken off the payroll but allowed to remain on the staff as a volunteer. One example of his dedication took place on a Friday afternoon during my junior soccer season. I told Coach Freking that I would not be able to make it to Saturday morning lifting, starting at 6:30, because I had a soccer tournament, and the bus left at 7:00. He responded, "Well that's no problem. I'll be here at 4:00 A.M. so you can come in and lift before your bus leaves." At first, I thought he was joking, but the look on his face told me he was completely serious. The next morning, I walked into the weight room at 5:00, still yawning, to find him running on a treadmill. He welcomed me and pointed me to the board of lifts for the day and offered his assistance if I needed a spotter for any lift. As I finished, I asked him if he came in this early every Saturday. He replied, "Yeah, normally I get here around 4:00 and workout. Then I coach you guys, the sophomores, and then the freshman until 11:00. As soon as I'm finished, I head over to work at the dealership until 8:00 PM." I was amazed. I was only functioning this early because I knew I had a nap waiting for me on the bus, but he was planning

on being up and active for another twelve hours. I could not believe that he would be willing to put in many hours of work with the team when he doesn't even get paid for it. This was just one day of the week, so I cannot even imagine the number of hours he has put in over his many years with the team. Coach Freking shows unmatched dedication to a program that gives him nothing in return except complaining parents.

One common trait of a great coach is the ability to inspire a team, and Coach Freking, a master motivator, could encourage us no matter what our challenge was. I can clearly recall one week during my junior football season when he was able to light a fire in all of our eyes. After another Friday night victory, we came in Saturday morning to "get the lactic acid out" and watch film as we did every week. However, this week we walked into the locker room to see a huge newspaper article about Assumption, our opponent for next Friday and one of our biggest rivals. The headline read: "Cannot be Stopped", and featured pictures of their team dominating a weak team in our conference. Throughout the article, there were highlighted passages about how Assumption may be the strongest team in the conference this year, and that the battle of the undefeated teams may swing their way. This was a common tactic by Coach Freking to fire us up, but he did not stop there. On Tuesday, we walked into the locker room again to see the article replaced. This time, there were twenty-two headshot pictures of all of the Assumptions starters, including their number, height, weight, and stats for the season. By Friday, almost all of the pictures were ripped to shreds or covered in spit. As we ended our team prayer and got ready to head out to the field, a loud voice was heard from the front whom everyone knew was Coach Freking, "I'm going to go out there and pick a fight with one of their coaches!" The team responded with a roar of excitement, and even though we knew he was kidding, we understood that if he were willing to fight for us, we must return the favor and fight for him. I do not know

whether he is responsible for our 31-0 victory in that game, but I do know that Coach Freking knew many tactics that could motivate and inspire his players.

Not only was he a great motivator and caring individual, Coach Freking was also wise when it came to teaching us about the real world. Of his many lessons, the one that has stuck with me the most since I have moved on from football was about accountability. This lesson was taught to me one July morning. The football team and I met on the track to stretch before lifting like we would four times a week. The coaches didn't come down from the weight room like normal, so we were a little confused with what the problem was. Eventually, Coach Freking walked out the doors and came down the hill towards the team. "DeAdrian isn't here. Everybody go home." We were even more confused now. Typically, one or two players were gone because they slept in, but the team had never been sent home for it. The team and I walked back to our cars dumbfounded. However, my fellow captains and I decided to make the rest of the team stay while we went and picked up DeAdrian. We drove to his house to get him, and to no surprise, he had simply slept in. We woke him up and drove back to continue our workout. The team began stretching again, and once again Coach Freking came down the hill. He preached to us that each one of us needs to hold ourselves accountable for our actions, and in addition, we need to hold each other accountable. For the rest of the summer, if someone were not on the track, we would call and wake him up to make sure he comes to lifting. This lesson has translated to many other aspects in my life such as school and personal relationships. Whether we were aware of it or not at the time, Coach Freking taught us countless life lessons.

Coach Freking was without doubt the best coach I had during my years of playing sports. Over time, I began to realize how great of a person he actually was, but I was still confused to why he was often so critical of his players. He briefly answered this question for me one day

after lifting. It was my senior year, and at this point, we had a mutual respect for each other. While lifting that morning, he walked by, noticing that the weights were not in the proper color order. He told me to organize the weights in the correct order, and still catching my breath from the last set, I simply responded, "I will." Coach Freking immediately yelled, "Don't tell me 'you will'! Do it! Never talk back to me!" as he kicked the weights to the ground. I was very angry and felt that he was overreacting, but I knew that it would be better just to do as he says. I picked up the weights and put them in order while he continued yelling. I avoided him the rest of the day, but as I left, Coach Freking pulled me aside. He apologized and told me that he wanted to make an example to the team about staying composed and having discipline. I handled it just the way he wanted me to, and as a senior leader, the team learned from my actions. We shook hands, and I went to the locker room. I thought to myself about the exchange, and I was amazed that even when I thought he was being completely outrageous, he was actually teaching the team and me a lesson. Now, I can look back and see that even that first time when I walked into the weight room and was met by his scrutiny, Coach Freking was already molding me into a better individual.