



Eva Bellon

Eva Bellon

# Daytona Beach Coaching

By Andrew Cooke M.D.

My story is about the coaching of two brothers, 12-year-old Zeb and 13-year-old Elija, who were raised in foster care. These were children, though I didn't know it initially, whose mother was addicted to crack and father was incarcerated. They were raised by various people and bounced around together from one foster parent to another. I met them while they were living with their 40-year-old grandmother who worked full time as an administrative assistant.

On the first day of practice Mrs. Smith dropped her boys off and told me that if I were to encounter any problems I should tell her immediately so that she could correct them. I semi-headed her words and focused my attention, as I always do,

on producing fundamentally sound baseball players. The brothers were like most of the players on my Daytona Beach team, inexperienced and unwilling to put forth the work necessary to become a good baseball player. I worked intensely with them, both on the fundamentals and on the physical fitness necessary to be an athlete.

Quickly I realized that the older brother, Elija, was unwilling to put forth the effort to excel in athletics. When I told the team to run, he would walk. When I lined the team up for ground balls, he would stand on the sidelines and watch. I found that all my motivational coaching techniques failed: he simply wouldn't work. He consistently would say, "Coach, I don't want to run, I just want to play baseball." After over a month of failed discipline I utilized a resource I never had before, his grandmother. This was the biggest mistake I've made as a coach.

Elija's grandmother immediately left work and drove to the ball field. I met her outside the dugout with Elija, waiting for the magic pill that would transform my obstinate ballplayer into the all-star I needed. Instead, the lecture I heard put me to shame as a coach. She spent over five minutes telling my player how he was worthless and would never measure up. She said that he was no better than his drug dealing father and his addicted mother. His only retort was, "Grandma, one day I will be better than you ever could." At which point she stuck her index finger in his chest and said, "I hope you get

to my level one day."

I watched this all in stunned silence. I realized that my player had more on his plate than just baseball and life itself was tough enough. I called practice and pulled Elija aside. I asked him if everything was alright. His response was short and curt, "Coach, if Grandma ever touches me like that I'm going to go to jail." I wish I had stopped and talked with him, I wish I had the courage to pull him aside and see what he meant by that. Instead, I let it go and my simple unawareness would haunt me.

The next week I called Elija's Grandma, to tell her what time practice started. She told me that Zeb would be at practice; however, Elija would be unable to make it. Over the weekend he had gotten in a fight with her and gone to jail. Elija had given her a black eye and a fat lip. I dropped the phone when I heard her words. If only I had acted, if only I had talked with him, maybe things would be different. I returned to reality and asked how long he would be in jail. She told me only a week and he would be ready for the game next week.

I spent the next week both nervous and anxious. "How could I have let my player hurt a woman like he did?" I had to act so that this would never happen again. When Elija returned for the game on Saturday, I did the only thing I could think. I took Elija outside of the park and across the street,

away from all the players and the fans. I told him, "Elija, if you want to punch someone, punch me, because I'm at fault, not your grandma." His response was, "Coach, you didn't do anything wrong. I'm not gonna hit you." I told him "You felt strong enough to hit a woman, why not punch me?" At which point he took a weak swing and said "I can't hit you, Coach." I pushed him and said, "You already did. The second you hit your grandma and got in trouble, you not only punched me harder than you ever could, you hit every one on your team. As both a baseball coach and a man, I will never allow violence towards women and you are a strong enough person to know that it's never acceptable." With watery eyes he took another weak swing and started to cry. "Coach, I'm sorry. I won't do it again." We left together, with tears in both our eyes, and returned to the team.

The game started without a hitch and my team was down by about two runs. During the second inning Zeb hit my second baseman, who happened to be a girl, in the shoulder. Elija immediately hit him back and told his brother, "Man, you don't hit women, no matter what they do to you." Unfortunately we lost that game, but I felt proud that my ballplayer had learned a lesson in life that maybe he will take with him. Though my coaching experience in Daytona Beach didn't have the same rewards as it did in Tallahassee, I will take my experiences and learn from my mistakes, just as my ball players did.