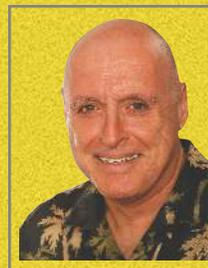


THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



828 Don't Widen the Plate

Twenty years ago, in Nashville, Tennessee, during the first week of January, 1996, more than 4,000 baseball coaches descended upon the Opryland Hotel for the 52nd annual American Baseball Coaches Association convention. A speech took place that night that means something for us, right now. I'm Jerry Roberts and that's next on The Extra Point.

In the lineup of speakers scheduled to present during the baseball coaches' convention weekend, one name kept resurfacing, John Scolinos. He was a legend. Coach Scolinos was 78 years old and five years retired from a college coaching career that began in 1948.

He shuffled to the stage to an impressive standing ovation, wearing dark polyester pants, a light blue shirt, and a string around his neck from which home plate hung — a full-sized, stark-white home plate.

After speaking for twenty-five minutes, not once mentioning the prop hanging around his neck, even those who knew Coach Scolinos had to wonder exactly where he was going with this.

Finally, he said: "You're probably all wondering why I'm wearing home plate around my neck," and everyone laughed.

The reason I stand before you today is to share with you baseball people what I've learned in my life, what I've learned about home plate in my 78 years."

Several hands went up when Scolinos asked how many Little League coaches were in the room. "Do you know how wide home plate is in Little League?" "Seventeen inches?", someone yelled, more of a question than an answer.

"That's right," he said. "How about Babe Ruth coaches in the house? How wide is the plate?"

"Seventeen inches?" a guess from another reluctant coach.

"That's right," said Scolinos. "Now, how many high school coaches do we have in the room?" Hundreds of hands shot up. "How wide is home plate in high school baseball?"

"Seventeen inches," they said, sounding more confident.

"You're right!" Scolinos barked. "College coaches, how wide is home plate in college?" "Seventeen inches!"

"Any Minor League coaches here? How wide is home plate in the minors? "Seventeen inches!" "RIGHT! And in the Major Leagues, how wide home plate is in the Major Leagues?" "Seventeen inches!"

"SEV-EN-TEEN INCHES!" he confirmed, his voice bellowing. "And what do they do with a Big League pitcher who can't throw the ball over those seventeen inches?" Pause. Back to the minor leagues was the answer.

"What they don't do is this: they don't say, 'Ah, that's okay, Jimmy. If you can't hit a seventeen-inch target? We'll make it eighteen inches or nineteen inches. We'll make it twenty inches so you have a better chance of hitting it. If you can't hit that, let us know so we can make it wider still, say twenty-five inches.'"

"Coaches... what do we do when your best player shows up late to practice? or when our team rules forbid facial hair and a guy shows up unshaven? What if he gets caught drinking? Do we hold him accountable? Or do we change the rules to fit him? Do we widen home plate? "

The room got very quiet, as everyone focused on the message.

(Con't.)

He turned the plate toward himself and, using a Sharpie, began to draw something. When he turned it toward the crowd, point up, a house was revealed, complete with a freshly drawn door and two windows. "This is the problem in our homes today. With our marriages, with the way we parent our kids. With our discipline. We don't teach accountability to our kids, and there is no consequence for failing to meet standards. We just widen the plate!"

Pause. Then, to the point at the top of the house he added a small American flag. "This is the problem in our schools today. The quality of our education is going downhill fast and teachers have been stripped of the tools they need to be successful, and to educate and discipline our young people. We are allowing others to widen home plate! Where is that getting us?"

Silence.

"And the same is true with our government. Our so-called representatives make rules for us that don't apply to themselves. They take bribes from lobbyists and foreign countries. They do things in secret. They no longer serve us. And we allow them to widen home plate! We see our country falling into a dark abyss while we just watch."

All were amazed. At a baseball convention where you expected to learn something about curve balls and bunting and how to run better practices, they had learned something far more valuable.

From an old man with home plate strung around his neck, they had learned something about life, about themselves, about their own weaknesses and about their responsibilities as a leader. They had to hold themselves and others accountable to that which they knew to be right, lest our families, our faith, and our society continue down an undesirable path.

"If I am lucky," Coach Scolinos concluded, "you will remember one thing from this old coach today. It is this: "If we fail to hold ourselves to a higher standard, a standard of what we know to be right; if we fail to hold our spouses and our children to the same standards, and if our schools & churches and

our government fail to hold themselves accountable to those they serve, there is but one thing to look forward to."

With that, he held home plate in front of his chest, turned it around, and revealed its dark black backside, "...We have dark days ahead!"

Coach Scolinos died in 2009 at the age of 91, but not before touching the lives of countless players and coaches.

His message was clear: "Coaches, keep your players—no matter how good they are—your own children, your churches, your government, your employees, and most of all, keep yourself at seventeen inches."

And this my friends is what our country, our island, has become and what is wrong with it today. It's time to go out there and fix it. Real change is needed, but "Don't widen the plate."

That's The Extra Point. Be responsible and make something good happen today. For 93.3 and the Ray Gibson Show, I'm Jerry Roberts.

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