

Out of the BLUE

by Gary Fowler

As baseball coaches, we experience highs and lows on a daily basis - even on a moment-to-moment basis.

One moment the game is lost, the next it's won. We understand that, and that's part of why we coach. We don't know what's coming next - a booted ground ball or a spectacular diving catch. Sports and coaching give us that thrill of not knowing what's coming in the next instant.



The interesting thing about coaching is that we've done our main part in the preparation for the game. During the games, it's mainly the players who need to perform. Yes, we make strategic moves during the game, but it is on the shoulders of the players with whom we rise and fall. The adrenalin rush and tremendous pride we feel over a great play or a victory by our kids is a feeling that can't be duplicated. On the other hand, the frustration and sometimes anger that comes from a miscue or a last-second loss can be very, very hard to control. The frustration and anger are height-

ened because the players determine the outcome - it is out of our control, to a large extent. At that moment, if the outcome was a negative one, we want to explode in anger, not sit down and quietly teach. Sometimes we do explode in anger - at umpires, at players, or maybe even at other coaches. Or we may throw something or kick something, or let out a string of curse words - all things we preach to the kids about NOT doing. We're frustrated. It's out of our control. We don't know what to do. We're angry. We want to blame somebody, so they can be the bad guy.

Coach Fowler is married to Nancy, and they have two children, Mackenzie (8) and Eric (7). He graduated from Anderson High School in 1977, and from the University of Texas in 1981. He was the Assistant Varsity Baseball Coach at Johnston High School from 1989-1994. He was the Head Baseball Coach at Hyde Park Baptist High School from 1994-1997. He has been the Assistant Varsity Baseball Coach, Pitching Coach, and Head JV Coach at Bowie since 1997. In those 5 years, his JV teams have an overall record of 91 wins and 15 losses, including 3 District Championships and 1 Runner-Up. He also coaches Football and teaches Math at Bowie.





Again, another blessing occurred because as I went through these seven weeks of radiation, I didn't get more and more fatigued, I got stronger and stronger! I went back to work full time and am still coaching baseball. Again, this was not my own strength, but God's miracle.

That's all true for baseball and sports, but it's also very true for life, in general. I'm the Assistant Baseball Coach at Bowie High School in Austin, Texas. In the spring of 2002, our Varsity Baseball team had an incredible run. But it really began in the spring of 2001. That year we had a very good year. We won several hard-fought rounds in the playoffs, until we reached the Regional Finals, only to face a District rival - Austin High School. We split the first 2 games, and were ahead 1-0 in the 6th inning of the third game. We ended up losing that game in heart-breaking fashion - on a VERY controversial umpire's call.

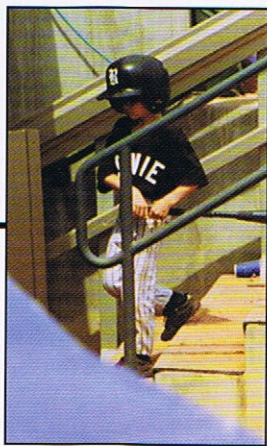
Coming back the next year (2002), we had almost all of our team back - 16 seniors, only losing 3 key players. We played great in our non-District games and Tournaments. We play in a tough district, and came out tied for first, and then won the tiebreaker game, so we went into the playoffs as the #1 team from District 25-5A. In our first round, we beat South San two games to none. Next, we played a tough San Antonio Holmes team. They beat us the first game. Our backs were against the wall, but we came back and won the next two games straight. Next up was a La Joya team that was virtually unknown. We knew they had one good pitcher. They won the flip, and we had to play only one game. We were the home team, and their leadoff hitter of the game hit a smash up the middle. Our shortstop, Johnny Ormand, raced over, snagged it, and whirled 360 degrees to fire him out by an eyelash. That set the tone for the whole game. We survived to win 2-1. In the Regional Finals, we faced San Antonio Reagan, who had two of the best pitchers in the State - 2 brothers: Jeff (Jr.) and Matt (Sr.) Manship. We played 2 out of 3. In the opener, Jeff Manship (Jr.) completely shut us down, striking out about 2 of every 3 batters

per inning. We somehow managed to get 2 runners on base, and pulled a trick play to score a run. Our pitcher, Terry Killion, did a fabulous job, and we won 1-0, without even getting a hit! In the second game, our bats came alive, and we won convincingly 11-2. So we were headed to the State Tournament.

In our semi-final game against Duncanville, we had our bats still going, along with Terry Killion, who pitched another fabulous game, and we won 8-3. Our team stayed at Dell Diamond to scout our opponent in the State Championship game. The other semi-final was Round Rock Westwood against Fort Bend Elkins; Elkins won. We went back to our hotel, got something to eat,

worst, I had a 4. Up until this time, I had no previous symptoms or warnings, like headaches, numbness, etc. It was like a ballgame where the next play is completely tragic and unexpected. It was a moment that would change my life forever, and countless others' lives forever, also. The short story of what's happened since then is that I've had surgery, radiation treatments, and am currently doing chemo treatments as I write this article in November 2002. The doctors have given me two years to live. So, in my life's "ballgame", my team had just made a huge blunder, and was probably now going to lose the game because of it. My wife and I went through all the emotions you might expect - anger, fear, loneliness, depression, resentment, and denial. It was just like coaching, because it was out of my control. I was angry, frustrated, and depressed. I felt like doing all those things you feel like doing when you lose a game - kick, scream, curse, and blame, except my feelings were about 20,000 times to a greater degree because the stakes were real.

Please don't stop reading now, because that's only a very small part of the story. Yes, my "team" was dealt a huge setback, something totally out of my control. But I did have a choice in how I would respond to that blow. I chose to stay positive. But more importantly, I chose to FIGHT and to WIN. In games and in life, we can't control the future circumstances, only how we respond. But how do you do that? In a game, if one-player makes a bonehead play, then his teammates have to step-up, respond, and make even better plays to win. The Coach also has to put that behind him/her and make even better decisions to get a win. My life took a major blow on June 8, 2002, but since then, I have had all kinds of "teammates" step up and make plays. Folks from far and wide have come in and supported us in so many incredible ways. The Bowie baseball community, High School and College Coaches from all across the state of Texas, our neighbors, our friends, our family, our church, and countless others have done things for us, been there for us, and prayed for us. People have done things for us you would not believe. We've received money and many, many encouraging notes and cards from these friends, and even from people we don't know. People have given me



and all went to bed feeling great. It was going to be the perfect end to an incredible season for our team.

We woke up the next morning, June 8, 2002, and everything seemed great, except for me - my right leg felt numb - like it was asleep and I had slept on it funny. I gave it a few minutes to go away - it didn't. I tried to stand up - I couldn't. It wouldn't go away. It was then that I had one of those moments I mentioned earlier. The moments like you have in a game when winning and losing hangs in the balance. Except this was no game - this was my leg, this was my life. I was taken by ambulance to the Round Rock hospital, where two MRI's revealed I had a cancerous brain tumor. It was not the good kind - the contained kind. Mine had a nucleus and fingers going out from it. On a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 being the

rides, mowed our grass, and kept our kids for several days. Others have purchased huge gift certificates for meals, groceries, paid for maid service for our house, and one person purchased a brand new sofa for me to rest on in my classroom. I could go on and on.

But just as in the game, the player who made the bad play needs to stay positive and make better plays (if the Coach lets him stay in the game!), I had to step up my "game", too. And let me just say before I start, that none of the following was of my own strength or willpower. I believe all of the things I just listed about people helping us out and all of the things I'm about to describe about my own experience; all of this was by the strength and power of God.

The doctors in Round Rock told us surgery was necessary immediately, so we started looking for a surgeon. It turns out my best friend's mom was best friends with the wife of probably the best neurosurgeon on the planet for this type of tumor, Robert Grossman, with Baylor Medical Center in Houston. He was recovering from back surgery, but he got us in with his partner who was, I guess "second best on the planet", David Baskin. We also met with one of only 3 surgeons who do this in Austin who was approved on our insurance plan. He said I would for sure lose the use of my right leg, and possibly other problems. He said that the surgery was no big deal, and that going to Houston for it would be like "going to Dallas for an appendectomy."

At that point, the

decision of who should do the surgery became as clear as "Do you bunt with a runner at 2nd and nobody out, with your #9 hitter up, when you're ahead 3-2 in the bottom of the 6th!" On June 20th, Dr. Baskin did my surgery. Three hours after the surgery, I was talking and moving all body parts - including my right leg! By the next evening, I was walking. A day later, I watched every pitch while the University of Texas defeated South Carolina to win the College World Series. After three days, I went home from the hospital. God had not just "gotten me through it"; He was directing my recovery on an incredible timetable. What a miracle!

After that, there were several other miracles that came along. For several days after we came back to town, I could not sleep more than three or four hours each night. Along with that, during that time, I had a sprained arch in my foot, which was incredibly painful. I also developed a blood clot in my left arm after surgery. God took care of all these things. The next step of treatment was radiation. The doctor sat down with us and described all the side effects that would occur from this type of treatment on my brain - hair loss, numbness of feet, possible loss of use of a leg, possible vision loss. None of these occurred except hair loss. And if any of you knew me before this happened, you would say, "Who cares?" to that! He also told us that, as these 34 treatments went on, I could count on mounting exhaustion and fatigue. This was particularly distressing news because my last radiation treatment was due to be on the very first day of school. Again, another blessing occurred because as I went through these seven weeks of radiation, I didn't get more and more fatigued, I got stronger and stronger! I went back to work full time and am still coaching baseball. Again, this was not my own strength, but God's miracle.

I could once again go on and on with examples, but I won't. What have I learned in the last 6 months? As for coaching, I've learned how important it is to stay positive. This may seem too obvious, but I need to be reminded that bad things will happen in games. That's when teammates and coaches have to step it up a notch, speak encouraging words, and never give in or give up. As for life, I've learned the same. Lately, I've had an incredible "team" come around me and my family, and hold us up and support us in ways we couldn't have even dreamed. We wouldn't have made it alone, just like no one can win

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the game alone.

The other life lesson I've learned is that God intends for us to live only one day at a time. He knows us better than we do, and He doesn't want us sitting around being proud of the past, while doing nothing in the present. Nor does He want us to sit around worrying about the future. He says it's best for us to take each day as it comes, and live it like it might be our last. Because if we do that, it makes our priorities fall right in where they should be. That's what this experience has done for me. I no longer take for granted those little moments and conversations I have with my wife, my kids, or anyone I come in contact with throughout each day. Think about it before each conversation you had if you thought, "what would I say to this person now if I knew this was the last time I would ever talk to them?" That would change most of our conversations.

I couldn't control what happened to me out of the blue on June 8, 2002, any more than you can control whether your center-fielder catches or drops that fly ball to win or lose the game. But what we can control is our response and our attitude from then on. Let me just tell you, that for me in my life, I choose to step up, respond, stay positive, and never give up. I choose to fight and I choose to win. Just like in the games, we may not win, but all we can do is live each day as if it might be our last. God doesn't promise any of us tomorrow, next week, or the next 20 years. What God does promise us is a better life now and eternal life in the future, if we decide to believe in Jesus Christ. We can also be a good "teammate" to friends, family, and even strangers in our lives. Step it up a notch, stay positive, and support them if they need it. In life as well as coaching, real victories come not in the win column, but in changing people's hearts and making a difference in their lives. That's why we need to love that stranger. That's why friends and family and church are so important. And that's why we coach.

