



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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The Road To Williamsport

By Michael Braunstein

Editor's Note: Two years ago, we asked Michael Braunstein to write an article for The Stepping Stone, and he brought us "Right Fielders of Actuarial Science" (October 2007 issue) where he likened the coach's need to find the best positions for players on a Little League team to the corporate manager's need to find the most productive positions for the actuaries on staff. Last year, he followed that up with "A Game of Inches" (October 2008 issue) where he addressed the little things that can go a long way toward winning and success—on a Little League diamond or in a Big League corporate environment. "The Road to Williamsport" completes the three-part series and, for the curious reader, provides the result of that big game. This time, however, Coach Braunstein offers no management or personal development theme up front. Rather, he invites you, the reader, to write in to The Stepping Stone on what corporate management or personal development message might be implicitly included here. We won't spoil things for you by revealing what we think they might be, but we will offer a few hints after you've read the piece. We'd love to hear from you at SteppingStone@JHACareers.com so we can share your thoughts with our other readers. Either way, we hope you enjoy "The Road to Williamsport."

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

When a town fields two teams of 12-year-olds for the annual Little League All-Star Tournament, and the first of those teams seems to have the majority of the big-name players, the expectations are not all that high for team two. But when that second Little League All-Star team enters its sixth game with the stellar record of four wins and just one close loss; when that same team, at 4-0, has already clinched first place in its bracket and has already guaranteed play into a second round; and when that very team now boasts confident players at each and every position up and down the lineup, expectations start to become understandably high.

They grow even higher when one recalls that game one took extra innings and included a terrific defensive play in the bottom of the 6th and two more great plays in the last of the 7th inning to keep things alive. Higher still when remembering that game two was in doubt until, finally, a two-run blast iced things in the top of the 6th. And perhaps those expectations become highest of all for this potential "team of destiny" when one is reminded that, after an easy game three, game four was captured with a tying home run in the last of the 5th followed by a two-out, slide-safely-into-home, game-winning, RBI single to conclude the 6th. Yes, five games complete on the road to the Little League World Series in Williamsport, this second team was alive and well and, who'd a' think it, the talk of the town.

BLACKJACK

There are no Vegas odds makers who cover Little League baseball (or, at least, there shouldn't be), so it's hard to tell if this team, with its newfound following, was now underdog or favorite. But, when the luck of the draw for round two was unkind and these literal boys of summer found themselves next pitted against a perennial district champion, things did not bode so well on paper. However, it should not be forgotten that this scrappy team, with its strong pitching and its ability to flash leather when necessary, had given up a scant 13 runs over its entire first five games, i.e. less than .42 runs per inning—the best, by a wide margin, amongst all the first round teams. And, as they say, pitching and defense wins games. That said, to keep winning, those baseball soothsayers had better be right. Because, in the offensive department, this glove-favored team had been credited with just 22 runs of their own—a stat well down on the list of run producers. What then the odds to win this next game—a guaranteed pressure-laden, single-elimination, loser-go-home matchup? Going in, arguably, a "pick 'em."



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CONTINUED ON PAGE 18



How does one explain, then, to a townful of disappointed spectator parents and fans, a 21-0 (yes, 21-0), mercy-rule-imposed shellacking in the very first second-round game which everyone and their second-cousin, twice-removed, attended? And, arguably more important, how does a coach explain this perceived debacle to the delicate psyches of the dozen or so 12-year old, once-confident athletes with suddenly sorrowful faces?

THE LIBERAL ARTS

Different coaches would likely try different approaches. To help ease their young minds, a philosophical coach might take a “you can’t win them all” angle. Another coach might grab hold of Grantland Rice’s mildly religious “For when the One Great Scorer comes to write against your name, He marks—not that you won or lost—but how you played the game.” And some, of course, might opt to wax poetic and choose a stanza a la Ernest L. Thayer.

Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright,
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light;
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout,
But there is no joy in Mudville: Mighty Casey has struck out.

And then there are coaches who would choose to share some history and remind their players of the 1951 Dodgers, the 1962 Mets, the 1964 Phillies or the 2003 Cubs. Or, if none of those are deemed sufficient to make the point, the entire 86 years of Red Sox misery (from 1918 until, finally, 2004) could be summoned. And the names of Pitcher Ralph Branca, “Marvelous” Marv Throneberry, Manager Gene Mauch, Fan Steve Bartman and First Baseman Bill Buckner must certainly surface.

For the politically active coaches standing on the sidelines, Thomas E. Dewey, George McGovern, Michael Dukakis, Walter Mondale, Al Gore or John Kerry might be served up as relatively recent role models. The musically inclined coach might, along with his team of players, karaoke a few bars of “Had a Bad Day,” while the thespian coach might offer up a little of his own Damn Yankees’ Joe Hardy and “You Gotta Have Heart.”

But, no, this coach was an actuary, and that made it easy. He could prove mathematically that these players had nothing to be ashamed of.

MATHEMATICS 101

Dear players and fans,

I did the math, and it’s no wonder. Pay attention, class. Before the game, as the players were warming up, I looked around at the outfield signs. 200 feet to the fence in left. 200 feet to the fence in center. 200 feet to the fence in right. The symmetry was evident and, given the right angle where the first base line



and the third base line intersect, made it numerically apparent that the playing area at Volunteer Field is, in its entirety, one-quarter of a circle with a radius of 200 feet.

Most of you will readily know how that translates but, for the math phobic, allow me this paragraph. The area of a full circle is Pi times the square of the radius (or Pi “r” squared as they say). Pi, as some of you may have forgotten, goes on forever but, in the interest of practicality, most of us accept it to be about 3.14 (unless you’re second baseman Peter, and then it’s 3.14159265358979323846 and then some). So, squaring that 200-foot radius gives us 40,000 square feet (i.e. 200×200) and then multiplying by Pi at 3.14 would make the area of the full circle to be 125,600 square feet (more if Peter Precocious has his way). Recall, though, that we seek the area, not of the full circle, but of the playing field. Hence, only a quarter of that 125,600 is playable, i.e. 31,400 square feet. (Please keep reading; the complicated math is over.)

Now, with nine players on a team and with one of those nine relegated to the catcher spot which, per Little League rules (and all other baseball rules for that matter), mandates that player to begin play outside of the playing quadrant, there are left just eight players to patrol this pretty vast expanse. In fact, if those eight players were to be equally assigned such a task, each would need to cover a whopping 3,925 square feet, i.e. almost 4,000 square feet each.

Assuming that each player’s stance is roughly two feet across, that’s the equivalent of asking each player to cover the 2,000 feet (about 4/10 of a mile) in front of him, and to ask him to catch anything which might be hit into that area. For all practical purposes, this is an impossible task. And, if you don’t believe me, try it. And it is an especially impossible task when the other team (and let’s give credit where credit is due) is able to hit the ball very hard and on a line against each and every pitcher we could throw at them—including, in fact, our very best. Worse yet (and this, to me, seems really unfair), our defense was restricted with an outfield wall beyond which we were not permitted—yet our opponents on offense had the option to extend beyond it as best they could. Thus you can see that we were provided with a clearly insurmountable challenge.

So, mercy, mercy, me. We did the best we could. We pitched, we ran, we chased. And, occasionally, we would throw in a new ball when the old one was lost. But, when it was over, it was clear that we simply could not overcome the mathematics of it all. Perhaps if Pi didn’t go on for so long we could have, but that would be akin to asking the sun not to come up in the morning. And that would be too much to ask because, for player and fan alike, let’s face it; the sun will come up in the morning—a bright and beautiful sun.

Professor (and Coach) Braunstein

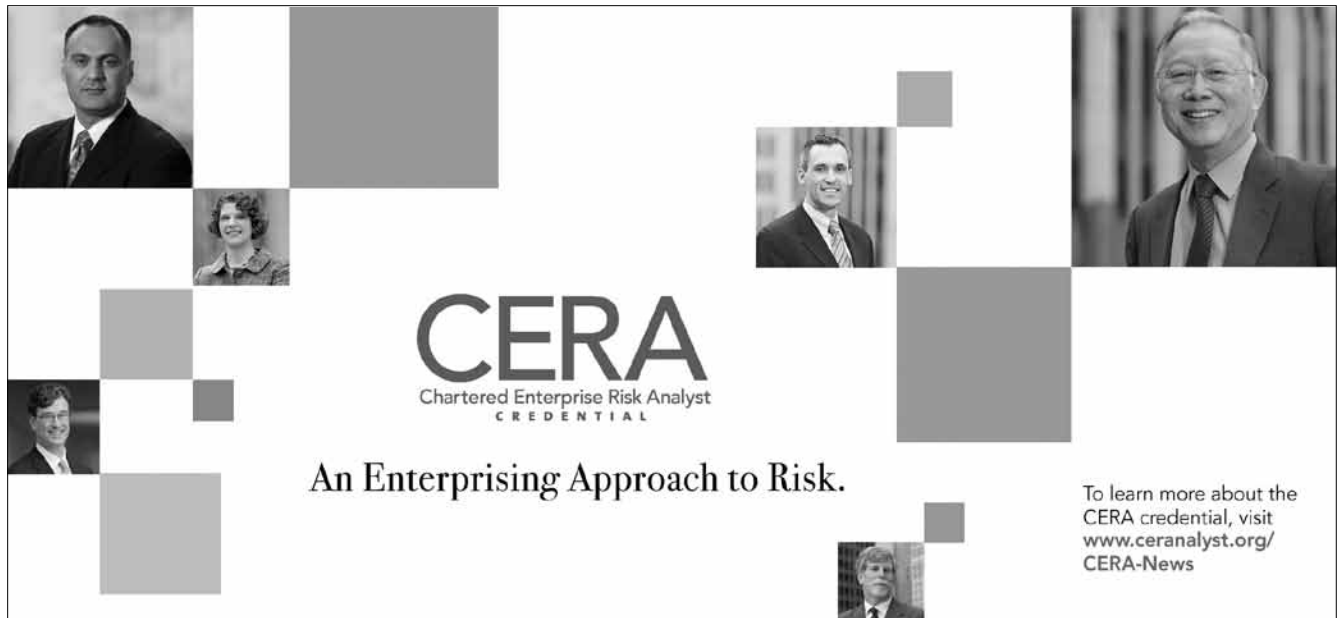
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CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

FREE PIZZA

As it was, the players didn't need to wait until morning. Tradition at Volunteer Field is to provide free post-game pizza to all the players and coaches of both the winning and losing teams. So attribute it to the resiliency of kids or attribute it to the opportunity for free food but, once that pizza came out of the oven, the game and its lopsided score were long forgotten by every starter and sub. And so there they sat and ate, alongside and chatting with their victors about summer camp and frogs and swimming pools and what 12-year-old boys talk about. For the parents and the rest of the fans—well, the one-sided geometry lesson might still come in handy. And, as for Williamsport, like a lot of boys (and girls) across the land, these too will be watching on cable.

Editor's Note: So what might Coach Braunstein be suggesting here? Perhaps the message is on helping to rebuild confidence after failing an actuarial exam or losing an important account. Or maybe it's about dealing with the unrealistic expectations of others. Perhaps he's suggesting the need for a corporate mercy-rule that would be imposed before a lack of company profit becomes too overwhelming. Or maybe the coach's story is just about dealing with adversity such as the loss of a job, in a positive and productive way, or lightheartedly, with some clever mathematical spin. Perhaps Coach Braunstein's conclusion is that, no matter what, life and career will go on. Share your own thoughts at SteppingStone@JHACareers.com, either elaborating on these suggested messages or by adding some of your own. Please write; we'd love to hear from you. ●



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