“PLAY TOGETHER. PLAY HARD. PLAY SMART.
Together means unselfishly, hard means with effort, and smart means with proper execution.”

-Dean Smith
Be a pioneer.

My life is dedicated to strength and conditioning. I spend countless hours engineering performance systems for the betterment of my athletes. One of my passions outside of strength and conditioning is history. Learning about the people and events that came before us fascinates me. Many years ago, I remember learning about the first settlers that pioneered our great nation. Driven, ambitious, and resilient. These were some impressive people! They left their homeland with hopes and dreams that were only a question mark on the horizon. They didn’t know where they would live, what they would eat or how they would make money. The pioneers were poor, battling sickness and fighting famine but they made the trek with a goal of a better future. We can all learn a lesson from these individuals in history.

Why should athletes be pioneers?

Athletes need to take risks. 1 percenters don’t conform to the other 99%.

Athletes need to deal with adversity such as losses, poor individual performance, or lack of playing time.

Athletes need to fully commit to the goals they’ve set. Doubt only delays the process. The journey to athletic success is long. It will test your patience. Like the pioneers, your arrival is many miles away.

Athletes need to trust the process. Stay present, don’t harp on the past. Keep your eyes on the horizon.

Athletes need to confide in their teammates. Find strength in the support of those around you (coaches, administrators, and teammates).

As an athlete, many situations in your career will test you. Here are a few examples of how you can be a pioneer:

Your teammates order pizzas after a training session. Be a pioneer: Eat like an athlete, find a better option. You worked hard, don’t erase the good grade.

Your teammates are negative in the locker room after practice. Be a pioneer: Serve as an energy giver and lift up those that are trying to lower the group.

It’s your day off. Lay in bed all day or get extra training, treatment, or skill work. Be a pioneer: Get extra work. Those that complete extra credit never fail.

The atmosphere in practice or lift is dismal. The energy is low and lacks enthusiasm. Be a pioneer: Be vocal, make some noise and encourage others. Turn up the volume!
A morning workout can be tough: not only are you waking up earlier than you prefer, but you may also struggle with what to eat (if anything) before training. So, for you early morning practitioners, here are some tips to make it successful:

1. HAVE SOMETHING

Sure, some choices are better than others, but something is better than nothing. Worried about digestive problems? It may take experimenting with something small at first, like ½ banana - but your gut is “trainable” and will eventually learn to accept something more.

2. CONSIDER LIQUIDS

If solid foods just aren’t going to happen, then consider something liquid like sports drinks, milk, or juice. This kills two birds with one stone: carbs AND fluids. (Note: sports drinks are specifically formulated to be easily digested and absorbed, while milk and juice are more concentrated and for some may contribute to digestive issues.)

3. FOCUS ON CARBOHYDRATES

The closer you get to a workout, the more the focus should be on carbohydrates. A small amount (5-10 grams) of protein or fat may be tolerated, but too much can slow digestion.

4. GET IT RIGHT AT NIGHT

If you absolutely can’t tolerate ANY calories in the morning, get a good high-carb dinner in at night if the morning workout necessitates it.
Sun Tzu once wrote that “Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.” We all know those athletes. The ones who always seem to have an excuse or reason why today they just can’t do it. Most these athletes have a lot of potential - a lot more than they recognize or utilize. But you, the coach, see it and recognize it. In fact, it’s not an infrequent occurrence for you to try and draw that potential out of them... only to be met with, “Coach, I can’t.”

This is where mental toughness comes into play. The dictionary defines mental toughness as “grit; mental fortitude.” Even this definition, however, does not really explain what mental toughness actually is. This is because mental toughness is an intangible characteristic. It is visible in things like perseverance through tough situations, the ability to instantaneously forget mistakes that may impede performance, “bouncing back” from injuries, determination to improve regardless of the sacrifice required, etc. The athletes that possess this skill of mental toughness are very successful and stand apart from others in their sport or position. Examples include Michael Jordan, Peyton Manning, and Derek Jeter (to only name a few). Mental toughness is, in fact, a skill.

It is something you can (and should) train; it improves over time. Athletes who do complete mental training are proven to be more successful and high achieving than those who do not. So my question to you is this: Do you want your athletes to achieve more than they think that possibly can? More than they tell themselves and you is possible? Mental training can set athletes apart from the crowd. It can develop athletes who come up with solutions instead of excuses. Athletes who keep pushing themselves and their teammates to reach far and above what is believed to be capable. Are you mentally preparing your team for success?
The quintessential gift for any graduating senior is Dr. Seuss’ classic, Oh the Places You’ll Go. The general theme describes the wonderful and amazing things you’ll accomplish in your life, except sometimes when you don’t, as you’re sure to have a few hiccups along the way.

You won’t lag behind, because you’ll have the speed.
You’ll pass the whole gang and you’ll soon take the lead.
Wherever you fly, you’ll be best of the best.
Wherever you go, you will top all the rest except when you don’t.
Because, sometimes, you won’t.

It turns out there is a simple way to help keep you on the right path for a long time. It doesn’t guarantee any deviation from your plan, but it should help. The trick is to consistently reflect on, and write down, what you value. As Professor Kelly McGonigal of Stanford writes, “It helps people persevere in the face of discrimination and reduces self-handicapping. In many cases, these benefits are a result of a one-time mindset intervention. People who write about their values once, for ten minutes, show benefits months or even years later.”

So here’s my challenge to you: take 10 minutes out of your day to write down 2-3 values that you personally live by. Put this list somewhere you can see. Reflect each week on how you’ve stacked up. Chances are that working your plan will become a whole lot easier when you see why it’s so important to you!

**Values:**
- Give 100% every day
- Never give up.
- Positive attitude.
- Respect coach & team
- Be a team player.
- Have fun!