

It was a little over two years ago when I started hearing the voice inside my head. I'm about to submit an Economics paper that could use another edit, but before I close the laptop the voice reminds me: "Last part, strongest part." I roll out of bed and into the bathroom and grab my toothbrush: "I am your greatest helper or your heaviest burden. I am habit," rings in my ear. It's a Thursday night and I'm contemplating doing the reading for my 9 AM section. The voice speaks again: "Failing to prepare is preparing to fail." I am compelled to trade Netflix for a highlighter. The voice, unforgettable after two plus years on the basketball team, belongs to my coach, Tommy Amaker.

During my freshman year at Harvard, making the varsity basketball team consumed my thoughts. I was told my chances were slim, the basketball program rarely took walk-ons, and so I poured myself into training. I ran stadiums, shot countless free throws, and bulked up in the weight room. Once on campus, I knew my way around the MAC before I could navigate the stacks of Widener. I tried out with high hopes, but a phone call, taken on a Friday night outside of the hockey arena, left me in tears; I was the final cut off of the roster. The next summer, I ran more stadiums, took extra shots, and grew even stronger. But the result of my sophomore year tryout was no different, except this time I was just leaving Harvard Hall, hovering around Johnston Gate, when I got the call. Again, I had been cut.

Weeks later, I got a phone call. The team had lost some games and the coaches wanted someone to energize practice and push the starters. I thought about saying no. I remembered vividly the disappointment from my previous tries, but I felt, as I would later hear from Coach Amaker, "The harder you work, the harder it is to surrender." I decided not to surrender. The risk of another dent in my pride was not worth abandoning my goal. After two long weeks as the only

practice squad member, I was told, standing next to the bleachers nearest the entrance to the gym, I had made the team. Through basketball I have learned that working hard not only makes you better, it makes you hungrier.

But what happens when that hunger subsides? My first year on the team, the Crimson had feasted on the spoils of immense success, enjoying a third consecutive Ivy League championship and an NCAA tournament victory. After consecutive high-margin victories early in my second season, we lined up for sprints to finish practice. Our sprints must be completed in a certain time, and several veterans failed to make the time. Worse yet, no one called them out. Coach was livid: “It doesn’t matter we’re on a winning streak,” Coach Amaker explained, “That’s not how we judge our team! We aren’t interested in winning championships, we are trying to become a championship team.” This idea, enigmatic at first, has stuck with me more than anything else during my time on the team. We don’t judge ourselves based on the scoreboard, or simply making a team, or even hoisting a banner. We will instead build a culture of excellence that demands commitment to high standards and personal roles, understanding that if we make that commitment, not only will we likely win a championship, but we will deserve it. When those veterans didn’t make the sprint, and no one spoke up about the lack of effort, our team was not living up to our standard; our leaders weren’t performing their roles. It is that shortcoming, not a number in the loss column, that we must guard against.

As I graduate and leave the team, I will not only walk away with experiences that have made me tougher and have rewarded small individual sacrifices with grander team accomplishments, but also with the voice inside my head. A voice that reminds me, both on and off the court, to live with the attitude that the payoff from hard work is not the jersey or the ring,

but the creation of a championship team. An attitude that even if you fall short of the material goal, you can be enlarged by the experience and be proud of your accomplishments. And should you reach that goal, you can take pride in knowing that the success is rightly deserved.