

Character and . . .

Transitions

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Character and Transitions

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Ritual in Sports: Transition and Transformation

James Romagna

Abstract

Athletes and coaches at every level of sports must face transitions at some point in their careers. Rituals are powerful tools for teams navigating transitions. When chosen thoughtfully, performed honestly and sincerely, and followed with time for reflection, rituals can lead to transformation and character growth in athletes' lives even beyond their sports experience.

The locker room was white-painted cinder block with two solid red stripes circling the room, one at three feet off the ground and the other at nine feet. The paint design replicated the team's sweater. The logo spread across the athletes' chests was even embroidered in the carpet, the center piece of the room. Unlike the sweater's winged design, which had been grabbed, shoved to the boards, soaked with sweat and blood and likely even spat on (depending on their opponent that weekend), the symbol on the floor was sacred. Everyone on that team knew the logo was never to be touched by foot, skate, or stick. No matter how raucous after a victory or angry after a loss the mood in the locker room became, the logo was protected by the belief that its representation of the team had to be respected. It was sacred to those who called the locker room home.



The sacred symbol on the locker room floor

This junior hockey team was set to embark on the road to the championship. The regular season was coming to an end and, although successful, it

no longer mattered. After seven months, the season was starting over. No matter how good they were during the regular season, the playoffs presented a clean slate. The locker room held 23 players: skilled sixteen-year-olds and gritty twenty-year-olds, and between those bookends was the gamut of experience, leadership, nervousness, success, failure, ego, confidence, and lack thereof. This room had every kind of physical skill there was and a full array of mental maturity. It was time to bring it all together.

Every coach and player involved in sports, no matter the level, has been challenged by a transition. It could be as desirable as qualifying for post-season play, hoping to continue riding the wave of success to a championship, or as devastating as the death of a teammate and having to carry on through a season that has lost its significance in a time of loss. Or perhaps it is the disarray of a season that has been disrupted by COVID and no one knows what challenges the next week or even day will present. Transition is an unavoidable part of coaching and participation in sport.

Every coach and player involved in sports, no matter the level, has been challenged by a transition.

For those who have made sports a part of life, the experience of transition is not new but rarely is it comfortable. There is the nervousness as one transitions from recreational sports at the developmental youth level to the introduction of competitive sports, where scores are kept, records matter, and, for athletes

who make the cut, there is pressure to earn a starting role or else become a bench player. There is the transition from high school to college. The NCAA reports that 7.4 million students participate in high school athletics, but the number shrinks to 460,000 in college, when suddenly *everyone* is good, the game is faster and more challenging, and success might not come so easily. There is the transition from a highly successful season of wins and championships to one of challenges through loss and injury. And finally, there is the transition from sports to life, when one transitions from being an athlete to being a former athlete.

All transitions are challenging but they present an opportunity for growth. I suggest that rituals can help move you through a transition to a point of transformation if you take steps of self-reflection, being honest with yourself, and examining yourself authentically. In a sports setting, these transformative practices can help a team work through transitions and encourage character development. Enabling this is the coach, who should play a vital role in establishing and observing team rituals. In exploring this,


I will look at three examples of rituals coaches have introduced that have helped teams identify what they've left behind, clarify their vision for the future, and make the leap to a new phase of life. Before exploring these examples, let us take a closer look at rituals.

The Nature of Ritual

What is ritual? Frankly, one encompassing description is elusive, though I am certain we have all heard the word, used the word, and have likely participated in a ritual. *National Geographic* journalist Tim Vernimmen points to rituals as repetitive, symbolic, and purposeful behaviors that are practiced in all cultures. In some cultures it is a definitive rite of passage, a backbone of their society, while in others it is a less ceremonial box that is checked while casually moving through life. Sociologist Robert Merton expresses the notion that ritual is a largely meaningless gesture (Goodger 219), while British anthropologist Mary Douglas states that dismissing ritual as empty gesture can be “seriously disabling” (21). I believe ritual has the power to serve as a turning point, a symbol of a transition, so let's look more closely at ritual's potential role in transformative experiences.

A 2004 study by educator and occupational therapist Ruth Segal suggests that even the most mundane routines can become rituals with symbolic meaning (507). A ritual may be a simple routine when cooking to ensure safety, a public event like a parade to strengthen community, or a prayer or symbolic act as part of a religion to preserve self. What may start as routine can become a ritual that promotes identity and belonging.

In *Ritual Solidarity and Sport*, John Goodger writes of rituals observed by athletes, regardless of team, that create a commonality across all sports, such as handshakes and award ceremonies. There is a commonality within the “sport group” but the practice of these common rituals separate the participants from the spectators. Rituals within a given team differentiate that team from another, creating a unique experience within the team. An example would be two opposing teams with differing approaches to pregame preparations. There can also be rituals within sports to define



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levels or status, such as belt rank in martial arts, or the recognition of the 1,000 point club in basketball. Goodger credits such rituals as a way for a team to express “both its single identity and its internal differentiations” (220). Ritual can be a powerful tool to establish and reinforce identity.



Commemorating a first NHL goal

French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep is more pointed in his recognition of the initiation rite, one type of ritual performed as a ceremony, as a purposeful way to change one’s identity, i.e., to transform. Van Gennep believes that all rites of passage have three phases: separation, margin, and aggregation (Turner, “Liminality” 360), which can also be traced through sports

rituals of transition and transformation. Championship teams celebrate with ring ceremonies and victory parades. They commemorate first goals by keeping the ball or puck and inscribing the date and opponent on it as a visual reminder. Teams play certain warm-up songs; others conquer particular hills in their final summer workouts. Some rituals are public, some are private. Either way, for those who participate in a ritual, it has meaning—meaning for the sport, the team, and the individual. Some of these acts are simple ceremonies while others are detailed rituals. Both carry meaning, providing a way for an athlete or a team to transition to whatever might be next for them.

In the team sports setting, Van Gennep’s “separation” can be interpreted as the movement from what “was” to what “is”; whether this means transitioning from regular season to post season or leaving behind old habits for a new way of doing things, it signifies embarking on a new journey. The “margin,” or liminal space, is that time of reflection, digestion, making sense of what was and what is to come. It can be a subtle or monumental moment of reshaping, redefining what was. This powerful moment of “where do I go from here?” or “what’s next?” is a crucial moment in an athlete’s career and life. “Aggregation,” the third phase, follows as the “new” athlete assimilates into the team setting, impacting the team wholly.

Following are the accounts of three teams and their specific ritual, created and introduced by the coach to be practiced by the team in that particular season. Could the ritual be adopted and implemented by other teams? Certainly. Would it have the same level of impact? That can be argued. The following three rituals were unique to these teams and all three

teams experienced the pinnacle of their sport, but more important than the seasonal success was the humility, gratitude, and compassion realized through each ritual.

Rituals for Transition

The Hotseat The junior hockey team’s “hotseat” was a cheap plastic black folding chair that looked like it would crumple under the weight of these junior hockey athletes. It did not. Positioned right at the bottom of the carpeted logo, there was just enough room left for the players to rest their feet as they awaited critique from their teammates and coaches. The room was clean, with open-faced pro-style wooden lockers around the perimeter, the windowless walls hiding the ritual from the outside world. The smell permeated every bit of that room—even the humming yellow industrial floor fans could not drive it out through the open doors. The smell of sweaty leather gloves, shoulder pads stained by the day’s work, and lived-in skates, often used for years on end, persisted. That smell settled into the locker room on the first day of practice. The day these young men met.

The head coach brought the hotseat with him from his successful college and professional experience—not the seat itself, but the process that is the “hotseat,” a no-holds-barred ritual process. It was a chance for athletes to say what they wanted to and be open and honest with their teammates, a chance to get it all out because there was a championship to win, and to win it, everyone must come together. Victor Turner calls this *communitas*. The hierarchy within the organization disappears and there is a “leveling and stripping” of status among those present (Turner, *Dramas* 252). Everyone was subject to the hotseat—players, coaches, trainers. All titles disappeared.

Everyone got a sheet with the players’ numbers on it and was tasked with going home and giving real thought to the analysis of each teammate. One team member interviewed for this article recalls it as an opportunity: “It’s not to namecall or call people out, but to get us to come together as a team and win a championship” (Curadi). After all, the goal was to win.

At this moment, in this uncomfortable environment, the shaping of each team member as well as the team itself began. The potential for great accomplishment was planted in each player and the strengthening of the team began. As another player on that team said, “Things that created separation in the room—[we had to] get them out in the open.” This was everyone’s opportunity to “write as little or as much about what that player

was or wasn't doing." This was an open and honest assessment of self and teammate because "we don't think about ourselves often, so this was a chance for people to tell you about yourself" (Bertsch). The coach reinforced that sentiment as he explained how perception is reality when it comes to what teammates think of each other, and that can be a very humbling experience. He felt that peer analysis was more powerful than coach assessment (Montgomery).

The next day the team gathered in the locker room, each player sitting in front of their open stall, waiting for their number to be called. "21, you're up." Sliding off the bench, he accepted the stack of papers gathered from his teammates and sat reluctantly in the hotseat, ready for the "accountability check" designed to make him "a better teammate, a better person" (Curadi).



The team's ritual of humility helped them grow and find unity as a team.

The team won the championship that year, and one could give credit to the hotseat as this team's private ritual, a true moment of unity, of coming together in ritualized community of challenge. The hotseat is a ritual that serves as a rite of passage for the team moving from the regular season to the playoffs and as

a ritual of humility for the players as their role becomes clearly defined by their teammates. What has happened up to this point no longer matters, the previous games don't matter, the statistics don't matter, and what players did or did not do well previously no longer matters. All things, and all players in the room, are equal, a feature shared by the next ritual I will discuss, practiced by a team seeking growth.

Ubuntu "There is a word in South Africa," President Obama said during his speech at the Nelson Mandela Memorial in 2013. "Ubuntu—a word that captures Mandela's greatest gift: his recognition that we are all bound together in ways that are invisible to the eye; that there is a oneness to humanity; that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others and caring for those around us."

In the Netflix docuseries *The Playbook*, Glenn Rivers, the coach of the Boston Celtics, was introduced to the idea of *ubuntu* by a fellow university board member who could sense he was looking for a direction for his team. He

spent hours studying the idea of *ubuntu* and ultimately adopted it in response to the challenge of coaching a team full of star players who had not previously played together. Coach Rivers interpreted and presented to his team the idea of *ubuntu* as “I can’t be all I can be unless you are all you can be.” His hope was that the players would no longer feel threatened by the success of other players once they realized that the better one player became the better they would all become (“Doc Rivers”).

Like the hotseat ritual, *ubuntu* also echoes Turner’s “leveling.” By adopting *ubuntu*, the star players were admitting that they were no better than anyone else and were willing to change for the good of the team. Although *ubuntu* is a philosophy, Coach Rivers and his team applied it as a ritual. The team declared it during their huddle break at every practice, during every timeout, and frequently used the term when assessing a player’s actions or behavior: “is that *ubuntu*?” (“Doc Rivers”).



Boston Celtics with Coach Rivers

As a ritual, it not only was a symbolic gesture but was also practiced as a purposeful behavior, chosen to move the players from individuals to a team.

Through this ritual, players built one another up by showing genuine concern and compassion, by creating a team unity experienced by the inner circle of the organization and sensed by all those observing. This ritual inspired compassion in players towards each other. The team thrived under the ritualistic adaptation of the *ubuntu* philosophy, ultimately winning the World Championship that year. My third example takes us in the opposite direction, to athletes who used ritual to aid in the transformation from unified team to healthy individuals following separate paths.

Fire in the Can One of the greatest franchises in the history of sport ended “with the flick of a match” (“Steve Kerr”). In 1998, the Chicago Bulls had won their sixth NBA championship during what would be the final year together for the current team lineup.

As a closing to their time together and their historical run, they gathered for one last team meeting and participated in a ritual. In ESPN’s documentary *The Last Dance*, Coach Phil Jackson recalls the meeting and the ritual “where they kind of put things to rest.” He pointed out to the players that this meeting was the last time they would ever be together. They needed something to help them transition from being part of this championship-

winning team to living their lives without it. They used a ritual. Coach Jackson asked each team member to write about what this team meant to them, read it out loud, and finally, put the paper in a coffee can in the center of the locker room floor.

Steven Kerr, current NBA coach and former guard on that team, notes that each player had very emotional words to share, and that the ritual brought the players together one last time, not as basketball players defined by their talents and contracts, but as people. They all stood as equals before that can. This was a chance to reflect on what they had accomplished and the people they accomplished it with, and, wherever they were in their careers, to think about what was next (“Steve Kerr”).

This ritual created a moment of gratitude, a time for them to share what they meant to each other as human beings, not basketball players. When the meeting was over, Coach Jackson turned out the lights and dropped the match in the can, ending one of sports’ greatest dynasties. Kerr recalls; “it was one of the most powerful things I’ve ever seen” (“Steve Kerr”). This ritual helped them say goodbye, it helped them end what they were and move forward into individual lives without team play.



Chicago Bulls Coach Phil Jackson and Michael Jordan

Recommendations

We often hear that sports build character, but based on the examples I have shared, I would propose that it is not the participation in the sport that builds character, but rather the rituals of sports. When thoughtfully and purposefully executed, these rituals can offer an opportunity for character building and transformation. There is constant transition in sports, and coaches are challenged daily to carry both individuals and teams through changing situations in order to experience success in the present and to encourage character development in the athlete as they pursue a life well lived. What transitions are you currently facing? What transitions have you faced in the past that you felt were missed opportunities? Were there transitions that you believe were handled well and could be duplicated to help others?

Every year, team, and player are different. There are coaches steadfast in their ways of doing things and there are coaches who are constantly

shaping their philosophy, regardless of their personal approach or their past experience. They know that a team’s dynamic, which changes from year to year, is what ultimately drives the success of the program. A ritual is not necessarily the best choice just because it worked once before, or because the coach experienced it as a player. It has to fit the personality of the team, a personality that only the coach truly knows.

The importance of coaches in the ritual process cannot be overlooked. Each example of ritual in this article was developed and implemented by the coach. In “Shifting Our Mindset,” Joe Sabin points to the role of a coach as someone that should make an intentional effort to be a mentor and hopefully have influence on the athletes beyond the field of play (46–47). Thoughtfully including rituals to assist during transitions encourages character growth and healthy transformation.

How can ritual help you move your team and players forward? We have explored a ritual that brings humility to a team, one that fosters compassion, and another that promotes gratitude. What is it that you want for the individuals on your team?

David Brooks, in *The Road to Character*, points out that when character is formed or changed, the person subject to change had “to humble themselves in self-awareness if they had any hope of rising up transformed” (13). The aforementioned rituals all had transforming qualities for the athletes. The rituals were pivotal moments in the athletes’ careers and lives.

The hotseat most directly illustrates Brooks’ emphasis because it was a ritual of humility. Physically sitting in front of peers, reading out loud what one does well and what needs to change is a transformative experience. The transformative effect of *ubuntu*


was evident in the compassion shown toward teammates. After the Bulls gathered one last time—not as basketball players but as human beings—to share their gratitude for one another after an incredible accomplishment, they could move on to the next phase of their careers and lives.

Brooks believes these moments can be small everyday events and can shape character slowly, or they can arrive as a “huge crucible” moment, a milestone moment in life (14). These three examples of sports ritual would certainly fit the definition of crucible moments in these athletes’ lives—

Thoughtfully including rituals to assist during transitions encourages character growth and healthy transformation.

departing on a journey to a championship, pursuing yet another banner to hang in the rafters to join the ranks of a sports legacy, or closing out a decorated career and moving on to another phase of life. These exercises in humility, compassion, and gratitude are a reminder to the athlete that they are not the “center of the universe” and that their “individual talents” are not enough in the pursuit of the larger goal (263). Brooks invokes something greater than sports: life is the larger goal, but these rituals act as single, powerful moments that shape the lives of these athletes.

We hear the phrase “we are our own worst critics” frequently used in the context of being too hard on ourselves or not giving ourselves enough credit for who we are or what we accomplish. We need a critical outside eye or, as Brooks calls it, “redemptive assistance,” which is the idea that others can help us through our struggles because they too have faced their own challenges (263). This can be likened to the rookie-veteran relationship in sports. A veteran, by definition, is one who has had a lot of experience in a particular field. In a sports team construct, they give the younger players helpful advice in areas such as skill development, game and practice preparation, travel etiquette, and dealing with victory and loss.



Life is the larger goal, but these rituals act as single, powerful moments that shape the lives of these athletes.


These “crucible” moments occur in both sports and life. One might happen in an open and honest conversation with a friend or family member when your “blind spot” is revealed to you, or in an honest evaluation of your skill and

teamwork at a crucial time in the sports season. Some level of discomfort, nervousness, defensiveness is likely to arise. Whatever the response, it is an emotional moment, a possible turning point. An evaluation of you by others that ideally is followed by deep reflection.

During the hotseat ritual, most players knew what was likely going to be said about them, but as one player from that team said, “Self-truth is tough, introspection is tough, the natural reaction is *not me*” (Bertsch). This moment of transition is monumental, for the team going into the playoffs and for the player as a person going into life. As suggested by the junior hockey coach, these moments should be perceived as opportunities for growth as a person, whether it is to improve in certain areas or further build your strengths. The intention of the person addressing you is to help you grow, for your own good and for the benefit of all involved—the team, the family, the relationship.

It has been said that it is not the situation but how we respond to the situation that defines us. What do you do in that moment when people are being honest with you and implore that you be honest with yourself? That single moment when the words are spoken can feel like an eternity. What do you do next in that moment? And in the moments to come? Others are being honest with you, and now you are asked to be honest with yourself. This is a moment of self-reflection: Who do I think I am? Who do others think I am? Who really am I? The pivotal moment is the ritual, but the most important moment is the one that follows, as that is the moment with the potential for actual transformation.

No one knows their team better than the coach. It is a powerful position and the impact rituals can have is real. How can we create ritual to be purposeful behavior as Vernimmen suggests, and not merely the meaningless gesture Merton defines? How can rituals be used to help teams make it through transitions and do so in a way that transforms and grows character? For that matter, how can athletes make the most of the chance to grow through ritual? Just as coaches have the responsibility to create and reinforce rituals, athletes, too, have the responsibility to embrace opportunities to develop their character with self-reflection, humility, and authenticity.



It is not the situation but how we respond to the situation that defines us.

- 1) Create Moments. The ritual is all about creating a powerful, meaningful moment. The ritual does not have to be new but it must be refined for this particular team in this particular moment. Make sure the honesty and emotion of the ritual is age-appropriate. Decide when it is going to be used. Will it be a single exercise in a crucial point of the season like the hotseat or the Bulls' ritual, or one that will better serve the team with frequency like *ubuntu*?
- 2) Be Sincere. Treat the ritual like the powerful tool it is. There are plenty of traditions and routines that the team can partake in throughout the season, but the ritual to shape the players should be approached with respect and sincerity. Powerful moments in life often induce anxiety and nervousness, reflecting the depth, honesty, and sincerity of the moment. Give it profound meaning.
- 3) Practice Reflection. Because the ritual is powerful, coaches should give and athletes should take time to process, time for the liminal space, the in-betweenness of past performance and future hopes. Coaches,

you know best how to approach your athletes. Not everyone reacts the same to the same moment. Time and space are valuable in this process, so make sure to allow for both. The value of the ritual process can start to be realized through a reflective meeting with the athlete, in conversation among athletes, or it may be manifested in an athlete's personal reflection and growth that takes place in solitude.

4) Promote Autonomy. Coaches, be part of the process, don't control the process. When approaching ritual, because it can be a "leveling" experience, it is important to be embedded in the team rather than in your coaching role. Create an atmosphere of equality so that the players might be more open and honest. Additionally, let the moment flow. Let go of the "coach control," and let the process define itself. Athletes, take responsibility for your development and watch for ways to participate in the process more fully.

5) Reinforce the Ritual. Keep the ritual alive, along with all that it has done for the team. Make reference to the ritual at appropriate times, but remember to always approach it with the respect it deserves. Don't diminish it by going to "the well" too often. Remind players individually of the effect it had on them and also choose strategic team moments when its power can be reinforced.

However you choose to go about encountering ritual in your team's experience, keep in mind the greater goal—to encourage character growth that will impact athletes' lives even beyond their sports experience. In James Kerr's book *Legacy*, he explores the unmatched success of the famous New Zealand All Blacks rugby team, noting that their focus was on the "personal



Engouraging growth through ritual

development, both as human beings and as professional sportsmen, so that they had the character, composure and people skills to be leaders both on and off the field" (517). Rituals such as the honest evaluation by peers, creating an atmosphere of humility in the hotseat; the practice of *ubuntu*, expressing compassion toward others; and the gratitude of others as not just teammates but friends who accomplished something unprecedented all help those who participate to develop identity and purpose beyond their sport. Sports, like life, is full of transitions and presents the opportunity to use rituals to help those transitional moments become deeper, more meaningful and life altering—truly transformative—experiences.

James Romagna is an Assistant Professor and Department Head in the Health Wellness and Sport program at the University of Dubuque. As a multi-sport athlete his whole life and a two-sport athlete in college he understands the impact of sport on life. He has been able to share his experience by remaining active in coaching. James has coached at the youth, high school, and college levels, as well as coached countless individuals through personal training and human performance. He holds an EdD from National Louis University in Educational Leadership, a MA from Loras College in Physical Education and is both a Certified Personal Trainer (CPT) and Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS) through the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA).

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Photo credit “Prayer before the fight” p. 36: Xuan Nguyen, [Unsplash.com](https://unsplash.com)

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