

# **The Messiah Method**

**The Seven Disciplines of the  
Winningest College Soccer Program  
in America**

**Michael Zigarelli**



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*The Messiah Method*  
*The Seven Disciplines of the Winningest College*  
*Soccer Program in America*  
by Michael Zigarelli

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# Preface and Acknowledgements



**M**any outsiders have tried to explain why the Messiah College soccer teams win so many games, among them CBS Sports, *USA Today*, *The New York Times* and an array of local newspapers and bloggers. I'm delighted that they have. This is a story worth telling.

I admit, though, to being not entirely satisfied with their explanations. They tend to do a fine job of describing the “what” but not the “how”—the results but not the means by which this program gets results. Much of the time, that “how” piece, the critical piece for any leader who wants to replicate Messiah's success, is a bit over-simplified, with important elements downplayed or missing altogether.

I don't intend that to be a criticism. That's just life in a sound-bite world. But by contrast, this is not a sound-bite book. It's a more in-depth look at this college soccer program, both the men's team and the women's team, a program whose combined winning percentage from 2000 to 2010 was the highest in the country for Division I, II, or III.

It's a book about the “how,” in particular, how excellence happens.

A few caveats, though. Truth in advertising. First, this is not an insider account. I never played soccer for Messiah.

I never coached there. I never even attended Messiah. So, like those news agencies, I too am essentially an outsider. However, as a Messiah College faculty member, I've had special access to the people and the soccer archives necessary to perform the research—dozens of interviews, copious secondary materials, a wealth of vital “insider” information.

Second, this is not a biography. Those who are looking for a history of the Messiah soccer program will no doubt be disappointed with this resource. I am not an historian; my fields are leadership and strategy. Perhaps predictably, then, this is a book about leadership and strategy. My basic research question has been *how do they do it?* What's the process these teams have followed to achieve excellence and to sustain it year after year? And how can we do the same with our own teams, in and out of sports?

Third, I've worked hard to take a dispassionate look at my subject, but still, my conclusions may not be entirely objective. This has been the easiest and hardest book project on which I've ever worked. “Easiest” because I love the sport and this soccer program, and it's been an absolute joy to learn what it's really all about. “Hardest” because as a researcher, one needs to maintain impartiality. As you'll see for yourself, though, it's sometimes difficult not to be impressed by these people and this organization. Frankly, I'm a bit relieved that the writing is complete and I can now go back to being a fan.

All that to say: *The Messiah Method* is surely not a perfect resource, but I've crafted it with as much care and integrity as I can muster. So many people have invested so very much to make the Messiah soccer program extraordinary. My goal has been to work just as hard to accurately convey both the “what” and “how” of their success. My hope, and indeed my prayer, is that this book will honor them and at the same time, that it will be helpful to you, no matter what kind of team you lead.

A special thanks to the Messiah College head coaches who generously shared their time and perspective to make this book possible—Dave Brandt, Scott Frey, Brad McCarty, and Layton Shoemaker. I'm also deeply indebted to the legion of other interviewees and contributors who effervesced with insights and stories about this unique soccer program: Todd Balsbaugh, Jake Berry, Nick Blossey, Greg Clippinger, Jared Clugston, Terry Earhart, Aaron Faro, Drew Frey, Kyle Fulks, Barry Goodling, Dan Haines, Susan Hasseler, Erin Hench, Randy Herndon, Katie Hoffsmith, Amy Horst, Tim Houseal, Kelsey Gorman, Kacie Klynstra, Hannah (Levesque) Leatherman, Savannah (Stolzenburg) Lehman, Mike Miller, Sheldon Myer, Jennifer Myhre, Trey Overholt, Rob Pepper, Geoff Pezon, Kent Ramirez, Mike Russ, Mindy (Miller) Smith, Jason Spodnik, Todd Suessmuth, Bethany (Swanger) Sauer, Troy Sauer, Aaron Schwartz, Dustin Shambach, Leah Sipe, Nick Thompson, Josh Wood, Marcus Wood, Sam Woodworth, and Corinne Wulf.

I thank you all for graciously allowing this outsider to report the inside scoop on *The Messiah Method*.

Michael Zigarelli  
August 2011

# The Messiah Method

## How Excellence Happens



From 2000 to 2010, the Messiah College soccer program—that is, the men’s team and women’s team combined—was the winningest NCAA soccer program in America. In fact, few others even came close. Messiah’s regular and post-season record during this time was 472 wins, 31 losses, and 20 ties, for a winning percentage of .922. By comparison, the second winningest college soccer program, Trinity University in Texas, had a combined men’s and women’s winning percentage of .884, and the extraordinary teams at the University of North Carolina, the top Division I program during this time period, posted a winning percentage of .816.

Other stats may be even more impressive. No soccer program at any level has claimed the men’s and women’s NCAA national title in the same year—except for Messiah. They’ve done that three times (nearly five times, actually, since in two seasons the men’s team finished first and the women second). Also, since 2000, the women have lost a miserly 13 games and none at home since 2006. The team amassed a 76-game unbeaten streak, they’ve been to eight of the last nine Final Fours, they were three times the national

runner-up, and they've hoisted the Division III (D3) NCAA trophy three times.

On the men's side, where there tends to be even more parity than in D3 women's soccer, Messiah has claimed eight of the last eleven national titles, posting a perfect 8-0 record in championship games. Lots of close calls, but when they've gotten there, they've won. Consider this counter-intuitive stat as well: Since 2000, the men's post-season record is 42-3, surpassing even their regular season winning percentage—astonishing, since the caliber of competition jumps dramatically in November.

Well, obvious question: How does Messiah College do it? What's the secret of success? And, more broadly, what can we learn, whether we're leading a sports team or a business or a school or a church or any other organization, about how to achieve high performance and sustain it year after year?

That's what this book is about, their method for success, *The Messiah Method*. Cumulatively over decades, the coaching staffs have painstakingly refined a process for chronic excellence that is, in fact, transferrable to just about any team. But before we overview that Method, let's first meet the architects of it.

## **The Makers of the Method**

### ***Dave Brandt***

*Men's Coach 1997-2008, Assistant Men's Coach 1988-1996, Messiah Player 1981-1984*

His former players describe him with Millennial Generation terms like “crazy soccer genius” and “freakishly good coach.” Parents have written accolades like: “We were lucky enough to send you our three sons and you sent us

back three fine young men.” And his former coach, Layton Shoemaker, describes him as “uniquely intense,” a characteristic that he says dates back decades to Brandt’s playing days.

Dave Brandt the player has career stats that rank him among Messiah’s best: 35 assists and 55 goals, including 18 game-winners. But Dave Brandt the coach has no peer at any college. When he left Messiah after the 2008 season to take the head coaching position at the US Naval Academy, he simply had the best record of any NCAA men’s soccer coach in history: 247 wins, 25 losses, 14 ties. In four of the twelve years he led the Messiah men’s team, he was honored as the National Soccer Coaches Association of America D3 Coach of the Year.

Importantly, Brandt departed Messiah with more than a legacy of wins and championships. He also left a legacy of transformed lives. Here’s just a sampling of commendations from former players, shared on a tribute blog after he resigned:

- “You have been the single-most influential person in my life...I am a better person because of you and your program.”
- “There is no way that I’ll ever forget you or the impact you had on my life as a young man who had no idea how to navigate his life.”
- “Thank you with everything that is in me for changing my life, for impacting me for eternity.”
- “I have more respect for Coach Brandt than any man I’ve ever known...He has taught me about doing the right thing for its own sake.”

As more than one alumnus told me, Coach Brandt would say: “The longer you are in this program, the more you’ll understand it’s really not about soccer.” Brandt confirmed

that in our interview, adding: “We’re using soccer as a vehicle and it’s affecting lives, without a doubt.”

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***The longer you are in this program,  
the more you’ll understand  
it’s really not about soccer.***

**Dave Brandt  
Men’s Coach, 1997-2008**

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***Scott Frey***

*Women’s Coach 2000-present, Assistant Men’s Coach 1988-1992, Messiah Player 1980-1984*

“Scott’s the best in the business.” The comment came from rival head coach, Marcus Wood, after his team narrowly edged Messiah in the 2010 National Championship. For years Wood had been picking Scott’s brain, benchmarking Messiah, learning all he could about how to transform his Hardin-Simmons University program. And that day the student excelled the teacher, but then spoke for countless other “students” at that post-game press conference: “They’re a model and we’re trying to replicate a lot of the things they’re doing.”

Frey (pronounced “fry”) enjoyed a solid career as a Messiah player, his years overlapping Brandt’s. As an alumnus, Frey returned to Messiah to assist with the men’s team before taking the helm at Alma College in Michigan, ultimately winning a couple conference titles and advancing to the Men’s Final Four in 1999. The next year, Frey returned to Messiah to lead the women’s program. Through 2010, he compiled a record of 229 wins, 13 losses and 11 ties, officially

earning the D3 Women's Soccer Coach of the Year honors in 2005 and 2009 and, apparently, unofficially earning the honor from at least one admirer as "the best in the business." (In fact, he's pretty close in the women's game—second only to legendary UNC coach Anson Dorrance in winning percentage.)

Like Brandt, Frey guides his team to win not just soccer games, but to win at life as well. Legions of current and former players attest to his kindhearted mentorship. His last lines of a recent email to the girls offer but one telling snapshot: "Have a great day. Make the most of it. Tell someone you love them. Your parents would really appreciate it, I promise."

For Scott Frey, too, this job is about so much more than soccer.

### ***Layton Shoemaker***

*Men's Coach 1974-1996*

"Layton is the grandfather of the program." So says a resolute Dave Brandt. "And he was a second father figure to me and many others. His influence on my life and on how I think was significant."

Shoemaker came to Messiah after coaching for seven years at Barrington College in Rhode Island. In his 23 years as the Messiah men's coach, he led the program to national titles in the National Christian College Athletic Association (NCCAA) in 1978 and 1981, he was the D3 Men's Soccer Coach of the Year in 1986, and he tallied a career record of 316 wins, 96 losses and 27 ties.

Along the way, he learned a number of coaching strategies and philosophies from the faithful study of what John Wooden had done at UCLA (which arguably, then, makes Wooden the "great-grandfather" of the Messiah program!) "It didn't matter that he was a basketball coach,"

says Shoemaker. “He could have been a cricket coach. But Wooden had to be doing something right.”

Shoemaker was also a bit of a Renaissance man, serving simultaneously as soccer coach, Athletic Director for 15 years, Chair of the Health, Physical Education and Recreation Department for 17 years, and teaching courses almost every semester. His work ethic was fabled and through it, he laid the foundation for the stunning success of the program after he left, though that’s not always recognized. Messiah sweeper and long-time program supporter Dan Haines put it well: “The foundation on a house is ultimately the part you don’t see ... From where we all sit today, it may be a little harder to see what Layton did. But it’s definitely there, underneath it all.”

***Brad McCarty***

*Men’s Coach 2009-present, Assistant Men’s Coach 2001-2008, Messiah Player 1989-1992*

Haines continued: “If Layton laid the foundation and Dave built the house, then Brad is building an addition onto the house—and it’s a *significant* addition.”

Indeed it is. For starters, it’s an addition of two national championships in his first two years in charge, making Brad McCarty the only NCAA soccer coach to pull that off. He did so, in part, because he has the humility not to fix what’s not broken, and at the same time, the wisdom to adapt Messiah’s approach to a competition that has been incessantly studying his team for years.

Back in the day, McCarty was a talented Messiah player who then went on to play pro for four years, later coaching college teams in Kansas and South Carolina before returning to Messiah as the Assistant Men’s Coach. He’s led the men’s team since spring 2009, a year when he continued the tra-

dition of his predecessors by earning the D3 Men's Soccer Coach of the Year award.

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*If Layton laid the foundation and Dave built the house,  
then Brad is building an addition onto the house—  
and it's a significant addition.*

**Dan Haines  
Class of 1983**

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A father of four, McCarty's posture is more than that of a firm disciplinarian. It's also one of a benevolent and sometimes lighthearted shepherd. He recognizes that though these athletes are national champs, warriors on the field and legends in the trophy case, they're still kids and he handles them as such. Case in point: While I was interviewing McCarty in his office, a player brought in a personal check for some equipment. McCarty handed it back saying it wasn't signed, after which the kid signed his check—in the memo line. Gently, with only the slightest smirk, McCarty edified him that we sign checks on the bottom right.

The program is clearly in good hands with their new coach. According to Brandt, "Brad has a full and complete understanding of the critical elements (of the system) on and off the field." And he can clearly execute that understanding, conceding a mere two losses in his first two years with the reigns. Like Brandt and Frey, he uses The Messiah Method to get results. Let's look now at what that Method entails.

## **The Messiah Method**

Their pace of play is rapid, the technical proficiency superb. Their first touch—often *the* distinguishing skill separating the best teams from all the others—is predictably tight. Ball speed and passing accuracy are impressive, honed through untold hours of passing drills. They find each other’s feet well.

The defense is swift and swarming, the goalkeeping is sound and often heroic. Tirelessly, these fittest of teams run others ragged by spreading opponents across the full 80 yard width of their home pitch and by constantly crashing the attacking third to gain a numerical advantage. In the midfield, they usually know where their teammates will be without even looking up. On a crisp Pennsylvania night, their on-the-field communication is heard halfway across campus.

If a team manages to take Messiah to overtime, they better have another gear available. Since 2000, the women have lost only four of 25 overtime games, winning 16 times; the men’s OT record even exceeds that, losing only four of 39, and winning 26.

These are athletes with the knowledge, skill and poise to play at any D3 school or, for that matter, at many D2 or D1 schools. Perhaps more importantly, they operate as a unit, with a flow and a rhythm that is beautiful, in the soccer sense of the word, and often masterful.

But this beauty is simply an outcome, just as the win-loss record and championship trophies are an outcome. They’re all the result of something else—something that teams who are just as fit and just as fast and just as talented and just as determined to win cannot yet seem to replicate. As Assistant Women’s Coach Todd Balsbaugh revealed: “The winning isn’t what happens on the field. Ninety-five percent of it is what happens before we ever get to the field.”

That's the primary research question of this project: What does that 95 percent entail? What's the process that enables the unprecedented, breakthrough success these teams have enjoyed? What's "The Messiah Method"?

In short, it's a series of habits or disciplines, seven in particular. And the good news is that every leader can glean from it, maybe even import the Method wholesale into his or her environment. It's a reproducible model for those who have the patience and courage to adopt it, no matter what kind of team they lead.

Some of these habits may be an epiphany, others may seem yawningly obvious, but in operation each is a challenge. To orchestrate any one of them with consistency requires effort and expertise; to orchestrate all of them requires a master conductor.

It's possible, though, as these coaches have demonstrated, and it's possible in or out of sports. Here's an overview of the seven disciplines that have generated such extraordinary results at Messiah College.

### ***Pursue a Higher Purpose Than Winning***

"I'll never forget something that Coach Frey said during my sophomore year," reflected 2003 All-American Erin (Benedict) Bills in a note to her former team. "A teammate had graduated and said she missed the summer workouts... I thought, 'yeah, right, like I'll ever look back and miss those!' Coach said something to the effect of 'the only thing worse than running is not having something to run for.'"

For generations, Messiah players have indeed had "something to run for"—something more than themselves or their reputation, something more than winning, and even something more than championships. In fact, almost everyone associated with both the men's and women's programs is

quick to point out that winning is decidedly *not* the goal at Messiah.

Of course, neither is losing. These players are exceedingly competitive and badly want to win. But it's not their purpose. Instead, they remain focused on “playing for the name on the front of their jerseys,” a higher purpose that prioritizes sportsmanship and character development and “team over individual.” More than that, this perspective may actually influence their on-the-field results because it supercharges their work ethic, it encourages smarter, more selfless play, and it builds team unity—the elusive competitive advantage of striving toward a common goal.

It's unorthodox in athletics, but each day the Messiah teams “pursue a higher purpose than winning.” It's the cornerstone discipline for them, the one that aligns and buttresses all the others.

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***The only thing worse than running  
is not having something to run for.***

**Scott Frey  
Women's Coach**

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### ***Be Intentional About Everything***

Expert leadership is not separated out as one of the seven disciplines in this book because, frankly, it's integrated throughout each of them. It is, in a sense, what this book is about from cover to cover—talented coaches who have created a success model and executed it with excellence.

Where these coaches may distinguish themselves the most, perhaps, is by being *intentional about everything*, by insisting on getting things right no matter how small, by attending to—even obsessing over—detail. From communicating the purpose, to designing the world’s best recruiting visit, to proactively managing team chemistry, to consistently confronting mediocrity, to developing the passing patterns that will take them from the centerback to the back of the net, as Coach Frey says: “there’s not much we don’t orchestrate.”

This is a leadership philosophy that traces its Messiah roots to Dave Brandt and his core assumption: “If you don’t like what’s happening on your team, it’s your fault.” It’s the kind of revelation that can change everything for a coach or almost any other leader. The truth is you have all the power you need. You can make your team and your program what you want it to be ... provided you put in the work.

How essential is this discipline? How much has it really mattered at Messiah? Brandt’s bottom line is this: “Intentionality may be the biggest part of our success.”

### ***Recruit “Both-And” Players***

The Messiah Method rejects the assumption that we must choose between players of the highest caliber and players of the highest character—between talented athletes and selfless, team players. For Messiah this has long been a “both-and” proposition, not an “either-or.” There’s no tradeoff and no room for compromise.

It wasn’t always that way, explains Brandt. “What happened with men’s soccer (in the late 1990s) is we redefined what success was. Messiah athletes had always emphasized the Christian aspect. What was lost a little was the ability to

compete, to be a little bit tough. We didn't want one or the other. We wanted both."

So Brandt raised the bar on recruiting, an approach that Scott Frey also implemented soon after his arrival in 2000. And over time, the coaches devised increasingly-effective ways to identify and sign these elusive "both-and" prospects—primarily Christian kids who were being recruited at the D1 and D2 levels.

Brandt sums up the philosophy by admirably quoting Herb Brooks, the gold medal hockey coach who transformed the 1980 US Olympic squad: "I'm not looking for the best players. I'm looking for the right players."

### *Cultivate Team Chemistry*

"Team chemistry," a commonplace term in sports, refers to how well players get along with one another, how much they care for one another, and how well they can anticipate each other's moves and synergize their efforts.

At Messiah, though, "team chemistry isn't something that we just hope for," says Coach McCarty. "It's something that we work really hard at. It's not easy, it's not simple, and it doesn't just happen." Rather, Messiah has designed specific processes to build and protect relationships. "There are so many little things that have happened along the way that have created this culture," says Frey about the women's team. "You've gotta keep pushing. You've gotta keep it going."

For the coach who's willing to invest the time, there's a generous payoff, including maximum effort year-round, top recruits who are attracted to the rare and refreshing environment, and a team that consistently pulls together in must-win situations. In fact, team chemistry is at the center of the

seven disciplines in this book because it's become the center of Messiah's competitive advantage.

### ***Link All Training to the Match***

“It's a fluid game with lots of moving parts.” McCarty grimaces, shaking his head at the challenge. “You've got 11 out there and there are no time outs. It's not like American football where you've got plays, or like basketball where there are only five guys and lots of stoppages and it's so much smaller.”

Soccer is an unstructured and sometimes chaotic sport. But the most effective teams bring order to that chaos, designing a system of play that can efficiently and predictably create dangerous opportunities. At Messiah, it begins with the leaders' crystal clear vision of what the game should look like and of the options that each player has in almost every situation. It's a high understanding of the game, for sure, though once a coach finally gains this vision, he or she can train to it.

But how exactly does that vision go from the coach's head to the players' heads—and feet—and ultimately become a reality on the field? From specific, imported drills to incessant teaching to doing everything at game intensity to innovative training for mental toughness, Messiah has found a way.

Every coach knows this, many fewer accomplish it: Training should be closely linked to the match. As we'll see, it's an advantage Messiah enjoys, one that even the teams they've played in Brazil can't seem to replicate.

### ***Choreograph Game Day***

Purpose and preparation are not enough. Capability and chemistry are not enough. To win, a team needs to execute.

Execution requires readiness and readiness is no accident. At Messiah, it happens by design, through road-tested, time-honored processes—both home and away, both before and during the match—that culminate in peak performance.

In short, they choreograph game day. For home games, that means routines and traditions to keep players focused and to connect them back to those alumni who came before them. For overnight trips, that means conceiving shared, team-building experiences that unify and keep them mentally-prepared. In either venue, for the coaches it means investing in powerful habits that make them more effective leaders.

Overall, the choreography creates an environment that enables players to thrive. And as usual, intentionality and attention to detail are touchstones of success.

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***The winning isn't what happens on the field.  
Ninety-five percent of it is what happens  
before we ever get to the field.***

**Todd Balsbaugh  
Class of 1994, Assistant Women's Coach**

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### ***Play to a Standard***

After both Messiah teams again claimed the D3 national championship in 2009, a reporter joked with Coach Frey at

the post-game press conference, asking: Instead of playing the Final Four, “should the NCAA just start mailing the trophies to Messiah every year?”

Frey managed only a slight grin, replying: “That’s the perception, but it’s never that easy. These two programs work unbelievably hard all the time. There’s never any down time. Our players are just so motivated.”

On the men’s side that weekend, Danny Thompson, who may have the distinction of being the only player at Messiah (or maybe anywhere else) who was carefree enough to eat a sandwich while being interviewed at a post-game press conference, explained between bites just how hard it is to sustain this level of success: “I think it gets more difficult year after year to repeat ... It’s easy to fall into complacency, a false sense of security ... But we can’t expect the same result. We have to go out and earn it. We have to battle that false sense of security ... by being the aggressor on the field and going at teams ... It’s a huge challenge every year.”

In a sport where so many teams win it all just once in a generation, how does Messiah repeat—repeatedly?

Both the men’s and the women’s team have met that challenge through what they call “playing to a standard.” Coach Brandt elaborates: “Playing to a standard is a higher calling than winning. The problem with making winning the highest calling is this: After you win, the question becomes *where do we go from here?*” Messiah avoids that problem, he continues, by making excellence—even perfection—their standard. So there’s always somewhere else to go, a higher level to attain, something even more exciting to accomplish. It’s now woven its way into the DNA of their program, but the tendencies that keep them on top are transferrable to every team.

## **This Doesn't Happen Overnight**

Collectively, these seven disciplines, as well as some other habits that we'll consider in the last chapter, comprise Messiah's success model, a transcendent method that they've increasingly refined during the past fifteen years or so. But as almost every one of these players and coaches will tell you, *they stand on the shoulders of those who came before them*, those who laid the groundwork for the unprecedented success the program now enjoys.

It's an important reminder for any change-minded leader. The road to the top is long and circuitous.

In fact, the women's program, which launched in 1988, took 18 years to win an NCAA title. The men's program kicked-off in 1967 and took 34 years to win an NCAA title. At Messiah, championship results have required years of dedicated work, actually decades.

During those decades, Messiah fielded plenty of talented teams. Before Scott Frey took over, the Messiah women posted a respectable 117-74-9 record, though they never quite made it to the NCAA post-season. The Messiah men have more of a storied history, boasting a winning percentage of .751 during Layton Shoemaker's 23-season tenure. In addition to their NCCAA titles in 1978 and 1981, and a runner-up year in 1980, they joined the NCAA in the early 80s, earning Final Four berths in 1986 and 1988. Their '88 semi-final battle with UC San Diego was nothing short of epic, with a crescendo of 13 rounds of penalty kicks before Messiah gave way. (By the way, UCSD went on to handily win the final that year 3-0, suggesting, albeit painfully, that Messiah may have been but a PK away from their first NCAA title back then.)

In all, before the Dave Brandt era, the men made the NCAA playoffs in half of the years in which they were eligible. Then, breakthrough. They've been invited to every

post-season since, making deep runs in most of them. So have the women playing for Scott Frey.

The lesson for leaders: Be patient. “It took years and years,” says Frey. “This just didn’t happen overnight. It’s been an ongoing process.” That lesson is true of the modern program as well. Brandt didn’t claim a national title until his fourth season of reshaping the program; Frey not until his sixth season with the new paradigm.

So, memo to coaches and all other team leaders: The method described in this book works, but it will require time and tenacity. Tell your team. Tell your boss. Then, tell your mirror. That person may need more convincing than any of the others.

It’s a long but exhilarating journey, but it’s how excellence happens. We turn next to step one.