

# 1.

## YOU CAN NEVER REST

There were twenty-two seconds left in the 2018 national semi-final game in Columbus, Ohio. We were up by five when University of Connecticut's team called a time-out. Our team had the attitude "we have this game won" and "we just have to hold on and we will be playing for a national championship." I was a bit more cautious, but by and large I shared my players' confidence. As any coach will tell you, having a five-point lead with twenty-two seconds left should be enough to win the game.

I gathered my team and told them two things: First, do not give up a three-pointer. "You can allow them a two-pointer, even a layup," I said. My thinking was that if we held them to two points, they would be forced to foul us and all we would have to do would be to make one free throw to put us up by four points, making it a two-possession game. The second thing I told them was a reminder that we only had one time-out left. "Don't use it unless you get really stuck." My thinking here was that

if we got the ball in quickly after they scored, they would foul us immediately, and we would still have a time-out for an emergency.

Well, we went out on defense and a UConn player drove right to the basket heading toward a layup. Rather than let her score as we talked about, one of our defenders ran away from the girl she was guarding at the three-point line to help near the basket. The UConn player saw her open teammate and hit her with a pass and she connected for a three-pointer. In addition to that miscue, one of my players immediately called a time out. So we went zero-for-two in listening during our huddle.

After the time-out we had to inbound the ball on our sideline, right near our bench. This can be difficult to do, but we had worked on a play which involved setting a screen for the player who would come to receive the ball. Unfortunately, we didn't set a good screen and our player didn't come to meet the pass. Connecticut stole the ball, converted a layup, and just like that it was a tied game. We also turned the ball over again with a few seconds left but luckily UConn missed their final shot and the game went to overtime.

Some teams, having given up a big lead in the last few seconds, would have been so demoralized that they wouldn't have the persistence and toughness to win the game in overtime. And some coaches would have wanted

to scream at their players, “How could you have done that?” or “I told you not to do that!” I recognized that we had just lost the momentum and my team was feeling despair during the break between regulation and overtime. The last thing they needed was for me to remind them of how they failed.

When I looked at them in the huddle, all of their heads were down. They all looked disappointed. Except for one player. She was angry that she didn’t personally go get the ball and make them foul her instead of allowing someone else to make a bad decision. I took one look at Arike Ogunbowale and knew that if the game came down to a last-second shot, she would be the one to take it.



Arike Ogunbowale makes the game-winning shot in the 2018 semi-final game.

And the rest is history. Arike hit the game-winner with one second remaining to send us on to the championship game. We managed to turn failure into success, but I was not about to let go of the lesson of what we did at the end of regulation and move on just yet. It was a teaching moment and the lesson was . . . *you can never rest*. With a five-point lead and only twenty-two seconds left, we should have won that game in regulation but we took our foot off the gas for a few seconds and lost our focus. It almost cost us the game.

## NO LEAD IS SAFE

As a coach, I never felt like a lead was safe. Reporters would always ask me after the game when I knew that we would win and I would usually answer, “When I cleared the bench with thirty seconds left and we were up by fifteen!” It’s a coach’s job to be sure that no one gets overconfident. It’s the same for anyone pursuing leadership or in a leadership position. Don’t assume anything is going to be handed to you. If you are a woman, there is a good chance it will actually be more difficult to achieve and maintain success. You can’t ever play it safe or play not to lose. You have to be aggressive and keep attacking.

Often during a season, if your team gets off to a good start and wins a few games, everyone begins to

look ahead and forgets the task at hand. Or, even if they focus on the current game, they may think they can turn it on and play well in the fourth quarter while coasting at the beginning. There are so many ways to lose a game or make the score closer than it should be when the team is looking beyond what is happening now. When players and coaches forget the task at hand, it gives the other team the confidence to stay in the game. Underdog teams love when this happens. It's always easier to play as an underdog when there's no pressure and everyone expects you to lose. The pressure is always on the higher-ranked team. The way to alleviate the pressure is to stay focused and not look ahead.

I never talked to the team about winning a game. Our pregame talks involved our keys to being successful,



not a score or the outcome. You can't focus on the final score, because that really isn't something you can control. In basketball, you can't *make* the ball go in the basket. Certainly, practicing shooting helps, but there are certain days when you just can't make a shot. And suddenly the bad shooting is contagious among your teammates. Everyone is looking for someone else to make a big play.

When this happens I think it's always important to stay in the moment. Take care of this one possession—offensive and defensive—at a time. One stop, one score. You can't try to protect a lead by hoping something good happens. You can't hope the other team misses. You have to set the tone early and let the other team know that you are prepared to battle for the entire forty minutes of the game. This philosophy is true for any part of life. You can't take for granted that things will work out on their own. You have to be the one to achieve your own success.

I had so many great players at Notre Dame, but the ones who were really special were those who never took a possession off. They never rested. They came at the other team at every opportunity. They wanted to wear the opponent down. If we were up by ten points, they would get in the huddle and say, "Let's get up by twenty." Not only would they never rest, they wouldn't let their teammates rest either.

No one is going to give you anything as you reach for your success. The only thing you can control is *you*. This means you can control your own effort, your own focus, your own discipline, and everything you think and believe. You can control your own attitude. You can remain positive. It's up to you to figure out what it takes to get to the lead and to stay in front. I love the quote of Australian author Sara Henderson who said, "Don't wait for a light to appear at the end of the tunnel, stride down there and light the bloody thing yourself!"

## **DON'T RELAX AFTER YOU TASTE SUCCESS**

Don't be satisfied because someone has told you that you are talented or because things have always gone well for you. Always look for the other shoe to drop. Really, you can never relax when you are trying to reach the top. I never do. I looked at every game as a potential loss. We always talked about a team's strengths, even if they were having a bad season or were at the bottom of our league standings. I believed that every team, no matter how much they were struggling, had a game in them in which they could rise to the challenge and win. Look at the strengths of those you are competing with for a job

or in school or for a place on a team. Expect everyone to give you a fight.

How do you keep from being complacent? In a game situation, it's important to stay loose. This is something I have never been good at. When you are competing, there is no time for negative self-talk. You have to stay loose *and* confident. If you are a team leader, the best player, or the coach—and particularly when you are the coach—staying calm under pressure lets the others know that everything is under control. A way to put this into practice is to take a deep breath. Assure yourself that you are fine, and then give that same message to your team. You are able to handle this situation and so can the others.

People will often tell you that you are on your way to success. Listen to the compliment, but then push it aside. Although I agree it's great to be on the right track for your course in life, people will overtake you or literally run by you if you just stay in the same place. At Notre Dame, we rarely lost to an unranked team. Some of that was because our leaders in the locker room did not allow anyone to become complacent. Our coaches didn't become complacent either. We scouted every opponent the same way. We never looked past anyone. Neither should you! If you aren't moving forward, you are falling behind!

## WHAT ABOUT FAILURE?

In every game there are moments when you succeed and other moments when you fail. In fact, in sports there are a lot of opportunities to fail. This is one of the great things about sports. Failure is an opportunity to improve and do better. You can use failure as a lesson for improving in other areas of your life too.

We were fortunate to have great success in our program over my thirty-three seasons as coach, but my final season in 2019–20 was a series of learning experiences. We had a losing record and a lot of failures. When you do fail you can't wallow in your misery. You need to look objectively at what happened and figure out what you can learn from it. And you need to act.

Looking at our losing season as a whole, I wonder if I should have changed our expectations or at least set some reasonable weekly goals. Our program was coming off of back-to-back appearances in the national championship game. But if the current team wasn't capable of winning the conference championship, maybe that shouldn't have been a goal. We could have adjusted our goals game by game so the team didn't constantly feel the strain of failing. We did edit the game film to show the players only highlights, but there usually weren't enough good plays to build confidence. Sometimes we would



show film of good execution even when our players missed a shot, just so they could feel good about something.

Our method was different from 2011 to 2019, when we went to seven Final Fours. We had some great teams, though occasionally we would have games in which we didn't play to our potential, even when we won. What the players on those teams remember the most and still talk about today is the practices following those games when we didn't play well. It's safe to say we didn't watch our highlights after those games.

Winning allows you to be a little more critical. I liked to follow the old saying that "what you allow is what will continue," so we would show those teams examples of plays with poor effort or execution. I needed to let the team know that their subpar performance was not acceptable.

The 2019–20 team felt the burden of the program's history of winning. They didn't want to be the Notre Dame team to stop our streak of twenty-four consecutive NCAA tournament appearances. The team was