

What's wrong with "whatever it takes"?

If you miss an opportunity to be honest and fair, you can't fix it later.

BY JIM CAMPBELL



It's that time of year again. The baseball season is in full swing; the professional football teams are getting ready to hit the gridirons, and, if past history tells us anything, the Stanley Cup hockey play-offs are still quite fresh in our memories.

It is the time of year when sports writers and broadcasters will gather predictable quotes from star players. You know, the regular stuff about how they will have to dig down, play as a team and be up for the key game. They will also record promises from coaches and managers, who declare they'll do "whatever it takes to win."

They are completely serious. They are ready to do anything, to cut any corner – to get a winning team, to get into the play-offs, to be the champs. Look at the salaries the star players are paid, at the attempts to batter good quarterbacks out of the game. And we all know how hockey coaches send tough guys onto the ice to intimidate the opposition, to pound other players into the boards and provoke penalties. Sure it often results in knocked-out teeth, stitches, and career threatening concussions and neck injuries. But that's OK – it's considered part of the game. You see the

Illustration by Gerald Heydens

same attitude in the way major league baseball overlooked the use of performance enhancing drugs in the home run derby a couple of seasons ago.

Sports are an important part of our culture. The attitudes and values they display have a powerful influence. Fair play, dedication, discipline, courage and steadfastness are extremely important to learn and uphold. But these days, “fair play” seems to have been displaced by “We’ll do whatever it takes.”

All sorts of people promise they will “do whatever it takes” – to be a star, to be famous, to get to the top, to make their company successful or to win an election. It is the prescribed road to success. When a political leadership candidate withdraws from a race because he doesn’t want to play such games, or when someone passes up a big opportunity because they feel the cost is too high, the cynics declare them foolish and naive. They say: “They could have had it all! Isn’t that what everyone wants? Isn’t that the real bottom line? Don’t they know how the world works?”

Philosophers for generations have debated “whether the end justifies the means.” It is an old debate but it is not likely to be settled any time soon. The benefits in doing “whatever it takes” to reach a high goal seem blindingly obvious. You win the game, improve the bottom line and maybe become one of the rich and famous. A few compromises and concessions on the way to the goal won’t matter when you get to the top.

So what’s the problem?

Things can get out of hand. The daily news brings us all sorts of reports of ter-



Jim Campbell

rorists, dictators, robber barons or cult leaders who are sure their high goals justify sacrifice, disruption, famine, wars, revolution, unemployment, political prisoners and judicious executions.

But we don’t have to cast such a wide net. The problems are closer to home.

It is easy to forget that honesty, truth, justice, fairness, compassion and love are not deeds. They are qualities given to actions. Qualities can’t be stored for later use. If values are not used, they don’t exist. And they are not retroactive. If you miss an opportunity to be honest and fair, you can’t fix it later. A vicious, career-ending football tackle or hockey check cannot be corrected with compassion and caution later.

The present is all we have. Later never comes. If we are honest, we know most of us never will reach the illusive top of the heap. So if that’s what we are waiting for before we do the good – the right – thing, well, you see the problem. It may never happen.

Besides, clawing your way to the top develops strong habits. It becomes natural to deal with problems, enemies and frustration in cold, calculating, selfish ways. It’s who you are and it’s hard for a leopard to change its spots.

A lot of us seem to have quietly accepted the “whatever it takes to win” philosophy. Maybe we should take time to weigh the benefits and burdens carefully before we go much further. What do you think? 🍀

■ *Jim Campbell of Oakville, Ont., is the author of a new book, “Jericho,” about a brave little cat living in the stable during the first Christmas.*