

CHAPTER ONE

Relationships: A Team of Redwoods

*“Your connections to all the things around
you literally define who you are.”*

– AARON D. O’CONNELL

Chasing Influence

- Teams that play together grow together. Make time for team bonding. Create meaningful opportunities to spend time together as a team away from practices and competitions.
- Prioritize relationships. Great teams have great bonds; one of the most significant influences on team members’ experiences is the depth and quality of relationships.
- Influential leaders know each team member at the heart level.

Clinton “Stick” Olson

“It was 1939 and the country was on the heels of a Great Depression. The world seemed to be crumbling. Nazi Germany had just attacked Poland, Russia invaded Finland, and

CHASING INFLUENCE

the Manhattan Project was underway. Yet, in America, oddly, life seemed to continue as usual. *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* were in theaters and Major League Baseball was uninterrupted. Lou Gehrig would retire that summer. Later in the fall I was born deep within Minnesota's farm country.

"I'm 82 now and as I look back, I've been blessed. I went through incredible times—both good and bad. When I was born television was hardly a thing and most homes didn't have telephones. Computers used to fill up rooms and now I can lose one in my pocket. I had a front-row seat to a Jim Crow-segregated America, the political assassinations and upheaval of the 1960s, the Space Race, the Cold War, horrific acts of terrorism, and finally a global health pandemic that put on pause a world that had been tough to keep up with. I've also seen the wonders of humanity and experienced good fortunes with a long, healthy life.

"The world has had its ups and downs, and I have, too. There's been two true loves in my life: family and baseball. I'll admit, the lines between these two loves have been pretty blurred. I coached for nearly 60 years and lived almost 80 years before the rug was pulled out from under me and I found out what a real loss feels like. When coaching, I was the person with the answers. Then, just like that, the tables were turned and I was filled with questions about why I am here and what is my true purpose. I've lived through some tough times, but nothing like these last few years.

"It wasn't supposed to have happened this way."

Coach Stick Olson had been talking to Patrick Fulda, a wily newspaper reporter who'd come to take in a town ball game on opening day at Wassail Falls' new ballpark. Town ball is something nearly unique to the Upper Midwest where men, and some women,

RELATIONSHIPS: A TEAM OF REDWOODS

of all ages still come together to play amateur baseball, creating a focal point for the hundreds of communities, regardless of size, that dot the region. In many towns the only landmarks are the church, a bar, and the ball field. The local baseball team is the pride and joy for many communities. They affectionately refer to their ballclub as “the town team” and their games become a gathering point for people to build community. That explains why Stick’s favorite season of the year wasn’t winter, spring, summer, or fall. It was baseball season—when the snow melts and people return outdoors to reconnect.

As part of his visit, the sports reporter sought out Coach as soon as he arrived at the historic ballpark. Fulda hoped to gain some good insights for his column, or maybe even a feature story on the new ballpark.

Though you’d never know just from talking to him, Stick Olson was a giant in the local baseball community, but most didn’t even know his real first name, “Clinton.” They knew him by his nickname, “Stick,” and although a few called him “Ole,” most simply called him “Coach.” He was enshrined in 12 halls of fame and had coached in nearly 7,000 baseball games.

Family and baseball had grown to be synonymous for the octogenarian. His family was part of baseball and baseball was part of his family. The interdependent relationship between these two loves seemed somehow to make both better and more valued.

A few years before, after over 50 years together, Stick’s wife, Sharon, died in her sleep. Although he’d faced various hardships his entire life, for the last half-century he’d always had Sharon by his side, helping navigate whatever nasty curveball had come his way. For Stick, Sharon’s loss was beyond crippling, like nothing he had ever experienced before. The most difficult life event to overcome is the loss of a loved one, and just like that, Stick faced the most trying time of his life.

CHASING INFLUENCE

Sharon and Stick met in first grade Sunday school, and Stick was already baseball crazy; Sharon had known what she was getting into when she said “yes” to marry Stick. After a Friday wedding, their honeymoon took a quick break so Stick could get back home for a Sunday afternoon game. Baseball was where Stick and Sharon together made a difference in the world. Most people try to catch up on rest over the weekend ... for Stick and Sharon—he was a teacher and she ran a day care—relief came on Mondays when they went back to work. Baseball was always an important part of their lives, and weekends were a frenzy of activity for the couple. They wouldn’t have had it any other way.

There was often a Friday night game, up to four games on Saturday, and three or four more on Sunday. While Stick coached, Sharon worked thousands of games in the snack shack, spending much of the weekend standing on a hard concrete floor, with no air conditioning, selling her legendary popcorn with a smile and quick-witted words to live by. It had to be buttered white popcorn ... the cheaper and less tender yellow popcorn cousin just wouldn’t do. Her popcorn was so renowned that parents would ask her to make hundreds of bags for graduation parties. Locals would drive by, stop their car at the top of the steps to the ballpark, check in with Sharon as they purchased a couple bags of popcorn, and drive away happy.

Stick’s thin, athletic frame bounced with energy matched by his bright blue eyes. He lived life with enthusiasm. Most of his hair was long gone, but that didn’t matter much since he rarely was seen without a ballcap that hid a tan line across his forehead. It was part of a perpetual “farmer’s tan” he’d sported for decades. He always wore pants, never shorts. Happy by nature, both Stick and Sharon seemed to always be smiling. Sharon’s eyes were warm and inviting; she shared motherly care with anyone she knew. She wasn’t outside all day like Stick and had light skin and short brown hair. Her well-proportioned body seemed to constantly be moving.

RELATIONSHIPS: A TEAM OF REDWOODS

Stick and his wife became staples of the quaint county seat of Wassail Falls (pronounced like *waffle* only with *ss* instead of *ff*), which boasted just over 9,000 people. Most of the residents had Scandinavian roots going back generations. A stoic Norwegian himself, Stick nevertheless loved a good joke and told some great stories. Inspiring leaders often seem to have a knack for storytelling with a purpose. Stick's amusing stories usually carried an important lesson, sometimes about baseball, more often about much more than that. He had an ability to add a touch of humor at just the right moment, bringing levity to a situation whenever it was needed.

Firm yet caring, he'd long watched his players experience the highs and lows of a game and of life, just as he had. Over the years Stick had changed, and softened a bit. He'd seen the town grow and evolve as his players graduated, got married, sometimes even divorced, had children, and lost loved ones. He'd even been there for some of their retirement parties, and unfortunately, funerals.

Stick didn't quite understand what the word *retirement* meant—he'd stopped teaching at Wassail Falls a quarter-century earlier, but had never really stopped working. He was a workaholic; Stick liked to keep busy and didn't know what it meant to relax and do nothing. After leaving the classroom he continued to coach, both at the high school and for the town team. There probably wouldn't ever be a retirement party or banquet for Coach; he was now enjoying his 60th year of coaching and had no plans ever to stop doing what he loved.

Stick also kept playing the game he loved well past the senior-discount threshold. What had once been smooth movements now took more effort, yet Stick continued to impress others by finding the energy to stay in constant motion. In amateur baseball, there are no age limits, and he needed to keep playing. Stick started out as a shortstop. However, as he reached his 30s the team needed him behind the plate. They had a 6'7" pitcher who threw hard and had

CHASING INFLUENCE

nasty movement on his pitches. No one else could handle his velocity, so Stick donned catchers gear—appropriately coined the “tools of ignorance”—and jumped behind the dish. At age 61 Stick caught in a town ball state tournament game for another elder statesman, and their combined age of 124 for the batteryⁱ set a state record that still stands today.

Playing ball is what kept him spry—mentally and physically. On town teams it's not uncommon for teenagers to be playing with middle-aged men. The wide age range among teammates is part of town ball's charm. That doesn't mean town ball isn't competitive. Some might argue it's *too* competitive. Tens of thousands of people flock to far-flung locations during the playoffs, brought closer by an incredible sense of fellowship and the allure of a pristine ballpark. You'll see 90-mph fastballs, 400-foot home runs, slick double plays, and perhaps even more entertaining, you'll meet a number of fascinating people.

After coaching his players in high school, Coach eventually played on the town team alongside many of them. And he loved it. Being on a team is like being in a family. As you play together on the same team in pressure-packed moments and learn to rely on each other for mutual success, you *really* get to know a person. Coach left a positive, indelible mark with countless people on his teams, creating lifelong bonds and relationships.

After Sharon passed away, Stick found himself lost for a time. Yet Stick's baseball family lifted him back up. His former ballplayers knew how different life would look for Stick without Sharon at his side and made sure to check in with him often. It took Stick a while to realize there seemed to be a pattern of phone calls and drop-by

ⁱ The term “battery” was first used to describe the unique pitcher-catcher relationship during the Civil War, comparing pieces of artillery working together with the firepower of a pitcher working with a catcher for a common cause.

RELATIONSHIPS: A TEAM OF REDWOODS

guests. He was used to getting phone calls about the rulebook and baseball strategy, but these conversations felt different. They had no agenda, no business or purpose. Stick heard a lot of “just calling to say ‘Hi,’” and it helped.

Then, two years later, just as he hit his stride again, he faced another unthinkable setback. Stick and Sharon had lived in a house across the street from the field for decades. During that time Coach served as the field’s lone groundskeeper. He was the only one to have edged the field, groomed the dirt, or cut the field’s grass since Nixon had been president. Stick often joked that most fields are dedicated to people after they die . . . and that maybe some people were hoping for exactly that a number of years earlier when they christened the field with his name. In truth, the field had been named after him because of the time, effort, commitment, and care he had poured into the ballpark—and its players—for generations.

On an otherwise unassuming April night, Stick dozed off watching a ballgame on TV. He awoke to a faint smell of smoke. Looking across the street, his heart fell to the floor when he saw a flickering light through his front window. Flames were shooting to the sky—the ballpark was on fire. Stick sobbed as he ran across the street after dialing 911 for help.

Vandals had started a fire in the grandstand at the 1938 Works Progress Administrationⁱⁱ ballpark, Stick Olson Field, burning it to the ground. The ball field’s grandstand, concessions, and clubhouse were gone in a flash. The smoke seemed to carry some of the small town’s beloved traditions away with it. Decades of work were reduced to ash. Suddenly the field, an important community gathering spot, was gone.

ⁱⁱ President Roosevelt, seeking to spark the economy of the Great Depression and create jobs for millions of unemployed Americans, created the WPA to build public buildings and roads. And ballparks. The WPA spent billions to help revive the economy.

CHASING INFLUENCE

But for Stick, the loss was even greater. With the ball field in ruins, the *game* that fed not only Stick's daily routine, but more significantly his purpose, seemed to vanish.

The pain was blinding. First Sharon, then the ballpark.



On opening day at the new ballpark, Pat Fulda arrived long before any spectators and found Coach raking the dirt smooth in front of the dugout.

"Hey-ya, old-timer, you missed a spot!" Fulda bellowed out with a very distinctive high-low raspy voice and smirk on his face. Fulda had dark, but balding, hair and his eyes flashed with a keen squint. Remarkably clever, you could almost see him thinking. He carried his weight well, but his knees showed their age as he carefully worked his way down the concrete stairs in a pair of tennis shoes, blue jeans, and an untucked button-down shirt.

Stick, still rangy and athletic with a well-lined face and gray hair showing under his ballcap, didn't need to look to know who it was. He was surprised, but happy, to hear Fulda's voice. The two had known each other for decades, going all the way back to Fulda's days as a neighboring town's lone sports reporter.

"I see we'd better tighten up our security!" Stick said as Fulda reached out a friendly hand with a side grin.

"Well, Stick, this new setup looks pretty fantastic," Fulda said as he walked through a gate to join Coach on the field. "Is there anything you miss about the old place?"

"Ya know, there's just something about old ballparks," said Stick, his eyes telling Fulda just how much he'd loved it. "They seem to take on a life and personality of their own. Our wood grandstand had a certain sound and feel. There was a creak and squeak that connected you to the bleachers as you walked through the aisles

RELATIONSHIPS: A TEAM OF REDWOODS

to find a seat. Somehow those bleachers seemed to capture all the crowd's personalities and reverberate their chatter right back to you on the field."

It's true. From second base on a quiet afternoon you could hear a conversation from the top row of the bleachers; it didn't matter if the opinion or advice was sound or not, it would still be provided—and heard by players and umpires alike. When the stands were filled with fans at a big game, it created an electric hum that would ebb and flow with the intensity of the game. And then there was that distinctive smell. The scent of fresh-cut grass joined the piney smell of the creosote used to treat lumber in days gone by. The familiar aroma of buttered popcorn and hot dogs traveling through the air topped it all off. If you sat near a garbage can, you might also catch a whiff from an old can of beer tossed in the trash.

Not only were the stands filled with a particular set of sounds and smells, they were also filled with memorable characters. In the golden days of town ball, thousands of people would attend games between rival towns. Amateur baseball was a really big deal for a community. It was what everyone did before the busyness of today's life became the norm. There were fewer people at games now, but the interesting people, loud advice, and strong opinions remained.

"I've missed the sounds and the people," Stick told the sports columnist. He'd always counted on seeing familiar faces: Leroy with his Stalker radar gun in the first row yelling out the slurred speeds of pitches, accompanied by a regular spray of spittle ... a group of elderly ladies with whitish-blue perms clutching their scorebooks and never missing a pitch ... Teddy, who would loudly repeat the same animated stories to an unusually patient audience, with his head tilted and hands serving as exclamation points ... and Norm, coolly hiding a cupped cigarette in his hand around the corner as though no one could tell what he was doing, forgetting that the smoke gave him away.

CHASING INFLUENCE

The ballpark was a fine place to spend a summer's day and escape reality. For most in the stands, the ambiance and music, the food and sun on your face, and spending time with friends was every bit as important as the ballgame. So for many, like Stick, today would feel like coming back "home."

As he had for years, Stick was preparing the field for the game and he had it down to an art. This was politely taken for granted by most people. Coach had always been the first one to show up and the last one to go home, making the short walk back across the street. Today, like any other day, Coach had already been doing field work for hours. Now he walked back toward the clubhouse to continue giving his tour to the baseball-loving newsman.

"Stick, the ballpark looks amazing," Fulda said. "How confident were you we'd get to this day?"

"That's a tough question." Stick paused to think. "While I'd say I never lost hope, it would be a lie to say I didn't wonder if this place would ever be rebuilt while I was still around to see it."

In fact, after the fire there were a lot of difficult questions for Stick. First he had lost Sharon and then his sanctuary. Where would he go? What would he do? The years of yarn-spinning, post-game meals, shared hardships, camaraderie, big wins, and tough losses had produced tight-knit bonds that reached across generations. The memories would never go away, but the place where he'd made them had become charred rubble. The ballpark became symbolic. Like the fragility of one's reputation, it had taken years to build and only a moment to destroy.

"After the grandstand fire, the news traveled fast," Stick continued. Radio, social and print media, and TV stations all carried the story, yet the outpouring of support could never have been anticipated. Unexpected donations began flooding in from all over the country to rebuild the grandstand and clubhouse. "Before we knew it, there were hundreds of gifts to help us rebuild, from 10 dollars to

RELATIONSHIPS: A TEAM OF REDWOODS

half a million!” Fulda suspected that many of the donations were a direct result of Coach Olson and the number of lives he’d impacted, and he was banking on the belief that the results of Stick’s influence would be on display at the Wassail Falls Huskies town ball game later that afternoon. That’s what the day was all about: the community had rallied and was ready to celebrate, honoring the memories, experiences, and relationships of the past while relishing the return of the sights, sounds, and smells of baseball after a three-year hiatus. It would make the community feel a little more complete once again.

Fulda returned his attention to the day’s events. “What are you looking forward to the most today, Stick?”

“That one’s easy—it’s all the people. I can’t wait to see some of the folks I haven’t seen in far too long.” The people returning were what would make this day special for him. Stick’s mind was on Sharon as he drifted away for a moment and added, “You can replace structures; you cannot replace people.”

Many of the players Stick had coached and played alongside would be at the game. They’d all circled Memorial Day weekend on their calendars to watch the Huskies return to the field and celebrate the reopening of Stick Olson Field, its new grandstand, and fancy clubhouse underneath it. The new locker room area replaced the cherished hangout Wassail Falls ballplayers had enjoyed since before World War II. The old clubhouse had been a long, irregularly shaped room, a fun and boisterous place serving as a changing area, mess hall, and family room all rolled into one. Gathering that day in a totally new space would be surreal for former Huskies. Although they were all excited to see the new facilities, for many the real reason they came back was to see Coach.

As Stick entered the clubhouse everyone inside welcomed him with “Hi Coach!” and the accompanying slaps on the back and the laughs that come when people are happy to see each other.

CHASING INFLUENCE

Players both past and present greeted the man they looked up to and admired, a second father figure for many. Some had seen him days earlier, but for others it had been years. Regardless of the last time they had been together, when they saw each other it was as though they'd never missed a beat.

Most had stayed in touch with him one way or another. Whether they'd reached out to Coach by email, phone call, or text message, it never went unanswered. He was always quick to reply, even if to say, "On my way to practice—I'll get right back to you tonight!" And he would, often late at night—2 a.m. was his usual bedtime—when the practices or games were over. He'd always sign off on his communications simply as "Coach." It was a title he was proud of.

Since Stick had coached at nearly every level from youth to college, on this morning a wide range of ages began to fill the clubhouse. They came in all shapes, sizes, backgrounds, and professions. A pastor, sign painter, farmer, bricklayer, carpenter, teacher, mechanic, cheesemaker, insurance agents, and an ice cream delivery man were all there, young and old, Black and white and Chicano, an eclectic mix that may have never come together, or ever made sense, if they hadn't been on the same team. These gatherings are where teams grow together in order to play together. In fact, once Father Time caught up with their abilities and players hung up their cleats and retired, it was the locker room time they usually missed the most. The reality was that most players never really "left" the Wassail Falls town team—they just stopped playing.

Team bonding and shared time outside of competition is where team members really get to know each other. Throw out all the trophies and medals. The best parts of the game are often found around it, not in it. The connections made through sports are most important.

Joe Ehrmann, known as "the most important coach in America," has dedicated his professional life to transforming teams and a broken youth sports culture. He explains that great teams understand

RELATIONSHIPS: A TEAM OF REDWOODS

three important truths: A) We belong to each other, B) We need each other, and C) We affect each other,² articulating something Coach already knew, that a team is nothing more than a set of relationships for a cause. Members of great teams are intricately intertwined, fulfilling a dual purpose of individualism and oneness. That was all on display in the new clubhouse.

As more players arrived, the hugs flowed back and forth. “I can tell how much these guys—and your relationships—mean to you, Coach Olson,” Fulda said. “How would you explain the level of connection you guys have after all these years?”

Stick looked around and spoke above the laughter that echoed from every corner of the room. The louder he spoke, the more pronounced his subtle Scandinavian accent became. “I think there’s an interdependence and selflessness that comes with being part of a team. This is why being surrounded by others can be so important when you have hardships. Being part of a team means that you put others before yourself, and they do the same for you.

“We had a Filipino ballplayer a number of years back who had a word for this—he called it ‘kapwa.’ It’s all about the connections of a team, and how working together as a group you can accomplish so much more than as individuals. Every last one of these guys was committed to each other more than they worried about themselves. That’s been the magic for some very special teams.”

Kapwa is the synergy of a team, the identity created by a group of people who share a set of relationships, culture, and memories. The essence of kapwa can be found in its others-centered, selfless approach where you see and care for others as oneself.³ It’s a shared identity wherein teammates belong to each other, need each other, and affect each other.

The best teams and teammates share collective values and, as a result, create very powerful bonds. Everybody draws strength from each other. One of the greatest drivers of the quality of athlete

CHASING INFLUENCE

experiences rests in the depth and quality of relationships among teammates.⁴ Experiences together away from practice and games are where many of these powerful, deep-rooted memories are created.

“I think the quality of your life is determined by the quality of your relationships⁵,” Stick continued. On next-level teams, it is more than talent that makes them great. It takes great connections among teammates. Communication built on trust and honesty is the basis of strong relationships. On teams, coaches are the linchpins for trusting relationships. Great coaches further those bonds for years to come and Coach had long ago sowed these seeds, not fully knowing how they might grow.

“I always described our teams as being like redwoods,” he said. “The bonds among our team are connected like roots of giant redwoods.” He explained to Fulda that redwood trees grow to be hundreds of feet tall, yet they rarely ever fall, even with a very shallow root system. That’s because after growing for hundreds of years, their roots interweave and bond with those of the trees that surround it, making it impossible for redwood trees to topple. “No matter what comes their way these guys will always hold each other up,” Stick explained.

Past ballplayers now surrounded Stick, coming back to Coach like a boomerang. At a time when he needed them the most, his redwoods held him up. “I’ve never been too concerned about myself,” Stick explained. “For me, it’s always been about helping these guys.” It was a lesson they’d all seen Stick model; his calling was to serve others. In an ironic way, a life of not being concerned so much about him, but rather others, had created a forest of people who would support him and each other through thick and thin. That’s the accidental and enduring power of living with purpose.

On this day, Coach would be surrounded by generations of players who had come back to Wassail Falls, excited to share their story about how he had left his lasting mark on them, and in doing so, the world.

The Lesson

Growing Together: What Redwoods Can Teach Us about Relationships

Kapwa (Filipino)

*“You are my other me.
If I do harm to you,
I do harm to myself.
If I love and respect you,
I love and respect myself.”*

The bonds among teammates on high-performing teams connect like roots of giant redwoods. In a forest, most trees compete for sunlight and nutrients, often choking each other out. However, redwoods need one another to thrive. For thousands of years, they have supported each other and grown together, like a great team that relies on each other for support.

Yet, redwoods have a shallow root system, without a main root to anchor them to the earth.

Despite their shallow roots, redwood trees rarely fall. The majestic trees always grow in clusters, or groves. Rather than growing down, their roots grow out. For every foot in height, a redwood tree grows three feet outward. These roots intertwine and interlock with neighboring trees, supporting one another.

After a couple of hundred years, the roots are so interconnected that there is no way a tree can fall over. Like a great team, the trees literally hold each other up. Redwood trees are totally dependent on each other, including support and nutrients. Only a redwood tree

CHASING INFLUENCE

can hold up another redwood. The results are astounding. The General Sherman redwood tree in the Giant Forest of Sequoia National Park is the largest tree in the world, standing at over 275 feet tall and more than 36 feet wide at its base, weighing over four million pounds with an estimated age of over 2,500 years, having started growing before Socrates was born! Yet it still stands and thrives, supported by all the trees that surround it.

In the same way, high-performing teams rely on the strength of the players' relationships with one another. They provide support and encouragement to help their teammates thrive, just as redwoods do. Teams that cultivate strong bonds can support each other through any challenge, just like a grove of redwoods standing tall together for thousands of years.