

Toastmasters Speech CC #5 – The School of Sport

(5-7 minutes)

This will not be your usual talk about what I learned from sport.
This will not be about learning comradeship, teamwork and perseverance.
Or how playing sport was the best days of my life when I was growing up.
Unfortunately, despite all my efforts to get nothing at all out of sport, I am forced to say that it knocked some truths into me that I now use almost every day of my life.

I'm not a sporty person, but I come from a sporty family.
My Dad was the head of the gym team when he was at school.
My youngest brother represented Australia in Lacrosse.
My other brother windsurfed.
I read books.

But I could not escape sport.
Through primary school and high school, I was .. involved .. in sports.
I tried soccer, lacrosse, swimming, squash, softball, hockey, and whatever random sport my Phys Ed teacher was testing out on us that week.
And aside from some knowledge of the rules, that's good for understanding the Olympics when it's shown on TV, nothing else has stayed with me.

It's after I went to Uni that my unbroken streak of mediocrity and detachment ended.
Well, that detachment ended, anyway. And I learned some lessons that are so mundane and obvious that it seems silly to talk about them. But they did bring me around to sport as a teacher.. even if I'm a slow student.

The sports were skiing and golf.

When I first went skiing, my friends took advantage of my trust. It was up at Thredbo, way before the landslide. This was my first day on the snow. I had completed the first ski lesson, and then joined my friends for lunch. I was feeling flush with success – I could snowplough on the flat, and not fall over. I was ready for some green runs.

As a group, we took the ski lifts up to the top of the mountain. My friends took off. I followed. I fell over. I began to suspect that I wasn't on the green runs any more.

After I fell over a couple more times, I was *sure* that we'd left the green runs behind. But, you know what? It was okay. Falling over on snow wasn't like falling over on concrete. Snow is soft. I asked myself – is this the worst that can happen? I fall on something soft?

After that I was willing to go a bit faster. Snowplough less often. Take a risk or two. And a strange thing happened: I stopped falling over as much.

Once I was *confident* I could recover from the worst it could get, all I had was confidence. And everything was more enjoyable too. The lesson – new things in life are better if you learn to fail at them at the start.

Which is ironic because I failed my golf audition.

I think my parents harboured dreams of one of us kids being a sports star of some kind, and supporting them into their dotage. Certainly when my brothers and I were young, my Dad took us out onto the golf course to see if we had any talent. Which we clearly didn't have, as he never took us back.

So, it was over 20 years later that I picked up a golf club again. This time it was my father-*in-law* coaxing me onto the driving range at Sandringham.

I found that the sound – the “crack” when you hit a golf ball correctly with the club became something addictive. You can immediately tell when your muscles have aligned, the club follows a perfect curve, and the ball is hit squarely and smoothly. There is that instant gratification. And instant disappointment when one of a thousand possible things occurs and the golf ball flies off wildly. It can be a frustrating game.

That is the essence of golf. That playing it well requires such extraordinary levels of self-control that the wind, grass and other environmental factors have relatively minor impact on your result. You truly play it against yourself.

I have found that some days I can't hit the ball with the club I'd like to use. I know I should be able to grab a wood, and smack the ball from the tee. But after four holes, and six lost balls, I have to face the fact it isn't working. The person who is playing golf that day is not Tiger Woods, and not anything close.

In playing against yourself, you need to be brutally honest. Even though it is embarrassing to play a 6 iron from the tee, if that's what I'm like on the day, that's what I have to play. And straight away, I'm rewarded by that sound – the “crack”.

The lesson – you'll do better if you are honest to yourself about your current limitations.

And that's why when I was writing this speech I removed the section at this point about my experiences with the sport of fencing. I always seem to be guilty of going over time.

But it does seem to be the case with me that although these lessons are obvious – *and* I read them in books! – it wasn't until I faced them first-hand in the guise of sports that I actually learned them. Somewhat to my chagrin, I confess.

A lesson about failing fast. A lesson about playing honestly. And the lesson that sport can be both enriching as well as a fun way to waste some time.

I hope my sport-mad family is pleased.

(5 mins)