

OVERCOMING DAUNTING OBSTACLES

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” - Chinese proverb

Ya gotta love those Boston Red Sox!

There they were, fading fast in the American League championship series. They lost three straight games to the New York Yankees, including a 19-8 drubbing that looked like the death knell for their season. But then they won the next game. And then the next. And then the next. No team in major league history had ever come back from a 3-0 deficit in playoff competition, but the Sox stared history in the face and became the first team ever to perform that feat.

The other great story of the American League Championship Series was Curt Schilling pitching the sixth game on a jerry-rigged ankle that not only made baseball history but medical history. His grit, courage and determination were a huge factor in Boston's comeback – and a great inspiration to his team-mates.

Then they were off to the World Series. Boston won one game at a time and swept the St. Louis Cardinals in four games to make baseball history again – by becoming the first team to win eight games in a row in postseason play.

This is a remarkable example of staring down long odds and overcoming huge obstacles. What lessons can this story teach us that we can use in our own lives? Say you want to lose 50 pounds or give up smoking or drinking. Maybe you're working on a university degree at night school and getting discouraged at the number of years it will take. Perhaps you're trying to recover from a marriage breakdown or serious injury that will take months of rehab therapy. What factors from the Red Sox success would help to meet those daunting challenges?

Optimism, persistence, determination, concentration, focus, team-work – all contributed to the Red Sox stunning achievement. They can be applied to any situation where we're looking up at a mountain that we think we can't climb. Taking a step-by-step approach is also important. Break down the goal into small, manageable steps. Then focus on the immediate task or objective. For the Sox, it was taking one game at a time – like the Alcoholics Anonymous motto “one day at a time”.

A crucial element in facing an overwhelming challenge is how people talk to themselves. This reminds me of another amazing comeback story involving the 1992 playoff football game between the Buffalo Bills and Houston Oilers. I flipped on my car radio to find Buffalo down 35-3 in the third quarter. “Well,” I thought to myself, “that's the end of their season. No point listening to this blowout.”

Fortunately, the Bills were thinking differently than this fair-weather fan in Canada! They ended up tying the game and then won in overtime 38-35 to record the greatest come-from-behind victory in National Football League playoff history. I asked myself later how the Bills did it. What was the step-by-step process? What messages were they giving themselves on the bench that propelled them to victory? They certainly weren't saying “Let's pack it in guys. This isn't our year.” There must have been a lot of positive thinking on the sidelines to lead them to triumph. It probably started small and may not have been very believable at first. For example, “C'mon guys, we gotta score at least one touchdown. Let's show a little pride.” After they did that, the next thought might have been “O.K., that wasn't too hard. Let's score another one.”

Seven points later, something like “Hey guys, we’re back in this game. Let’s get another one.” Then maybe “We’re on a roll. We can catch these guys.” and so on.

This kind of positive self-talk is vital to achieving success in the face of overwhelming odds or challenges. But taking pressure off and keeping tension under control are important as well. When people get too serious or start over-thinking, they get in their own way (especially in sports). Johnny Damon, the Red Sox center fielder, put it this way: “We try to eliminate the thinking and let our natural abilities take over.”

To keep things light and relaxed, there’s nothing like introducing some humor. That was one aspect of a phrase Damon used that became prominent during the playoffs: “We are just the idiots.” While the sober-sided, no nonsense Yankees were all business, the Sox stayed loose by approaching the game for what it is – a game! They took their work seriously but keep it balanced by taking themselves more lightly. Obviously, it worked.

What tall mountain do you want to climb? Starting a new career? Going back to school? What insurmountable odds are you facing? Recovering from a bankruptcy or paying off a huge debt? What daunting task are you putting off because it looks overwhelming? Getting back in shape? Cleaning out years of clutter in the basement? Think of the Red Sox. Set small, short-term goals. Take it one step at a time. Stay focused. Talk to yourself in a way that’s positive and encouraging. Remember to be light and humorous along the way. And believe in yourself – believe that you can get it done.

What’s one step that you can take – today – to get started on your next journey?

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