

# THE SPORTS PLAYBOOK

## Building Teams that Outperform, Year after Year

*Joshua A. Gordon, Gary T. Furlong,  
and Ken Pendleton*

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## PRE-GAME

### The cost of failure in sports

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# 1

## PRE-GAME

### The cost of failure in sports

“Finding good players is easy. Getting them to play as a team is another story.”

Casey Stengel<sup>1</sup>

No one likes to lose—that seems obvious. Yet in every contest, it is almost inevitable that one team, or many individuals, will lose, and only one team or athlete will win. This also seems obvious. If failure in sports simply meant losing a game, or losing more games than were won in a season, the consequences would be bearable, even if we didn’t like it much. After all, everyone understands that the zero-sum game of one winner and many losers is built into sports itself.

Failure itself, however, goes much deeper. Competitiveness is innate in people, and often becomes intertwined with identity and self-worth. Failure in sports, especially repeated failure, often triggers deeply negative reactions that can impair a team or an athlete’s ability to perform in the future. There can be many hidden costs beyond the in-game losses when individuals and teams don’t perform. When an athlete’s identity and focus is solely based on winning, competition itself can become a no-win situation, for both winners and losers. When competition is focused exclusively on winning, both the drive to win and the fallout from failure can be incredibly destructive.

Competition, however, can also be constructive—it can help teams and individuals achieve well beyond what they, or anyone, ever expected. Competition can be a motivator for success and growth like no other. And competition, properly focused and understood, can do this regardless of the outcome, regardless of whether the team wins or the team loses.

Misunderstanding this dual nature of competition, or failing to have a game plan that leads to healthy and successful competition, can often lead to destructive types of conflict. Destructive forms of conflict inevitably lead to failure, not success, in

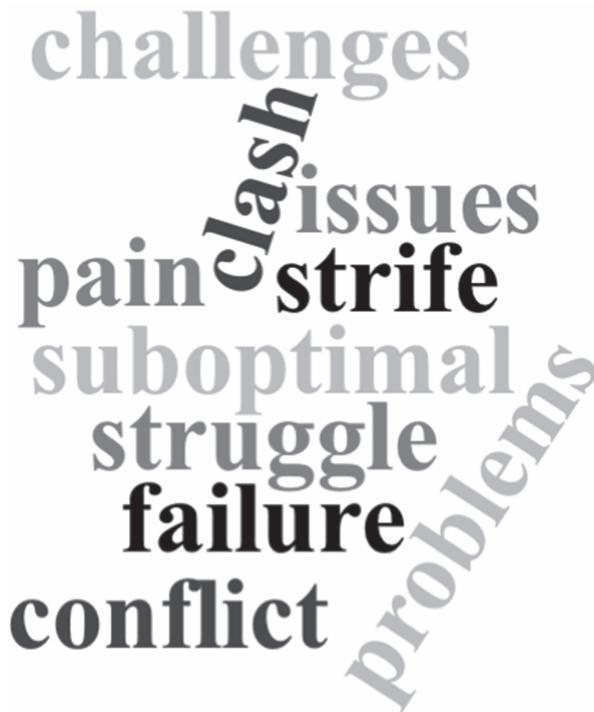
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sports. As we'll discuss, success often extends well beyond the measurable in-game outcomes and can cascade in quite destructive ways.

To cite perhaps the most famous example, in 1994 at the US Figure Skating Championships in Detroit, Nancy Kerrigan was attacked in an assault planned by co-competitor Tonya Harding's ex-husband, in a bid to take Kerrigan out of competition. Harding skated well at the US Championships, but was later implicated in the attack, and skated poorly in the Lillehammer Olympics a month later. Harding eventually pled guilty to conspiracy to interfering with the investigation, and was banned from competition for life. Four other men, including her ex-husband, served jail time for the assault. What started as simple competition ended in destructive, career-ending conflict.<sup>2</sup>

### Conflict in sport

Destructive conflict in sports is not new. Some in sports get hung up on the word "conflict" itself. One NCAA football coach that we were working with insisted that he never experienced conflict while at the same time lamented all of the issues, problems, and challenges he faced.



**FIGURE 1.1** Conflict is often associated with negative words that can lead to destructive behavior

Destructive conflict in sports goes by many names—the polite terms include “issues,” “problems,” and “challenges.” The damaging behavior this type of conflict can cause includes (but is not limited to) poor team chemistry, fighting, hazing, bullying, domestic abuse, sexual assault, verbal abuse, drug abuse, and poor sportsmanship. Such conflict happens between athletes, coaches, fans, and other supporters, and stretches from little league to the major league. The impact and cost of this kind of conflict can be immense, but in most cases there was an opportunity to mitigate it, or to avoid it altogether.

The start of the 2014 NFL season coincided with a series of domestic violence charges against some of the league’s best players. A grand jury indicted Adrian Peterson on charges of reckless or negligent injury to a child. The Minnesota Vikings initially suspended their All-Pro running back for one game, but public outrage compelled the NFL to suspend him the entire season. The NFL also suspended Baltimore Ravens’ star running back Ray Rice indefinitely after a video surfaced showing him knocking his then-fiancée unconscious. Rice was reinstated after appealing, but the Ravens had already released him and no other team has been willing to sign him (as of publication).<sup>3</sup> The Carolina Panthers placed a “franchise” tag on Pro Bowl defensive end Greg Hardy before the 2014 season started but were compelled to deactivate him after the first game of the season because of domestic violence charges, even though they agreed to pay his \$13.1 million salary.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the San Francisco 49ers released defensive end Ray McDonald after multiple domestic incidents.<sup>5</sup>

But there’s more. The NFL also had to confront a number of other issues, both on and off the field, in 2014. Philadelphia Eagles’ wide receiver Riley Cooper was videotaped making racist remarks at a country music concert.<sup>6</sup> Allegations of homophobic treatment swirled around Michael Sam, the first openly gay player to be drafted by an NFL team.<sup>7</sup> Worst of all, New England Patriots’ tight end Aaron Hernandez was arrested, later convicted of murder, and eventually apparently committed suicide.<sup>8</sup> The season ended with “Deflategate,” after league officials discovered that the New England Patriots were unfairly using underinflated footballs.<sup>9</sup>

And unfortunately, the 2014 season was not an exception. The 2013 season was marred by a hazing scandal after Miami Dolphins’ offensive tackle Jonathan Martin went public with allegations that he had been verbally abused by teammate Richie Incognito.<sup>10</sup> The most disturbing incident of all occurred in 2012 when a Kansas City Chiefs’ linebacker murdered his girlfriend, in front of his daughter, and then drove to the Chiefs’ training facility before shooting himself in the head.<sup>11</sup>

These are not recent problems by any stretch of the imagination—and there are far too many of them to write them off as isolated incidents. The “Bountygate” scandal, which involved New Orleans Saints’ players being paid for making injurious hits, dated back to 2009.<sup>12</sup> Some players, such as Aldon Smith,<sup>13</sup> Michael Vick,<sup>14</sup> Plaxico Burress,<sup>15</sup> and Ben Roethlisberger,<sup>16</sup> were involved in repeated incidents and allegations ranging from DUI to sexual assault to dogfighting to illegal weapons charges.

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And that's in just one professional sports league.

Amateur sport is not exempt, either. Even in youth sports, parents have been arrested for everything from assault to murder over referee calls, opposing player behavior, disliking their own coach, or simply losing games.

To make matters worse, many coaches, players, and administrators confuse competition with this type of destructive conflict. Competition is a core value, an integral part of the process in sport. Competition is healthy when it pushes athletes and coaches to practice, improve, and perform at peak levels. Healthy competition aims to win, of course, but focuses even more heavily on training, practice, and attaining Peak Performance. Destructive conflict, on the other hand, is an entirely different process, one that is not focused on personal performance, but on attacking and beating the other party. While conflict also focuses on winning, it becomes personal and tends to focus on winning as the only goal, and by any means necessary. When destructive conflict arises, there is a wide range of coping mechanisms people have developed, approaches that include avoidance, compromise, giving in (even when very unhappy), and fight-to-the-death responses. Destructive conflict, left unaddressed, almost always escalates to a point where it damages or destroys peak athletic and team performance. It is analogous to the difference between the physical stress we put ourselves through for necessary adaptation in training, as compared to physical injury, a place no athlete wants to end up since it clearly derails any competitive goals until the ability to perform is regained.

Some level of conflict in sport (as in life) is inevitable, given the thin dividing line between healthy competition and conflict. Healthy competition pits one person, one team against another, tests one team's skill as against another.



**FIGURE 1.2** Destructive conflict, like the proverbial devil on our shoulder, leads to friction, strife, and dis-unity. Competition can drive Peak Performance when our better angels keep us focused in that direction instead.

And since competition is focused on winning and losing, it is a small step from competition to destructive conflict. Without a clear framework, without understanding and aligning with the goals that support competition over conflict, it will almost always end in conflict that impairs an athlete or a team. Conflict is almost always self-defeating.

Despite the frequency with which conflict arises in sports, coaches and administrators often delay addressing destructive conflict in sports until after a damaging event occurs. Part of this is human nature, a general aversion to tackling messy and difficult situations until they are undeniable. It can also be that individuals and organizations operate on different time horizons. If a coach, athlete, or administrator only stays with a team or institution for a few years, they might have less incentive to address the conflict, simply ignoring or delaying the situation and leaving it for their successor. This is the equivalent of relying on doctors to heal injuries, but ignoring the plans of the training staff to do everything possible to not suffer the injuries in the first place. Regardless of motive or human nature, continuing to react after the fact rather than preventing destructive conflict in the first place incurs higher net costs and prevents organizations from maximizing their potential. Teams that have built a culture of achieving the healthy goals of competition will meet every challenge, issue, or problem effectively.

One of the truly great features of sports is that success is measurable. Whether it is in wins, championships, performance metrics, or financial measures, sport rewards performance more directly than just about any other industry. The flip side, of course, is that destructive conflict has a similarly measurable impact when it leads to failure. Mismanaged sports conflicts have severe consequences for sports teams, with negative impacts on competitive performance, reputation, and the financial well-being necessary for success. Seasons are lost, careers are cut short, fans feel betrayed, and millions of dollars are spent on investigations and crisis management. This is true for professional teams and amateur teams at every level, from peewee to NCAA to professional leagues around the world.

In this chapter, we explore some of the ways in which destructive conflict impacts teams and individuals in both tangible and intangible ways. Often, when seeking explanations for why something has gone wrong, we simply blame an individual—“Fire the coach! Cut the player!” Unfortunately, change is ineffective when done in the absence of understanding. We must start with a recognition of the costs the team is paying, and then seek solutions that cut to the core of why we are seeing underperformance on and off the field.

Certainly, individual accountability has its place, but if the underlying causes of destructive conflict are systemic in nature, then removing a “bad apple” won’t have lasting impact if you are running a “bad apple factory.” Yet, no one will change the status quo until we understand the costs of “sports as usual.” So, with that, let’s look at some examples of destructive conflict in various levels of sport, and consider carefully the costs of destructive conflict when it is addressed too late, if at all.

## Professional sports

Professional sports provide a critical forum for understanding the costs of conflict in many areas. Specifically at the professional level, revenue, on-field success, and reputation all matter greatly. All can be impacted when destructive conflict arises.

Consider the catastrophe that unfolded with the Portland Trail Blazers at the turn of the millennium. Despite the fact that the Trail Blazers had only appeared in two NBA finals since 1977 and were in the smallest market in the league, the franchise had enjoyed 18 consecutive seasons of sellouts (1977–95) and were reputedly one of the five biggest revenue-earners.<sup>17</sup> They were generally viewed as a civic treasure. Matters only seemed to be improving after a young team appeared in two consecutive Western Conference finals in 1999 and 2000. Unfortunately, the Blazers did not make it past the first round of the playoffs the next three seasons and, worse still, alienated the citizens of Portland. How did this happen?

After the 1999 season, general manager Bob Whitsitt traded away eight players and imported two All-Stars. During the 2000/1 season, Trader Bob, as he was known, made three more major deals, one of them resulting in the departure of future All-Star center Jermaine O'Neal and another in the departure of the most popular player on the team, Brian Grant. There was no denying that this was a deep and talented team. Asked if he had ever encountered a deeper team, guard Steve Smith paused for a minute and then responded, "Are you counting the Dream Teams?"<sup>18</sup> The scarcity of playing time prompted former All-Star forward Detlef Schrempf to admit, "I'm not going to lie and say I'm cool with it."<sup>19</sup> Guard Damon Stoudamire succinctly identified the larger problem: "We have no identity."<sup>20</sup> Whitsitt did not exactly deny the allegation that he was assembling the team without considering how all the parts would fit: "I wasn't a chemistry major."<sup>21</sup>

The chemistry problem was greatly exacerbated by the conduct of the team's best player, Rasheed Wallace. Wallace led the Blazers in scoring and rebounding but drew 41 technical fouls in the 2000/1 season for poor behavior, topping his own NBA record by three. He was ejected from seven games and suspended three times. He once threw his jersey in the face of a teammate during a game. His behavior off the court was also troubling. He showed up for his initial press conference wearing a t-shirt reading, "F\*CK WHAT YOU HEARD," and was once overheard uttering profanities at a fan meet-n-greet after a kid showed up asking for an autograph without a Sharpie.<sup>22</sup>

Wallace was probably the least of the Blazers off-court problems. During this era, players were arrested for cruelty to animals, possession of large quantities of marijuana, and assault. In July 2001, Whitsitt dealt Steve Smith, the 1998 J. Walter Kennedy Award winner for good citizenship, to San Antonio and signed free-agent swingman, Ruben Patterson. According to *Sports Illustrated*:

"Two months earlier Patterson had entered a modified plea to attempted rape for allegedly forcing his children's nanny to perform a sex act while his wife

was in the hospital for surgery. Although at his sentencing Patterson asserted the act was consensual, he was forced to register in Oregon as a convicted sex offender. “When you get the facts, his situation is no different from other folks’ who haven’t been publicized,” Whitsitt says. “He really is a good guy.” (In February 2001, Patterson was convicted of misdemeanor assault after breaking the jaw of a man he believed had scratched his BMW.)<sup>23</sup>

Players did not exactly come across as concerned about their horrible public perception. “We’re not really going to worry about what the hell [the fans] think about us,” Bonzi Wells explained. “They really don’t matter to us. They can boo us every day, but they’re still going to ask for our autographs if they see us on the street. That’s why they’re fans and we’re NBA players.”<sup>24</sup> Maybe, but attendance and TV ratings declined sharply and fans aired their disaffection very publicly. As one former fan from Bend, Oregon explained in the *Oregonian* at the time, “Cheering for the Blazers today seems almost dirty, tantamount to selling one’s soul for a cheap thrill.”<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, there is a cost whether the conflict is on the team, or between the players and the fans. Consider the Houston Oilers.

The cost of allowing dysfunction within a team to fester is perhaps best illustrated by the 1993 Houston Oilers. The Oilers entered the season as Super Bowl favorites. No less an authority than Bill Belichick went so far as to describe the team, which included nine Pro Bowl players, as “one of the best, most talented teams I have ever faced.” The problems started almost immediately, however, when owner Bud Adams hired Buddy Ryan as his defensive coordinator without giving prior notice to head coach Jack Pardee. Adams was still smarting from the fact that the Oilers had blown a 35–3 second half lead to the Buffalo Bills in the 1992 playoffs, and he threatened to break up the team if they failed to make the Super Bowl this year. Adams hired Ryan, reputedly one of the greatest defensive coaches ever, to shore up the defense. Ryan responded to the power Adams gave him by making it clear that he did not take orders from coach Pardee. Defenses and offenses often compete with each other, but Ryan pushed the concept beyond the breaking point. He frequently and publicly disparaged the offense and offensive coordinator Kevin Gilbride, deliberately sabotaged plays the offense called in practice, ordered his players to hit teammates wearing non-contact jerseys, and once unilaterally pulled his unit off the practice field. Ryan was allowed to create a dysfunctional, conflict-driven environment on the team.

Fights occurred between players all the time, reaching a peak when Ryan actually struck offensive coordinator Kevin Gilbride during a game broadcast on ESPN. Neither coach Pardee nor anyone else took steps to acknowledge this incident, let alone address any of the others. The level of conflict and animosity continued to grow. “None of these train wrecks is [sic] being managed by anybody,” noted defensive lineman Sean Jones. Despite all of these problems, the team was talented, and this level of talent helped them win 11 regular season games in a row and make the playoffs. Under the pressure of the playoffs, however, the seams finally



burst—for the second year in a row they collapsed in the second half of a playoff game, squandering a 10–0 lead and surrendering 21 points in the fourth quarter. Owner Adams kept his word and dismantled the team. The following year, the '94 Oilers lost nine of their first ten games, set records for low attendance, and moved to Tennessee in 1995.<sup>26</sup>

What were the costs of such behavior to the team in terms of wins, dollars, and reputation? What about the individual athletes, coaches, administrators, and supporters? The grueling hours of practice and focus required to prepare for the incredible demands of the National Football League can't be delivered when the locker room is in turmoil, and the decline in performance demonstrates that here.

This incident, like any that take away from on-field success, raises key questions. How many more wins would they have had without this distraction? Staff hours spent focused on investigation and follow-up might have been integral to improving the team's performance. What will become of the careers of those involved? They will likely play again, but the reputation of individuals and the organization were changed forever. How much more did it cost to clean up this mess after the fact rather than put structures and processes in place to prevent or mitigate the kinds of issues that will inevitably arise?

We can look to another example from Major League Baseball to get further insight into how this can play out. Let's look at the 2012 Boston Red Sox.

The 2012 Boston Red Sox arrived at spring training with largely the same talented roster that was the winningest team in baseball for much of the 2011 season. Yet, the 2011 season unraveled in the final month when the Red Sox completed a historic collapse. The Boston media spent significant time investigating the 2011 Red Sox as “a team that was on pace in late August to win 100 games and contend for its third World Series title in seven years” and instead became “a story of disunity, disloyalty, and dysfunction like few others.”<sup>27</sup> Three of the star pitchers, Jon Lester, Josh Beckett, and John Lackey became known more for their “habit of drinking beer, eating fast-food fried chicken, and playing video games in the clubhouse during games while their teammates tried to salvage a once-promising season” than for any of their considerable individual on-field accomplishments. The season post-mortem included the analysis that “the 2011 Sox perished from a rash of relatively small indignities. For every player committed to the team's conditioning program, there was a slacker. For every Sox regular who rose early on the road to take optional batting practice, there were others who never bothered. For every player who dedicated himself to the quest for a championship, there were too many distracted by petty personal issues.”

The final performance cost for 2011: “The hapless Sox became the laughingstocks of baseball as they went from holding a two-game divisional lead over the Yankees after the Aug. 27 doubleheader—and a nine-game advantage in the wild-card race over the Tampa Bay Rays—to finishing a humiliating third in the AL East.”<sup>28</sup> Off-field, the Red Sox fired their long-time manager and winner of two World Series Rings, Terry Francona. They decided that Francona should be held accountable for the late-season collapse. General manager Theo Epstein

negotiated his own departure and left to take a similar role with the Chicago Cubs. Eventually, Bobby Valentine was hired to replace Francona prior to the 2012 season. Few players changed spots on the roster as this core of players represented a very talented group with a demonstrated ability to win. Could Valentine help to re-establish a winning culture?

Unfortunately, no. The 2012 Boston Red Sox finished with their worst record since 1965, winning only 69 games despite having a talented roster full of expensive contracts.<sup>29</sup> Bobby Valentine was fired and many of their star players were traded away. Most of the news stories throughout the year highlighted the continued discontent; Valentine was apparently an active participant in this negative culture with reports that he and his coaching staff had largely stopped speaking to each other by season's end. Fan interest began to dwindle and there was very little reason for optimism as they looked toward 2013. The costs of conflict were clear and noticeable. Given the vast talent on the 2011–2012 rosters, it's hard not to imagine a very different outcome if the constant conflicts surrounding the team had been managed more effectively.

Each year, we can look across the various professional leagues and see seasons and careers derailed by destructive conflict. The good news is that there are clear, proven tools that can help better mitigate the costs of sports conflict. The bad news is that the professional sports leagues aren't the only ones making these mistakes.

## College athletics

If we look to intercollegiate athletics we quickly see that destructive conflict is a significant threat to success. There are extreme pressures to perform competitively and financially. There is no shortage of problems on and off the field of play, not the least of which stem from the fact that teams are made up of adolescents barely on the verge of adulthood. National headlines highlight concerns about recruiting, sexual assault, off-field violence, academic fraud, rules violations, hazing, bullying, and other issues that undermine the NCAA's stated mission to "support learning through sports." In the past decade, over 44 percent of programs in NCAA's Division 1 have committed major rules violations. According to a study on the NCAA website, 77 percent of male and 88 percent of female student-athletes agree with how negatively the national media portrays college athletics and the many issues that grab headlines each week.

Take an example like the Rutgers men's basketball program. Former Rutgers men's basketball coach Mike Rice was caught on video "hurling basketballs from close range at his players' heads, legs, and feet; shoving and grabbing his players, feigning punching them, kicking them, and screaming obscenities and homophobic slurs."<sup>30</sup> One can only assume that this wasn't part of the recruiting pitch presented when encouraging talented athletes to obtain their education in New Jersey, and certainly falls short of the Scarlet Knights' Athletics Mission Statement, "to reflect, reinforce, and enhance the educational mission of Rutgers." Rice clearly did not embody "the core values of accountability, respect, integrity, academic achievement, community service, fairness, diversity, and sportsmanship."<sup>31</sup>

The University of North Carolina, a fine academic institution with a rich history of athletic success, dominated national headlines in 2014 with accusations of hazing,<sup>32</sup> academic fraud,<sup>33</sup> and rules violations.<sup>34</sup> The reputational cost to UNC has been immense; once considered one of the “public Ivy schools,” it is now seen in a much less favorable light across the country. The related investigations are long, costly, demoralizing, and call into question the core educational value that athletics add to the university experience. Yet, these scandals are not natural byproducts of success but, rather, a failure to understand and follow critical structures that align on-field and off-field success.

Other concerns include student-athlete stressors that contribute to mental health issues (often suffering in silence because of stigmatization in sporting communities), a suicide rate that makes it the third-leading cause of death among student-athletes,<sup>35</sup> a strong sense of isolation on college campuses, and pressures to play injured. Even the more mundane concerns, such as appropriately managing social media and dealing with increased visibility that sports success brings at such a young age, have impact on performance and the overall student-athlete experience.

## **Youth and scholastic**

At even younger ages, boys and girls drop out of sports altogether at an alarming rate for reasons often linked to destructive conflict.<sup>36</sup> Sociologists examined reasons kids drop out of sports, with “I did not like or get along with the coach” and “I did not like or get along with my teammates” constituting a large share of the explanation. When considering the many benefits of athletics (lower obesity, better grades, less substance abuse, lower teenage pregnancy rates, etc.), the systemic dropout rates are alarming.<sup>37</sup> Parents often struggle with how best to support their sons and daughters, with parent/coach conflict becoming a staple of daily life surrounding youth and scholastic sports. Book stores and the internet are filled with advice to both coaches and parents on how to develop tomorrow’s athletic stars, yet as organized sports have replaced sandlot (informal) sporting events from previous generations, we have lost some of the most important social skill development opportunities for our kids. In generations past, learning to compete effectively without falling into destructive conflict was one of the most important skills that sports taught us. With the professionalization of sports, however, destructive conflict is on the rise.

To illustrate, let’s examine the difference between youth pickup basketball at a local park compared to an organized league that represents how most youth today engage in sports. If there is a disagreement over a call at the local park, the players have to negotiate and find a way to resolve their dispute. There is no referee or adult authority figure to serve as an arbiter. Instead, players talk (or shout), maybe threaten to leave or take the basketball home with them, but most importantly they begin to learn that if they want to play they have to find some way of resolving these issues that keeps everyone playing. In contrast, an organized league functions with a referee making all the calls; coaches, parents, or players either accept

or argue with the calls, but there is no requirement to negotiate successfully with peers. Indeed, this system often gives all stakeholders license to abuse the referees and each other, reducing rather than increasing accountability for behavior. The skills and lessons in constructive resolution of issues are abundant and natural in sandlot or pickup sports, but need to be consciously developed in the more structured sports leagues we have today. This is another reason why we need a Playbook for performance now more than ever.

## Defining the costs of sport conflict

To understand the true costs of conflict, we need to examine the various currencies that costs are traded in, both in the short term and long term. These various currencies include direct costs, reputation or brand costs, and performance costs measured in wins.

*Direct costs:* There are tangible, monetary costs from directly dealing with a destructive incident. Direct costs can include (but are not limited to): staff time and overtime to deal with the crisis, extra public relations, contract buyouts, firing and rehiring expenses, NCAA or league sanctions, legal fees, fines, and settlements. Not only does a damaging incident cost an organization or athletic department money, it diverts resources away from daily operations and organizational development. Organizations are forced to focus on the present crisis rather than plan strategically for the future. Direct costs are usually not built into operational budgets, putting a strain on scarce resources.

*Reputation/brand costs:* Making headlines for the wrong reasons works against the positive public relations efforts and goodwill created by an institution and can take years to rebuild. It could be said that one damaging story has as much impact on public opinion as ten positive stories, perhaps even more. A seemingly isolated incident can begin to rebrand an entire organization for the worse, especially if the organization is seen to be reactive and sluggish in addressing the problem. Reputation costs can include lost ticket sales, lost merchandise revenue, sponsorship withdrawal, donor erosion, brand damage, and compromised recruiting ability. For individuals it can mean limited career opportunities and damaged reputation. While difficult to measure in the moment, reputation/brand costs can fester for years and eventually outweigh direct costs.

*Performance/wins costs:* Sport is unlike any other industry in its singular win/loss narrative. Because success and failure are so stark and visible, every input to achieving optimal performance and competitive advantage becomes that much more valuable. While it is difficult to pinpoint how much on-field performance is affected by negative behavior, in the high stakes world of college and professional sports every misstep is a distraction and a disadvantage. If athletes and coaches are unable to grapple with conflict, performance can be stunted, teams become less cohesive, and personal behavior compromises professional achievements. Since winning is integral to the financial success of an athletic program, the impact of losses related to destructive conflict are only magnified over time.

## Stakeholders

So, who are the individuals who should be concerned about the costs of destructive conflict? Well, there are a number of key stakeholders in sports. For simplicity, we broadly group them into four important categories: administrators, coaches, athletes, and supporters. Each group has specific interests inherent in their respective roles that highlight specific categories of costs when things go awry. In team sports, success is interdependent and requires significant alignment to ensure success. When there is a disconnect between vision, mission, goals, objectives, values, or expectations of the players and coaches, then there is likely to be a high degree of underperformance. Sports are much more than putting all of the most physically gifted athletes together. There are a series of “neck up” competencies that drive success alongside the physical skills that are often more subtle and more difficult to develop and nurture. Each of the key stakeholder groups has a significant role in ensuring the success of the team, and when things go wrong they each have a unique set of “pain points”. These pain points are what we seek to understand, prevent, and resolve.

Each of these primary stakeholder groups has distinct interests inherent in their roles, and experience the costs of destructive conflict in different ways. Administrators are responsible for both the long-term and short-term success of the team on and off the field along with the overall financial and reputational health of the organization. Coaches are in the trenches and responsible for athlete development and for winning. Athletes must balance the mixed-motives of team vs. individual performance and may be concerned with both their on-field success and current or future commercial viability. Supporters represent a diverse set of individuals that includes families, boosters, fans, alumni and their relationship to the team; the potential impact of conflict on them will depend greatly on their specific situation.

Understanding direct, reputation, and performance costs are critical to fully appreciate the importance of managing conflict. The overall cost of a single episode of destructive conflict is also dispersed among a number of stakeholders and is usually a no-win situation for everyone: administrators, coaches, players, sponsors, and fans. There are many possible causes of trouble. For example, most teams have cheerleaders, but Boston Celtics coach Red Auerbach would not use them because he was concerned about the potential disruptions they might cause (see box below).

The cost to each stakeholder group may include (but is not limited to):

- *Administrators*: Loss of revenue streams, loss of goodwill, brand damage, time, stress, liability, job termination, damage to future career opportunities, reputational damage.
- *Coaches*: Team losses, financial losses, suspension, job termination, damage to future career opportunities, reputational damage.

- *Athletes*: Suboptimal on-field performance, suspension, premature end to athletic career, loss of scholarship, defamation, damage to future professional opportunities, damage to personal life, loss of product endorsements, criminal sentence.
- *Supporters*: For family, friends, donors, alumni and others that support the team through various means, costs include loss of goodwill, dignity, and spirit in connection with “their” team’s performance or personal behavior; this reputational damage may also result in lower donations and ticket/merchandise revenue.

Red Auerbach’s explanation of why the Celtics didn’t have cheerleaders during his long tenure as coach and team president:

“Too many problems. Best case scenario, there’s not a thing going on between any of them and your players. The wives are *still* pissed off. Worst case scenario, and you know as well as I do it happens, something is going on, and then, eventually, everyone ends up pissed off.”

*Let Me Tell You a Story*, by John Feinstein and Red Auerbach,  
Back Bay Books; New York, (2005), p. 288.

## Administrators

Sports administration can be a thankless job. Much of the daily work goes unnoticed by the public. It is often in times of crisis that we learn most about an administrator’s role and the work they have done leading up to that moment. Certainly, when individuals pursue roles in sports administration, few look eagerly forward to the tough problems that may arise. Most would readily prevent those issues if they knew how.

When destructive conflict takes hold, administrators’ costs can include loss of revenue streams, loss of goodwill, brand damage to themselves and their institution, time lost, stress, liability, reputational damage, and job termination. Each of these represents a substantial impact on the organization which they lead, and are held accountable for.

In many universities, the marching band program is run very much like a sports team—there is stiff competition for spots in the band, the drum major functions as a team captain, and the conductor is the coach. When a 2013 Florida A&M Marching Band’s hazing incident resulted in the death of drum major Robert Champion, the fallout was substantial.<sup>38</sup> The loss of life was a horrible price to pay but certainly not the only cost involved. Nearly every administrator involved was fired and many faced significant legal battles in the aftermath of this tragic death that permanently altered their personal and professional lives. The Band itself was shut-down before being restarted under entirely new leadership. It is not

hyperbole to state that many administrators' careers depend on their ability to manage conflict early, often, and effectively.

For any administrator who has experienced an investigation or special task force in the aftermath of an incident, they will attest to the tremendous stress and impact in looking backward for responsible parties culpable for the conflict that occurred. Yet, many are reluctant to invest in preventing such incidents proactively when the cost of prevention is exponentially less than the cost of cleanup. Avoidance is often easier than planning for disaster. It is our hope that by helping all parties understand the impact of conflict that administrators will better see the value in these upfront investments. It is our goal to shift administrators' thinking from reactive to proactive in order to better manage performance, financial, and reputational costs.

## **Coaches**

Coaches face team losses, financial losses, job termination, damage to future career opportunities, and reputational damage. Often facing tremendous pressure to win in the moment, it can be challenging for coaches to invest in activities that may not be of obvious value in winning the game tomorrow. Yet, when the linkage between proactive prevention and team achievement is lost, when prevention is sacrificed to a win-in-the-moment mentality, disaster is inevitable.

Let's take the example of Boston University Women's Basketball coach, Kelly Greenberg, accused of mistreating her players. Greenberg had faced such allegations several years earlier before they again resurfaced in 2014. Ultimately, she left her job under new allegations shortly after four student-athletes walked away from \$60,000 per year athletic scholarships claiming abusive treatment from their coach.<sup>39</sup> Greenberg had an outstanding record with four 20-win seasons and 186 victories in her seven-year tenure, but will forever be known for the incidents of alleged bullying.<sup>40</sup> On-field success will rarely be enough to offset the tremendous costs of off-field issues left unmanaged or unaddressed. What processes could have been in place to uncover these issues earlier when they were still resolvable? How could these costs have been mitigated?

## **Athletes**

When conflict is high, athletes experience poor on-field performance, suspension, premature end to athletic careers, loss of scholarship or contract, reputational harm, damage to future professional opportunities, damage to personal life, loss of endorsements, and legal action. Daily headlines in sports illustrate how many athletes face significant costs from poor decisions. Trayvon Reed, a 7'1" center set to attend Maryland, lost his scholarship after allegedly stealing an ice-cream bar and resisting arrest.<sup>41</sup> Michigan State pulled its scholarship from recruit Jay Harris after he had released an explicit video.<sup>42</sup> A talented former Oregon Duck football star

was kicked off the team for a series of legal problems and had his NFL career cut short after being arrested three times in nine days in 2013.<sup>43</sup> These are just brief snippets. Each day there is an incident that captures national headlines and dozens more that remain private but have substantial impact on the teams and individuals connected with that athlete.

There are many physically gifted athletes in any sport. Often, what truly separates good athletes from great athletes is their ability to manage on and off-field stressors, challenges, and conflict.

## Supporters

Supporters are impacted as well. They realize a loss of goodwill, diminished connection with their team's performance and personal behavior, and their own reputational damage through association. Many supporters invest heavily in teams either through their purchase of tickets or merchandise, and in college and scholastic sports supporters may also be direct financial backers. Few such supporters are happy to see their generosity spent on fixing a mess rather than building success on and off the field. Supporters can be the source of problems, as well. Parents make headlines with fist-fights at youth sports, and in college, programs are put at risk by boosters violating the rules. For example, the Miami Hurricanes faced a lengthy NCAA investigation, and flirted with receiving the "death penalty," because a prominent booster provided improper benefits to its football players over nearly a decade.<sup>44</sup> Fan rivalries have even led to deaths, such as the incident where a New York Yankees fan "plowed her car" into a Red Sox fan who chanted "Yankees suck."<sup>45</sup> Supporters are a key stakeholder group that needs to be part of any team's performance plan in managing the potential stressors and distractions and learning how to engage them in positive ways.

## Cost of conflict calculator

One of the first steps in deciding what tools are most appropriate in managing potential or actual destructive sports conflict is assessing the costs of such an issue. Unmanaged conflict leads to greater legal costs, diminished engagement from athletes and coaches, decreased retention of key talent, reduced performance, suppressed innovation, reduced motivation, and bad chemistry.

To calculate the costs that commonly occur from destructive sports conflict, we can attempt to quantify the direct, reputational, and performance costs an athletic department or team is likely to incur. We can then look at a cost/benefit comparison between reactive and proactive approaches to addressing the problem.

As an example we use a hypothetical but very realistic case: a star athlete on an NCAA tournament-level basketball team has been accused of harassing another student, while the head coach's practice tactics have come to light as borderline bullying and hazing. Both attract national headlines during the season, eventually forcing the athletic department to fire the head coach and suspend the athlete until



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an investigation is completed. To the public it appears as though the university did not address situation promptly and transparently, furthering the negative media coverage.

The likely costs to the university from the example case are illustrated in Figure 1.3.

Specific Impacts	Costs		
	Direct	Reputation	Performance
<b>Administrative Staff</b>			
Staff time devoted to crisis (8 staff spending 20hrs/week for 10 weeks at \$25/hr)	\$40,000		
<b>Coaching Staff</b>			
Firing and contract buyout of old coach (2 years at \$2M/year)	\$4,000,000		
Rehiring process for new coach (executive search committee \$50k + signing bonus \$500k)	\$550,000		
<b>Athletes</b>			
Star athlete suspended from team until internal investigation is cleared (lose one game without him or her)		?	1 Loss
<b>Legal</b>			
Law firm hired to represent institution, investigate and write report to Board of Regents (200 hrs at \$500/hr)	\$100,000		
<b>Public Relations</b>			
Repairing negative attention from media frenzy will likely be extensive and take time. (Press consultant for 1 year to help address = \$30k)		\$30,000	
<b>Donor / Sponsor Relations</b>			
Less willingness to give or partner with institution (lose one sponsor )		\$100,000	
<b>Sanctions / Penalties</b>			
Potential NCAA investigation (fines, public opinion, recruiting potential)	?	?	?
<b>Merchandise Sales</b>			
Lost support from fans (10% decline in sales)		\$50,000	
<b>Ticket Sales &amp; Concessions</b>			
Decline from lower attendance (10% of \$3M)		\$300,000	
<b>Team Performance</b>			
Normally a playoff team; less likely w/o star player (Exit one round early loss of revenue)		?	\$1,600,000
<b>TOTAL COSTS</b>	\$4,690,000	\$480,000	\$1,600,000
<b>TOTAL DOLLAR COSTS</b>	\$6,770,000		
<b>TOTAL WIN COSTS</b>			1 Add'l loss

**FIGURE 1.3** Cost of conflict calculator

Using conservative estimates for staff time, salaries, legal fees, and eroded fan support, the direct and reputational costs of these two incidents could cost the athletic department nearly seven million dollars. The longer-term impact on the basketball team and university brand could be much greater. This estimate also does not fully quantify the impact on the team’s performance for the season, such as one additional loss preventing the team from making the NCAA tournament. Poor season performance hurts donor and sponsor relations, overall athletic revenues, and recruiting potential.

While hard to put dollar figures on reputation, brand, and performance, it is worth thinking hard about these impacts, as they can stymie potential and put a team or department in rebuilding mode for several years.

Unfortunately the situation above is not unique. Incidents of bullying, hazing, and sexual violence in sports are not isolated, nor are they reserved for the most visible athletic programs. At the end of 2014 there were 94 colleges and universities undergoing Title IX sexual violence investigations ranging from Division I powerhouses to Division III schools, many related to sports. Depending on the specific nature of the incident and the media attention, many of the costs described will be realized for these institutions if a traditional reactive approach is used. All of these institutions could likely benefit from a more proactive approach.

## Resolving vs. preventing

As the late Nike Hall of Fame coach, Norm Levine, would implore at the start of every new season, “Mind your Ps!” Specifically, he would repeat, “prior preparation prevents poor performance.” The case study above provides an illustration of the costs that can easily result from a reactive approach to a series of destructive problems. However, proactive approaches are available and can be used to prevent these issues at a fraction of the cost, even reaping a net benefit in terms of positive reputation and improved on-field performance. Proactive approaches can be handled internally if the expertise is there, or can be brought in from an outside consultant at relatively small cost. Figure 1.4 compares two approaches and their respective costs and benefits.

### *Direct costs: A function of time*

As shown in Figure 1.4 below, the direct costs of an incident can easily be 100 times greater for a reactive approach than a proactive approach. This makes more sense when thinking about cost as a function of time. In the technology sector, software hiccups are an inevitable part of the development process. But there is a big difference between catching problems early and not catching them until the product is already to market. Samsung released the Galaxy 7 phone that had a battery defect, causing it to potentially catch fire. A full recall ensued, costing Samsung

Response	Types of Impact		
	Direct Costs	Reputation	Performance
<b>Reactive Approach:</b> a step behind each problem	\$6,770,000	Large Negative	Small to Large Negative
<b>Proactive Approach:</b> prevention approach internally, or outside resource to prevent or catch and resolve early	\$50,000	Small Negative to Small Positive	Small to Medium Positive

**FIGURE 1.4** The costs of reactively addressing conflict, compared to proactively addressing conflict

an estimated one billion dollars, and counting. Had an extra two, three even ten million dollars in testing been done, it could have theoretically caught the problem before release. A potentially crippling problem can be fixed at relatively low cost in the initial testing or beta testing phase, but the same problem could cost exponentially more if millions of customers are already using the product.

Conflict resolution training, a clear Issue Resolution Process (a key part of *The Sports Playbook* in Step Three) along with assessment and evaluation can be the early detection system in an athletic department that identifies potential personnel problems long before they become big and costly. Conflict resolution specialists are usually less expensive than traditional legal firms, and they work to prevent problems, not just resolve them.

### ***Reputation: Small upside, big downside***

Making headlines for the right reasons yields applause, but making them for the wrong reasons can invite much louder disapproval. Public perception sometimes gives sports teams the benefit of the doubt, but too many negative incidents and a team can be known for all the things it wants to forget. This is illustrated by the *Wall Street Journal's* annual "Grid of Shame" report, categorizing every major NCAA football team in varying degrees of being either admirable or embarrassing. Being in the embarrassing category does not help the conversation with a recruit's parents or in attracting new donors. Every team should strive to be admirable in their own eyes first, and then to their supporters and to the public.

Improving an institution's reputation and brand image requires not only positive stories, but risk assessment and strategic thinking around how to prevent problems. From inside an organization it can be challenging to assess small personnel issues and problems that might be building, let alone formulate a proactive response. Conflict resolution professionals specialize in collecting the actual quantitative and qualitative data necessary to provide neutral feedback and recommend proactive solutions.

### ***Performance: Achieving potential***

Taking an approach that prevents problems is almost always the right thing to do. If it can yield a small competitive advantage it's also the strategic thing to do. Every coach and administrator is looking to find an advantage for their teams on the field, and as a way to attract top recruits with benefits like new facilities, devoted training staff, academic support, sports psychologists, quality housing, fair medical coverage, and more. In the emerging era of greater institutional autonomy within the NCAA this will only be more true as resources are freed to suit department needs.

Conflict resolution skills and expertise are one such necessity and can help teams and athletes achieve their potential through fewer disruptions, improved group cohesion, and shared goals. Preventative approaches from the Playbook can also be useful during the recruiting process by appropriately vetting individuals who are higher risk, and during training to develop lower-risk athletes. Because conflict results in distraction, friction, and sub-optimal performance, conflict resolution skills are critical to achieving maximum potential both on and off the field.

Too often, we contemplate the costs of conflict in sports after something has already happened. Sean Williams, a promising NBA prospect, appeared to have addressed an important problem. But a major gaffe in an interview suggested otherwise (see box below). While in crisis mode, there is a clear mandate for action and change. Certainly, conflict can serve as an important catalyst for growth and improvement in how we approach our sporting lives. Yet make no mistake, waiting for a crisis is the more painful time to change and adapt and often devolves into investigations geared primarily to the assignment of blame, rather than what will address the problem going forward.

One of the goals of this book is to help teams and organizations make an important shift toward preventing and mitigating the costs of conflict in sports instead of waiting for the inevitable “bad” thing to happen, and then paying the financial and competitive costs to try and fix it. Following the types of prescriptions we outline here is exponentially more cost-effective than scrambling after the fact, in any currency you wish to measure. Certainly, resolving problems after they arise is an important part of the equation. But an ounce of prevention, as they say, is worth more than a pound of cure. There is a clear Playbook for success.

Back in 2007 Sean Williams, 6' 10", was an off-the-charts player who had been suspended from his Boston College team the first two of his three seasons after being arrested for possession of marijuana (a charge that was later dropped). He'd played only 15 games his sophomore year and still blocked 75 shots. Williams looked like a big-time NBA player and was expected to be a first-round pick—in part because everyone assumed that his ability to get through his junior year without being suspended meant that he'd gotten his marijuana use under control.

Before the 2007 NBA draft, he'd flown to Houston, at his agent's request, to practice his interviewing skills. The agent cut the Rockets a deal: Williams would talk to the Rockets and the Rockets alone, and the Rockets would offer the agent tips about how to make Sean Williams more persuasive in a job interview. It actually went pretty well, until they got onto the topic of marijuana. “So you got caught smoking weed your freshman and sophomore years,” said the Rockets interviewer. “What happened your junior year?” Williams just shook his head and said, “They stopped testing me. And if you're not going to test me, I'm gonna smoke!”

After that, Williams's agent decided it was best for Sean Williams not to grant any more interviews. He still got himself drafted in the first round by the New Jersey Nets, and made brief appearances in 137 NBA games before leaving to play in Turkey.

*The Undoing Project: A Friendship That Changed Our Minds*, by Michael Lewis, W. W. Norton & Company; New York, (2016), Kindle Edition, pp. 22–3.

## Summary

Destructive conflict in sports is a costly, systemic problem. Destructive conflict results in high monetary costs, poor athletic performance, brand and reputation damage, and can end careers. This type of conflict also fails to promote the positive values of sport and often overshadows the goodwill created by individuals, teams, and entire institutions. The examples in this chapter are just some of the many recurring types of conflict in sports that make headlines every day. All these issues share common costs—some incidents will be more costly than others, some disparaging comments will hit the press and others will remain unheard. Eventually, however, we will all continue to pay the price if the destructive conflict continues to occur.

Negative conflict is not inherent to sport, and it can be prevented and resolved. The costs can be reduced or avoided altogether in many cases. Possible solutions are affordable and their benefits far outweigh the existing costs. Only a preventive approach to sports conflict can achieve lasting change and alleviate the costs to stakeholders at all levels.

The Playbook we propose is a comprehensive approach that proactively develops a strong team culture and team alignment at the front end, along with low-cost reactive approaches to solve problems once they arise. Finally, it brings clear ways to proactively sustain this culture season after season. The Playbook can significantly mitigate ongoing costs and create a culture of success on and off the playing field.

## IDEAS FOR REVIEW: CHAPTER 1 THE COST OF FAILURE

### Important points

- Conflict can be destructive—it ends teamwork, it takes the focus away from winning, it drains resources that need to be dedicated to preparation and training.
- Conflict can also be a creative force—the energy that conflict creates can bring success and teamwork, if the team knows how to harness and focus that energy.
- The cost of destructive conflict can be immense in sports, including: time and energy spent addressing the conflict, money spent by losing valuable players, by a team that underperforms and loses fans and revenue, by damaging reputations—just to name a few.
- Conflict can be addressed reactively—by waiting for a crisis before acting—or it can be addressed proactively—by taking steps that prevent the issues from arising in the first place. An hour of prevention can avoid hundreds of hours of trying to fix it after the fact.

- Conflict can affect stakeholders differently—athletes and coaches perform poorly and fail to win; administrators and organizations suffer damage to their reputation, along with significant financial impact; fans lose interest.
- There is a better way. There is a Playbook, a framework that teams can implement to create and support success on the team.

### Think about this

Where you have personally been part of a sport where the competition was positive and rewarding:

- What did you or the team achieve?
- How would you rate the level of effective teamwork?
- What did the leaders do that brought success?
- How much were the goals and objectives shared by everyone on the team?
- How did the team members help each other?
- How were any conflicts that occurred addressed?

Where you have personally been part of a team where there was significant stress, pressure or conflict:

- How successful was the team in the end?
- What behaviors did you see that contributed to failure?
- What damaged the relationships?
- What was missed by the coach or the leaders?
- How were team members treated that you thought made it worse?

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