

## **WINNING A NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP**

### **Building your successes on your failures**

**Dr. Alan Goldberg**

When the NATIONAL SEMI-FINAL game suddenly and finally ended in the fourth overtime, I was too stunned to react. I knew “sudden death” meant the game was over when someone scored; yet I still felt like, “There must be some mistake here! The game can’t possibly be over.” Fans around me were crying while others just stared blankly forward in shock. When I looked back to the field, many of the players were collapsed on the turf, overcome by exhaustion and emotion, completely and utterly drained. In the middle of this crushing defeat, Santa Clara players ran around the field in wild celebration. This was truly the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat, side by side and the UConn men’s soccer team was on the wrong side!

I felt this sick feeling building up in the pit of my stomach that kept me company for weeks and months afterwards, whenever I thought about that Friday night. After the game I talked to the team. I felt like I was giving a eulogy at a funeral. The guys had physically gone through the wringer this season and had played their hearts out in this game and now it was all over. Both teams had played well and someone had to lose. Someone *always* has to lose. That’s the sad part of any great competition, especially when the losers played like winners. It seems a shame that the Huskies had to leave the field feeling like losers, which in fact they weren’t. That’s just simply the nature of competition. You win and someone else loses. Unfortunately, it was our time.

“Losing STINKS,” I thought to myself. No doubt about it!! It feels just awful. Yet, within any loss or painful setback lie the seeds to success. I hoped that the guys could use this experience as a source of motivation. I hoped that they would remember these terrible feelings whenever they trained and faced hardship, frustration and setbacks. Remembering how bad it felt can only propel you to go harder, to push beyond your limits, to get more out of each and every practice. It’s never *how much* time you put into practice that’s important. It’s always *what* you put into that time that’s really important. It’s the *quality* of your practices that count and keeping a goal in mind while simultaneously remembering the pain of coming up short will dramatically increase the quality of your training.

That’s the thing about failure. If you’re smart about it and you use it wisely it can motivate you to even greater heights. Being smart about it means that you don’t use your failures as an emotional whip to beat yourself up. Instead, you want to learn whatever you can from the experience, figure out what your weak points were, what you could have done differently, and then move on and begin to work on these.

**Coach Reid had the team sit and watch the Championship game two days later, a bitter, yet important pill to have to swallow after coming so close. The guys hated this. It was incredibly agonizing to sit there and think that this is where you could've and should've been, "if only." Success is ALWAYS built on your failures. Frequently the more painful and bigger the failure, the more motivation and opportunity you'll get from it to power you ON to later success. To do this, however, you must pick yourself up off the ground, dust yourself off and begin again. The only true failure is when you stop trying to go for it.**

**In the Spring the team met to discuss the mission for the year. It was a "no brainer." Everyone wanted to get back to Charlotte, NC to finish what they had started last year, to win the National Championship. We talked about what it would take, the sacrifices, the commitments, the physical and mental hardships of training, a summer spent on campus taking courses and getting ready. We looked at what went wrong, both team and individual weaknesses, and what was necessary to make the dream come true this year. In August, after the freshman had joined the team, the guys developed a mission statement; the goals that THEY wanted to accomplish and what kind of team standards that had to be followed in order to successfully complete the mission. Each player signed a mission-commitment sheet agreeing to abide by the team rules in order to successfully reach their goals. A signed copy was framed and put up in the locker room as a daily reminder of where THEY wanted to go and what THEY had committed to.**

**If you want to accomplish something, I mean REALLY want to accomplish something, and then you have to get very clear about exactly what your mission is. You have to spell out in detail, your goal and what you need to do to get yourself there. What's it going to take? What weaknesses are between you and making that goal a reality? How much will you need to practice? How hard will you have to work? How uncomfortable will you have to make yourself? Are you willing to do whatever it takes to get there? The clearer you can get on your mission and the steps necessary to accomplish it, the better chance you have of seeing it happen. Understand that it's always much easier to say that you want something. Talk is cheap! It's much more difficult to follow those words up with action! Bottom line is this: How hard you work is how much you want that goal, not how much you say you want it!**

**Pre-season started and the reality of the grind set in. Soon it became clear who would get most of the playing time and who would be a "role player." Role players worked their tails off in training, pushing the starters to their limits, yet rarely saw any action. Role players have the very hardest job on any team. They work, sacrifice, suffer and push themselves and yet they**

never or rarely share any of the limelight. Playing the game is what's fun. Role players don't often get to experience this. However, you can't win a championship without a total team effort and without committed and dedicated role players. You can't have committed role players unless the starters AND coaches respect and appreciate each and every one of the non-starters.

It would be untrue of me to say that every role player on the team was happy about the contribution that they were allowed to make to the team. I don't know any serious athlete who likes sitting on the bench. There's nothing enjoyable about it. However, unless YOU and your mates are willing to put "we" in front of "me", a team can't be successful. Remember, the whole is ALWAYS greater than the sum of its parts. It's the team that wins the game and makes the season successful, not individual superstars!

Slowly, over the course of the season and despite periodic grumbling, this began to happen with the Huskies. As the team approached the championship part of the season, there was more of an acceptance among all the players as to how they were going to best contribute to the team's mission. There was more of an understanding that the only way to accomplish this goal was for EVERYONE to come together. After all, it's never the best team that wins. It is instead the team that plays best TOGETHER!

UConn won the regular season Big East Championship and then unexpectedly was upset in the semi-finals of the Big East Tournament. The loss dropped the team out of the national seeding for the NCAA tournament and eliminated any home field advantage. It was a tough reality check, but a blessing in disguise. Despite the fact that winning Big East was one of the team's preseason goals, the guys knew that they had a much bigger prize in mind. The loss mobilized and refocused them. They beat Dartmouth 3-0 in the NCAA opener at home. In the round before the quarters they had to travel down to South Carolina to play Clemson at home, a team UConn had never before defeated. UConn let in a soft goal early in the game and dominated play for the remainder of the action. Unfortunately, they still trailed 1-0 the entire game.

Just because you've lost to a certain opponent every other time that you've played them, doesn't mean that *this* game/match will end in the same manner. All too often, athletes and teams talk themselves out of playing to their potential by focusing on *past history*. Believe it or not, what's happened in the past is totally irrelevant to this match as long as you can keep yourself focused in the NOW, on what's happening in front of you. The past is, very simply gone and that's where you want to leave it.

Thinking “this always happens”, “we can never beat them” is nothing more than a set-up to underachieve.

With 3 minutes and a few seconds left in the game, and their season and dream slowly slipping away, the Huskies continued to maintain their composure and focus. They didn't let themselves get sidetracked by the pressure and rapidly disappearing time. They kept their heads in the game, created a scoring opportunity and capitalized on it, sending the game into overtime. There was an understanding on the field and the Husky bench that the game was now theirs. Clemson seemed to be barely holding on to their lead as the final minutes of regulation slipped away. They hadn't been able to mount an offensive for most of the second half.

What is mental toughness? Can you keep your head on straight when your back is to the wall and the negative thinking and self-doubts are threatening to overwhelm you? Can you keep your concentration on the task at hand as the clock is inexorably robbing you of a chance to reach your ultimate goal? Can you stay relaxed under pressure and avoid the trap of pressing or trying too hard? Can you block out the home crowd who delights in everything that goes against you? Mental toughness is all about staying focused and relaxed under pressure.

This is exactly what the UConn players did. They gave a clinic in mental toughness. Playing probably the gutsiest and best game of their season, they pulled out a win in the first overtime period on an unbelievable bicycle kick by one of the freshman. This win gave the Huskies a quarterfinal game against a very physical Brown team at home the following weekend, the winner earning that coveted trip to the Final Four. The team entered the Brown game pumped with confidence and beat them in a hard fought game, 1-0 setting the stage for a return to Charlotte and another shot at the National Championship.

I spoke with the team the day before their semi-final game and had the eerie, wonderful feeling that they were going to go all the way. They were relaxed and composed. They were focused and determined. They knew what they had to do and were unfazed that this was the Final Four. The key to peak performance under pressure is both simple to understand yet sometimes very difficult to achieve. You have to stay relaxed and focused. In the big games all kinds of elements conspire to prevent you from accomplishing these two critically important tasks. Stay loose and focused. Yet here I was with these guys and this is exactly what I was picking up from them. They were ready. I had the urge to write down, then and there, that I knew they were going to win the national Championship. However, being an athlete and as superstitious as the best of them, I didn't want to offend the Gods of big game competition. I kept my thoughts to myself.

**In the semi-finals against Southern Methodist University, the #1 goal scoring team in the country, UConn erased the pain of the previous semi-finals by playing a virtually perfect game. They completely shut down the much talked about SMU offense and won 2-0. Interestingly enough, one of the Huskies' important goals at the beginning of the season was to turn themselves into one of the best defensive teams in the country. Their shutout of SMU was pretty clear evidence that they had accomplished that goal.**

**Now UConn was one game away from that dream that had started one year ago to the day when they lost to Santa Clara. One game away from a National Championship! The weird feeling that they were going to win was stronger than ever inside of me. I knew that the National Championship was inevitable. Talking with the players on the Saturday before the game only reinforced what I felt. They were loose and relaxed. They were confident. They were focused on themselves and the task at hand. They were not caught up in the hype, the media circus that was the final four or the reputation of the opponent. The players knew to keep their focus away from "uncontrollables." They knew that there were many elements completely out of their control. They also knew that focusing on uncontrollables will only get you uptight, kill your confidence and make it impossible for you to play to the very best of your ability. Their mission was even clearer now than it had ever been. The end result seemed inevitable.**

**Sunday, game day was unseasonably cold in Charlotte. UConn's final opponent, Creighton had beaten twice defending National Champion Indiana in their semifinal match-up. Creighton played the wide-open game style favored by the Huskies. UConn's defense shut down Creighton's offensive power and midway through the first half, the Huskies converted on a penalty kick opportunity. The first half ended with a 1-0 lead. With less than 10 minutes to go in the game UConn scored again to ice the game and secure the National Championship. It had happened!**

**As I watched the players celebrating on the field I couldn't help but think for a moment to the heartbreak of the previous year. There is no question that your successes are ALWAYS built on top of your failures. Learn from them and get stronger.**