

**A TRADITION OF EXCELLENCE
DEMANDS COMMITMENT**

Mr. Robert Ladouceur

Secondary schools and university colleges in the U.S.A. encourage students to participate and to excel in extra-curricular activities (religious, social, athletic, music, drama, volunteer service, etc.) as a valuable component of their total education. In the autumn of 1994, the football team of De La Salle High School (Concord, California) was named the # 1 high school football team in the U.S.A. by the national sports television network ESPN, and was selected as # 2 in the nation by the newspaper USA Today. At the dinner honoring the team for its accomplishments, their teacher and coach, Mr. Robert Ladouceur, congratulated them on their winning record and invited them to view their experience as members of a winning athletic team in the larger context of their commitment to the Lasallian Christian tradition.

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**Football Banquet Remarks
Robert Ladouceur, Head Coach
February 13, 1995**

The 1994 De La Salle Varsity Football Team was the most highly decorated team in Northern California history. They won the school's 13th straight league title; 10th north coast section title; 3rd California state championship. They were voted 2nd in the nation by U.S.A. today and first in the nation by E.S.P.N. They also pushed a present winning streak to a state leading 39 games. The present seniors will graduate having never lost a football game at De La Salle. Having heard the mentioned accomplishments; I have often been asked -- "do we really deserve the accolades bestowed upon this team?" I answer with unequivocal certainly - yes.

Make no mistake about it. It wasn't the 1994 spartans alone that brought national recognition to the school. Many players before them fought, sweat, sacrificed, achieved and won. They brought national recognition to De La Salle. They are the ones who established a tradition. So where do the '94 spartans fit into this tradition? The first thought of tradition or the word traditional seems to have an unfavorable connotation in today's quick changing world. The word itself often conjures up the thought of being oldfashioned, backward, out-dated, and even stubborn in the face of truth; and for

some traditions I would suppose that's true. Thomas Elliot once wrote, "Tradition by itself is not enough; it must be perpetually criticized and brought up to date under the supervision of orthodoxy."

Please, don't be misled, our tradition is not the color of, or how we wear our uniforms. It is not what we eat at a pre-game meal. It is not the plays we run, and to a large degree it is not how many wins we have accumulated. The wins are just a by-product of what our tradition actually consists of. These are just the trappings of a tradition, shallow, hollow; in fact this has nothing to do with tradition at all. Those who believe that this is tradition will eventually realize that they didn't belong to, or experience, tradition.

Our tradition begins with a commitment. There is a qualitative value we place upon that word - commitment. It isn't enough to say, "I'll show up". We may say we're committed to many things in life. But to what degree? Commitment is a precursor to many adjectives used to describe our tradition. It is the title of our paper. The key is to infuse commitment into everything we stand for and what we do.

Is it enough to say we work? No, it is our commitment to work. It is the ability to invest the time and pain necessary to construct and restructure our bodies for vigorous competition and numerous athletic challenges.

Our tradition calls for a commitment to accountability. This is not an assumption. This is a promise that I will be there for you; and I can count on you being there for me. From the way you spot my barbell, to the effort you give on a double team, to the lift you give me home after practice. In the end to be able to claim "I was there for you" is not only the most difficult endeavor one could take upon himself, but one of the most rewarding when it comes to assessing the quality of our humanity.

Our tradition is built on trust and honesty. Having the courage to say "this is who I am, can you help me? Or can I help you?" It begins with a sometimes painful evaluation of our strengths and weaknesses. Laying oneself open to be vulnerable. But it is only through this process that real growth and change can occur. To fool ourselves into believing we have arrived is just closing the door on life itself. I don't know if any of you have figured it out but I have always thought that someday I (we) will arrive at some fantastic conclusions. In so thinking, I have lied to myself, believing life is complete. But the truth is we never arrive, and we never will. The best we can hope is to come as close as we can to that destination. Don't get me wrong, that journey is no walk in the park, it is rife with setbacks, disappointment and broken hearts. It is only through the pain of significant self examination that we can hope to right ourselves and remain on that straight and narrow path that will lead to true fulfillment and inner peace.

To be a part of spartan tradition means one must be courageous. This does not mean just being brave in the face of a tough opponent. Rather it's having the courage to conquer our own cowardly spirit, that little voice inside of us that says "I can't," "it's too hard" or "I am not good enough". The biggest reason why we don't achieve is because we don't believe we can. We place roadblocks in our own way, sabotaging our own efforts. It takes courage and determination to crash down those roadblocks and push the limits we have placed upon ourselves and what others have placed upon our ability.

The famous Jesuit scientist and philosopher Teilhard de Chardin claimed that "the meaning to existence is the passing on to something greater than our own immediate selves." It

was his belief that everything living is in a constant state of striving for perfection. Isn't this the essence of fulfilling human potential? The reason why we achieve is because we believe we can.

The most important component of spartan tradition is our commitment to create a brotherhood among ourselves. Accomplishing this is usually bigger, greater, and tougher than any opponent we face all season. It means we must first defeat our own selfish egos. This lion is not easy to tame. We are under constant pressure in our secular society not to invest in anything unless there is something in it for us. This question is the conflict at the core of our very being. How much am I able, and how willing am I, to give? Can I sacrifice and lose some of myself for the greater good of the whole? Experience tells me we can give, and we can sacrifice. It is possible to recognize, appreciate and celebrate the uniqueness of every individual in this brotherhood. From Jason Anonos to Mike Bastianelli, we accept that one is never greater than the other; that each contributes unique talents to the brotherhood and without one we would be much less than who we are. To underestimate the strength of our brotherhood is the serious mistake our opponents make. To guess at the reason for our success is to misunderstand the power of our brotherhood. All the wins, trophies, proclamations and newspaper clippings are for naught if we have not learned how to live with, and love, our fellow man.

The team of '94 lived up to this tradition though it wasn't easy. There was a point in our season where we were full of ourselves. We believed that we were rightful heirs to that tradition without having sacrificed for it. We believed wearing the jersey and showing up on Friday entitled us to that tradition. However, we learned that tradition cannot be inherited and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor.

But our world turned and maturity prevailed. This team not only carried the tradition but set new standards for those who follow. They leave behind a legacy of California football that will be hard to duplicate. But never underestimate the will and determination of 16 and 17 year olds. Somehow, somehow they will find a way to prevail.

Before we get too full of ourselves again, let's keep what we've done in its proper context. We are but a small tradition inside one that is much larger than ourselves: that is the tradition of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and Saint La

Salle himself. Don't be so presumptuous to believe that we think football is an end unto itself. It is unfortunate that many outsiders, and regrettably some of my teaching colleagues, believe that we are the proverbial tail wagging the dog; that athletics rules the roost and is given preferential treatment. I make no apologies for our success or methodology.

La Salle believed in education for all, that every young man, regardless of social status, should be prepared mentally, physically and spiritually to take on an unforgiving world, and to be ambassadors of good will ready to evangelize their environment. Our job and what we've done has just been a trial run, a training ground for the huge task that lies ahead. What it has taught us is that we are the fortunate ones, who know what could be - and the way it should be.

To the sophomores and juniors, your task is to uphold our heritage given to us by Saint La Salle and fight to preserve our football tradition.

To the graduating seniors, your task is not so simple but much more exciting and challenging. It was easy for you being a spartan. It was easy to run 15 gassers with 45 others running by your side. It was easy to work hard when the man working with you was working as hard or harder than you. It was easy to achieve a goal when 45 others had the same goal. It was easy to accept and love another knowing you would be accepted and loved back. But as Jesus said "what credit is that to you?" Even the pharisees can do that. Your task is to transform your environment. To take your Lasallian heritage and spartan tradition with you. And believe me you will have that opportunity. Whether it's the next friend you make, party you attend, job you work or dorm floor you live on, you will have the opportunity. You not only have the responsibility but the duty to transform the world because you have been privileged to attend this school and learn the difference. By this I don't mean you have pushed your advantage over others, or increased chances for potential learning power. What I do mean is you have been taught in the way of the gospel. Shown glimpses of the kingdom preached by Jesus. Of course, that is provided you have the eyes to see with, and ears to hear with. You know the way things should be, and the way things could be. I say good-bye to you with the utmost confidence that whoever enters your life and travels your path will be richer, fuller, and all the better for just having known you as I have. •