

# A Sports Story of Character and Integrity

*By Kirk Mango, May 27, 2013*

Before I highlight the purpose behind my title...I would like to share with you a true story from my teaching career that demonstrates an all too common thought process these days. One in opposition to the inference my heading implies.

On one warm spring day, a good ten plus years ago, I was walking in from the softball field with my class talking to my students. I happened to look behind me (as I often do when walking with groups of students) and noticed a student back in the pack leave the side walk to retrieve a tennis ball left in the parking lot. It was likely left from the previous tennis class; inadvertently (yea...right) hit over the top of the fence surrounding the courts.

My student picked up the tennis ball and promptly started bouncing and catching it as we all walked to the door of the school. Upon entering the school I held back a little, allowing students to pass me, and waited for the student who had retrieved the tennis ball to catch up to where I was.

As we met, I walked with this student toward the locker room and promptly asked him for the tennis ball so I could return it to the basket for use by upcoming tennis classes. His response was "I found it...I get to keep it." I smiled, thinking he was kidding, and politely repeated my request.

He again indicated that the ball was his because he had found it, this time stating "finders keepers...losers weepers" as we moved closer to the locker room.

Continuing down the hall together, I then asked if he really believed that anything he finds becomes his, automatically, without any consideration to whom may have lost it, how it came to be where it was found, or any other mistake someone might have made. Without any hesitation...he said "yes."

"Really?" I asked. He again nodded his head yes.

I then said..."So, what if someone were to say...deposit their paycheck at the drive up window of their bank, asking for \$100 cash in return out of that deposit, and the teller sent back \$700.00 cash along with the slip indicating the original deposit was not changed (meaning that \$600 extra money was mistakenly sent back)...what should happen to that \$600 extra dollars the teller mistakenly gave out?"

He said the person who got that money should just keep it.

I then asked what about the teller...they would likely lose their job with a drawer that is \$600 short at the end of their working day. He said that that is too bad...they should not have made the mistake...that it was their problem..."too bad so sad"...he said.

I then told the student that the story I just told him actually happened. He said "really?" I continued stating that the person who was given that mistaken \$600 gave it right back letting the teller know

they had made a mistake. The student's response...“what idiot would do that...give back \$600 *free* money.”

I responded...“I did.”

My point to him was not to indicate what a nice guy I was, but that there are people (not just me) who do choose a different path than the one he is indicating he would follow. That even though he sees many of his peers make the same choice he would make, there is a *better* choice for him...for anyone.

Something else too...I would not be bringing up this story if I felt his was an isolated case. I have seen, after 34+ years in education, the same thought process (in one form or another) out of many of his peers (just as he did), especially over the last half of my career.

I have even had conversations with student aids and leaders who, when pressed, indicate that if someone does something against the “rules,” so to speak, and doesn't get caught...then they did not really do anything wrong. That the only time it actually becomes a poor choice is when someone does get *caught*.

Me...I just stand there in amazement when students have indicated such...and one reason why I told this particular student (the one “stealing” the tennis ball) the story I did. Again, I wanted him to know there was a *better* choice...one where your conscience is clear...one where you can feel good about yourself because of the character and integrity you showed.

That is why it was so satisfying, almost relieving, to hear about San Francisco Giants relief pitcher Jeremy Affeldt giving back the \$500,000 he would have received if he had not told the Giants organization about the mistake in his recent contract extension. A clerical error would have given him \$500,000 more than what he had originally agreed to, and legally...he could have held them to that if he wanted.

To me, Jeremy's statement (in David Brown's [piece at Yahoo Sports](#)) says it all:

*“I can't take that money...I won't sleep well at night knowing I took that money because every time I open my paycheck I'll know it's not right.”*

Now that's character...the showing of integrity, something that former student of mine had not yet grasped. Awesome...a person with a conscience, a moral compass; a professional athlete willing to do the right thing just because it is the right thing to do, something we certainly don't see every day. And an example a good number could take a lesson or two from as poor character choices seem to abound in all walks of life (need I mention Illinois politics)...and at many ages.

Oh...and that former student...the one I spent most of my time discussing in this piece...he never made it through high school, at least not where I taught. His poor choices likely continued, closing many doors of opportunity for him he probably never even knew existed.

So sad!!!