

Before I start, I want you to know that I am the only counselor in the history of Pasquaney to ever give a tree talk on his birthday.

During football season my final year of middle school, we played four games before I was tackled once. It seemed like every time I got the ball, I scored a touchdown. I could not be stopped. In fact, I dominated. Sports came naturally to me. My baseball coach said he had never seen anyone hit a ball as far as I had. I didn't lift weights, and I didn't workout in addition to the normal school practices. I was lucky, I was gifted. In school, classmates looked at me with admiration. I would walk through the halls hiding my normal smile behind a stone-faced, tough-guy look. People would say, "D-Crom's just naturally good at everything." The younger boys wanted to be like me, and the girls thought I was mysterious. I had constructed an entire persona based on my innate talents. Supremely confident in my status and reputation at the top of my small middle school, you could say I believed in David Cromwell exceptionalism. I received the best athlete award, got into the high school of my choice, and graduated from the Calvert Middle School a legend.

This tree talk is not about my middle school successes. In fact this may be one of the most introspectively critical talks you'll hear. It is a story about me. It is a story about me and my failures. I had such great natural talent, yet because I couldn't commit myself to improving these talents, I missed opportunities I would never get again. I hope that after listening to this talk, you will be inspired to take advantage of the opportunities you are surrounded by. Commitment and hard work are all you need.

I began high school at McDonogh in the fall of 2008 and tried out for football. The athletes on the varsity team were significantly bigger and older and it was intimidating.

“These guys are so much bigger”, I thought. “They’re more aggressive and tougher than me.” For the first time in my life, I lacked the supreme confidence I had during middle school and I became concerned that I might not be cut out for the varsity team.

Like all the other normal sized freshmen, I spent that season playing JV football and had pretty decent success playing nose tackle and running back. By the end of the season, however, I knew the head coach had taken notice of me, speculating where he might fit me on the Varsity squad the next year. I began to feel the pressure, and as much as I liked the idea of being on varsity as a sophomore, I avoided the coach like the plague. Was I really ready? What if I wasn’t good? What if I worked hard, practiced a lot and still wasn’t good? My mind was made up; I did not want to be on the varsity team. I couldn’t risk it. I was too scared of failure.

On top of my fear of failure, committing to football out of season, or outside of daily school practices was something I didn't agree with. I always worked hard during the organized practices, but I convinced myself that I shouldn't have to commit so much time to a single team. “High-schoolers deserve to have the time to do whatever they’d like to do,” I told my parents. Because I was unable to commit, I was unable to improve.

Sophomore year of high school, much to the surprise of the head coach, I declined the invitation to play varsity football, deciding to play JV again. I used the excuse “I am not strong enough yet,” but the truth was, I didn't want to commit, and I didn't want to fail. The following year, instead of working hard and progressing within the football program, I switched to running cross-country. That same year, I also switched from basketball to squash. I quickly became one of the better cross-country runners and

squash players in the whole school. I was pretty good. In fact I was pretty good at a lot of things, but I wasn't great at anything.

It has taken me a long time to fully understand why I changed sports so suddenly. Sure, I may have had a few legitimate complaints with both of the basketball and football programs, but the reality was, my fear of failure and refusal to commit had held me back. I subconsciously knew I needed to spend more time practicing and working harder, but I didn't do it. Guys with less natural talent began to rise above me because of their commitment and hard work. I couldn't believe it, I couldn't understand it, and I grew more and more frustrated as I struggled to accept my lack of improvement relative to theirs. Finally, with a lot of bitterness and a flurry of excuses, I switched sports. I blamed my lack of improvement on the way the programs were run, the leftover effects of a concussion, and even camp for "getting in the way." Instead of taking on the challenges that football and basketball presented, I quit without taking an ounce of responsibility. I was scared that I wasn't really that good, and I wasn't mature enough to do anything about it.

Here at camp, we have the ability to strive for success in many different ways, not just sports. Whether your aim is to make a shop project, become a better pitcher, get in better hiking shape, be a better leader, or maybe all of these things, accomplishing goals requires an attitude that I didn't have when I was your age. The first step is to embrace the possibility of failure. Another way to say that is to embrace difficulty. In every challenge, there is a risk of failure, otherwise it would not be a challenge. Michael Jordan said, "I can accept failure, everyone fails at something. But I can't accept not trying." When I allowed my fear of failure to affect my decision-making, I

didn't even try. I lost valuable opportunities to actually get good at football and basketball. The second step is to make a commitment. If you have a shop project, spend those necessary activity periods every week working on the project. If your goal is to get in better shape, make sure you do loops a few times during the week. The most important part of committing is to stick to it, to follow through, and to actually dedicate ourselves to whatever we say we are going to do. Although it shouldn't restrict us from doing other things on the hillside, our commitments should keep us focused and on top of our goals.

After we acknowledge we might fail, and make our commitment, the third and last step is to work hard towards the goal. Run hard all the way up the lane every single loop, cut those dovetails with focus, maintain your patience as a listener. As Thomas Edison said, "There is no substitute for hard work." Nothing can be accomplished without it.

As you all know by now, I did a terrible job throughout high school of integrating these three steps into my life. Of all the decisions that I made that avoided commitment and failure, my decision to stop pursuing baseball at a high level is the one that still eats away at me the most. I nearly left it out of this tree talk due to the mix of emotions I feel about that decision. Baseball has always been one of my greatest loves and I distinctly remember Hobb's Field counselor Bill MacInnis telling me that I would be so much better than he ever was. However, at the end of my junior year in high school, after having a tough...tough year as a hitter, I made the decision to play squash in college, instead of baseball. Using the excuse, "My arm won't make it through college," I was able to convince my parents and my friends that I was actually making the intelligent

decision to not play baseball. Once again, I was trying to protect myself from the potential of failure. I was afraid that I really might not be that good and just like that, I threw away the commitment I once had for baseball.

When I arrived at Middlebury College two years ago to play squash, I decided to try out for the baseball team as well. I did a few workouts with the players, and felt good about my chances of making the team, but something didn't make sense. After about a month of preseason, I realized I was on the verge of making a terrible mistake. I had committed myself to being a squash player, yet I was about to sacrifice that commitment to reopen an old dream, an opportunity that had already passed. I realized that if I split my time between squash and baseball, I would never be great at either. I had committed myself to squash. It was time to close the door on baseball.

I hope that never happens to you. While it is not yet time to specialize, try committing to and working hard at the things you do. If you want to get good at something, focus on it. Don't be afraid to fail; make a commitment, and work hard. I am now committed to being a squash player, but I will always remember the opportunities missed. Hopefully you can avoid making similar mistakes, so even if you don't achieve your goals, you can be proud you tried.