As you will undoubtedly remember from my last Tree Talk, I’m interested in fairly practical matters. It’s time to get up and say what’s on my mind. And that’s exactly what I want to talk to you about right now. Specifically, what I and a number of other people (mostly coaches that I run into during the winter) call “the little things” and the importance we give to an individual’s responsibility in dealing capably with what appear to be the minor details of many different aspects of life. Now there is some difficulty speaking on such a subject because total emphasis on detail (as I’ve found out) often heads one for the final position of not being able to see the forest for the trees. In other words, you can clutter up a process with such strict and binding attention to so called petty or trivial matters as to cloud the goal towards which you might be working. But I think the danger can be avoided if each of you will try to look at the whole business from a sensible prospective.

First of all, what are little things? Well a little thing is one ground ball, one lost windbreaker, one serve in tennis, or perhaps that one soak when you forget to turn your tag at the waterfront, or that one small section of the trail that you’re working on.

Bigger things are inspections, tennis matches, baseball games (or seasons), and our entire network of trails in Crawford Notch. I’m sure Bubbles would probably maintain that dragging the bottom of the lake in search for a body would also be a pretty big thing. And there are big things like the ideas and the values that get so much emphasis from different counsellors here on Tree Talk Ridge over the course of the summer.

In any case we all have goals. We go from day to day with many goals. Some important. Some not so important. They exist simultaneously and gradually we either accomplish them or we drop them until by the end of the day, or the week, or the year, or your life, everything is either accomplished or not accomplished.

Now back to details. It’s easiest for me to visualize details by putting the idea in an athletic context. Good coaches that I have run into (and this is something that I’m trying to do as a coach myself) harp constantly on small points sometimes to the point of complete frustration on the part of their players. But the coaches have good reason. Now to help my point, you are all going to imagine that you would like in the worst possible way to become a professional baseball player. Now whether some of you lacrosse players like this game or not, it involves a variety of skills. And I think I’m safe in assuming that all of you would recognize the fact that you probably would have to practice a little bit to become a professional baseball player. You should practice to hit with power, to bunt well, to throw hard and accurately, to run fast, to slide well, to field smoothly and with great range, to run the bases intelligently, and to understand signals and situations. Now, when I got out of prep school and most of the way through college, I thought that if you could do all of these things with some skill or with great
skill, you were probably good enough to become a pro. However, my last four years at Taft I had the pleasure of working under a man who really knew his baseball inside and out and who made me rethink the difficulty of becoming a professional baseball player.

For example, throwing the ball. Now apparently that’s a simple task. You can all do it. I’ve seen you all do it. But let’s just take an outfielder. An outfielder is the guy who sits out in the daisies, and he picks his teeth while the ball game is going on, and then he comes in and hits home runs. For an outfielder to throw the ball right (and I just happen to have brought a ball), he had to grip the ball across the seams, to prevent it from spinning and going off course. To maximize power, he has to throw right over the top of the shoulder. He has to step toward the target. Obviously, that makes sense! But he also has to do it with an open stance; otherwise, he is going to be throwing across his body and will lose velocity on the ball. He has to hit the cutoff man. He has to throw bullets, and he has to hit the cutoff man. If he doesn’t hit the cutoff man, that player loses the option to cutoff the ball and throw to second, cutoff the ball and throw home, or whatever. The outfielder has to hit the cutoff man. It’s a must.

Now he has to do specific quick arm exercises and general strength exercises for the entire upper half of his body. To throw like a pro after catching a fly ball, he has to catch the ball off the throwing shoulder, move into the ball and take two crow hops, get his entire upper body weight back and snap the arm through. That’s the way he has to do it. If you want to be a pro, you have to work to get all of those details right.

Not only that, (but if you’re doing it right) you’re throwing not only with your arm, but with your legs, too. Any pitcher will know that your legs get tired and your arms get tired because you’re pushing off any time you throw the ball. So, you have to do constant sprints and constant step-ups to keep your legs strong so that your arms can stay ready. Now if you do all of that stuff, constantly working on it, you might be able to take your arm and try to sell it to a major league team. But then there are each of those other things that I have been talking about, and they also have a long list of details that you have to work on before you actually become a great baseball player.

Well, obviously not all of you (as a matter of fact, probably very few of you) want to be a professional baseball player. In other words, that’s not entirely important to you. But there must be something that’s important to all of us. And I think that that thing that we will all find is important is becoming someone that we can be proud of. In other words, developing yourself as a person, which is really the key to the whole process over these eight weeks and for the rest of your life.

So, we all want to be good, responsible, trustworthy, courageous, sensitive, kind, productive, capable, respected, honest, sincere, loyal and intelligent, thoughtful, honorable, and sensible people. For each of those traits we also need a long list of things similar to those that go into making a major league baseball player. But wouldn’t it be great if Boom!, Zap! all of a sudden we could all be all of these things. But it just doesn’t happen. There's no more
possibility to magically become this kind of very, very good person that we all want to be then
there is to all of us suddenly being on the mound at Yankee Stadium after we've been freeping
around Hobbs Field throwing sidearm, under-hand, and everything else.

Attention to apparently small and insignificant matters makes a substantial difference.
Let's take one item from that list, responsibility. You want to be responsible people. Of course
you do. Now there are two good reasons why you want to be responsible. One is that people
don’t have to spend the majority of their time (like they have been for the past five weeks)
going around and picking up for you people. And the second one is that if you are a responsible
person, you are respected, and you are in demand. In other words, if somebody wants
something to be done, and you want to do it, if you're responsible, you'll get the opportunity to
do it. And I bet I can name ten or fifteen areas in camp (or you can name ten or fifteen areas in
camp) where you have a chance to develop this sense of responsibility. At the tiniest level is the
question of gear. Who's going to take care of your gear for you?

Does anybody have any answer to that question?
"You are."

Nice going, John. You are going to take care of your gear, nobody else is.

Who's going to wash your shirt if you don't?
"The Laundry."

Change the question. First of all, the laundry is not necessarily going to wash it because
I've seen some of the shirts they've washed. Secondly, it's on Thursday afternoon, and you
know that you need one for inspection so you're going to wash it. If you're doing it right, you're
going to wash it. And if you need a raincoat in the rain and you don't have one, who do you
blame? I hope you blame yourself. Unless it's obvious that something happened. But, this is
what you hear: "It just disappeared from my bunk," "Someone took it," or "I didn't leave it
down there!"

And then there's the magic word they. I just heard the magic word they this morning,
and you hear it all winter during school, especially when the administration becomes separated
from the rest of the students. It's always, "God, look what they've done." And the they has
some kind magic that really doesn't exist, but they do it and therefore I suffer, therefore I can
blame them. Now sometimes these statements are valid but really not too often. And the real
problem comes when you take these excuses and you really, actually begin to believe them.
And you say, "Someone took it." You know someone didn't take it, but it becomes so easy for
you to say it that all of a sudden you start to believe it. You blame all of your own mistakes on
somebody or something else.

Now, you have to learn to take responsibility for your own actions and this is a really
good place to start doing it. I think these eight weeks are an excellent place to start doing it.
This involves taking credit for something that you've done well but also taking the discredit for
something that you've done poorly.
If you start taking responsibility yourself rather than blaming somebody else when you make a mistake, you're going to make fewer mistakes because you listen to yourself much more then you listen to other people. In this way you start on the road towards becoming what somebody would call a responsible person.

By following through on an assigned task somebody asks you to do, you take a step towards becoming more responsible. Most assigned tasks make sense. On Notchpost I imagine (I was never on Notchpost, being a little tyke when I left. It wasn't because I was a bad guy.), I don't imagine that talk is a particularly valuable commodity. In other words, you have a task there to do and the less time you spend talking about it and the more time you spend doing it the better off that you and the rest of the group and the AMC and everybody else is going to be.

You as an individual you either “cut the mustard” (this is baseball term that means to get stuff done) or you don't. And judged upon your deeds, and although this trial may be a very small the large scheme of things, it should teach you that you’re not going to be able to escape what you do or what you don't do. So while on Notchpost, you either do the dirty work or you don't.

In other areas of camp, the same thing holds true. You either fielded the ball or you didn't. The stuff about the sun and everything else doesn't make any difference. You either fielded the ball or you didn’t field the ball. Other people realize that it's a bad hop or not. But the time has come to stop saying, “Well, it's a tough chance” and all that stuff. Don't say anything; instead, get the next one. You’re either leaving your gear around camp or you’re not leaving your gear around camp. No amount of cheap chatter is going to get you out of this. Nothing that you can say is going to keep people from seeing through you and looking at what you do in these very small areas.

Now responsibility, which is what this segment of this little talk is all about, is only a part of that long list of things that is hopefully going to take you and make you into that very good person that we all want to be.

In all of these areas on that long list, it's the easiest thing in the world to rationalize verbally and get out of (on the talk level) the goals that you have set for yourself. On the surface you can tell the entire world that you want to be a great tennis player, that you want to win those tennis matches, you want to win the inspection, and you want to work hard for the theater, but people are going to see straight through you if you don't do it. The same holds true for the type of person that you want to be, not just the things you want to do. The details in the small acts lead directly to the formation of your character.

For example, kindness (I hope that you all want to be kind or at least want to be known as kind people.) starts with being kind to that one person in your dormitory whom you don't necessarily like. If you can’t be kind to him then hang it up! Don't start talking about kindness to
anybody. You don't deserve to, you don't have the right to if you can't be kind to that one person.

Honesty starts by taking responsibility for your own actions. If you blow the inspection, don't talk and say that you didn't and that somebody else made a mistake. Don't go up to somebody else on another day when you're feeling good and say, “Honesty is a really important thing.” You have not been honest with yourself. If you're constantly grabbing for the food first and are always getting there late when you have an appointment and are always looking like a slob (when you know that looking like a slob is going to upset somebody else) and then you say that you really should be thoughtful and you think sensitivity is key (and sensitivity is a great word in the last decade), you're not making much sense because you're not showing by what you're doing that thoughtfulness and sensitivity are key.

I’ll end with another baseball term. “You make the routine plays and let the big plays take care of themselves.” If you can make the routine plays, you're going to make the big play. But if you “blow it” in those small ways, it's doubtful that you're ever going to play major league baseball.