

# THE COMPETITIVE EDGE

HOW TO WIN EVERY TIME YOU COMPETE

DR. JEFFREY BROWN



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*The Competitive Edge: How to Win Every Time You Compete*

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Designed by Mark Lane

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In this remarkable new book, *The Competitive Edge*, sport psychologist Dr. Jeff Brown helps readers explore their personal values as they are acquired, challenged, and refined over time through sport training and competition experiences. The seven principles he offers and elegantly discusses will be useful to those who seek to learn more about themselves and the game of life. Christians and people across faith orientations will find in this practical, readable book a treasure for now and years to come.

**Edward F. Etzel, EdD**

Psychologist and Associate professor, West Virginia University

The famous twentieth century journalist Heywood Broun said “Sports do not build character. They reveal it.” As a sport psychologist and member of the Boston Marathon Medical Care Team for many years, Jeff Brown helps fallen competitors understand the psychological complexity of winning versus losing. In his remarkable book, *The Competitive Edge*, Brown shows how the important qualities of character and integrity lead to winning not only in sports, but also in achieving life goals. The text is light-hearted, witty, and most importantly, insightful. This book is a winner.

**Marvin M. Adner, MD**

Medical director, Boston Marathon 1978–2006

Dr. Jeffrey Brown’s precise book about integrity and the human spirit is seamlessly universal and inspirational. I highly recommend this enjoyable, yet pensive, book.

**J. Michael Moncrief**

Actor, *The Legend of Bagger Vance*

*The Competitive Edge* will help you weed out the things in your life that wear black hats, it will help you eliminate the bad guys, and lead you down many years of Happy Trails. Even if you don’t come in first, you’re still a winner! I love this book!

**Roy Rogers Jr.**

President, Roy Rogers–Dale Evans Happy Trails Theater & Museum

This is an important topic that doesn’t get discussed enough. In *The Competitive Edge*, Dr. Jeff Brown has nailed it. As Christians, we must have a different playbook. Winning without integrity is not winning. I know of no one better qualified to provide wisdom on this principle than Jeff Brown. I highly recommend this book.

**Frank J. Lofaro**

President and Chief Operating Officer, Christian Management Association

Your integrity is your most valuable asset in today’s global marketplace, not to mention in your own home . . . and the heavenly home that awaits us. In *The Competitive Edge*, Jeff Brown weighs in on the age-old clash between playing to win and playing fair, showing us that it is possible to do both.

**Sheila Heen**

Coauthor of *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*

*The Competitive Edge* serves up some surprising insights that can benefit everyone from the pro athlete to the weekend warrior, from the exec in the office to the kid in school. A superb book that transcends its sports-based theme to offer valuable keys for living a better life, too.

### **Jim Vitti**

Author of *The Cubs on Catalina*, *Southern Gold*, *A Little Piece of Paradise*, and *Publicity Handbook*

As a non-Christian sport psychologist, I approached Jeff Brown's book with some hesitation, wondering how the combination of religious orientation and mental training techniques would work for someone like me. The ultimate irony was that his guide to maintaining integrity and staying in touch with core values became a useful road map for me as I struggled with the very question of how to honestly endorse a book when I could not fully embrace everything it had to say. That being said, I feel entirely comfortable and true in saying that this book will be very useful for both Christians and non-Christians alike. It provides compelling stories and a variety of religiously based and secular strategies for staying true to oneself while engaging fully in the competitive world we live in, be it business or sport.

### **Kirsten Peterson**

Senior sport psychologist, United States Olympic Committee

*The Competitive Edge* offers a powerful message to those of us who seek athletic success while fulfilling God's will and plan for our life. Jeff Brown offers a seven-principle plan that will enable you to achieve peak performance, fight the good fight, and finish the race.

### **Ian McCaw**

Director of Athletics, Baylor University

Dr. Jeffrey Brown has crafted a great book for all people looking to balance a competitive spirit with moral and personal integrity. Having attempted to do this very thing on CBS's *Survivor*, I am keenly aware of just how difficult a negotiation this balance can be. Life, like *Survivor*, is filled with moments that suggest: "Just this once, it's not a big deal." But in truth, compromising one's values is always a big deal. Thanks to Dr. Brown's book, I am more fully prepared to face these compromising situations with my integrity intact.

### **Austin Carty**

Contestant, *Survivor: Panama-Exile Island*

Dr. Jeff Brown identifies seven principles that are absolute necessities in living a life of character and integrity. Christians do not need to sacrifice their competitiveness to live a believer's life. Jeff Brown has done a superb job of encouraging that competitive nature while drawing closer to Christ.

### **Ron Wellman**

Director of Athletics, Wake Forest University

Through engaging stories and anecdotes, Dr. Jeffrey Brown offers a winning road map for athletes and other competitors. The tools of sport psychology, combined with central awareness of your values, character, and integrity, will give you the competitive edge.

**Dr. Kate F. Hays**

Past president, Division of Exercise & Sport Psychology, American Psychological Association  
Founder and director, Toronto Marathon Psyching Team  
Fellow, Association for Applied Sport Psychology  
Author, *Move Your Body, Tone Your Mood*

Dr. Brown's principles are like sport psychology parables—inspiring, useful, and a great resource for the integrity-driven, high-performance life.

**Carol Kauffman, PhD ABPP**

Assistant clinical professor, Harvard Medical School

*The Competitive Edge* is a must read for anyone who competes, whether in athletics, business, academics, or any other entity. *The Competitive Edge* will have a great impact on the way you view competition in today's world. The principles in this book have changed the way I see competition in our culture.

**Rico Petrocelli**

President, Petrocelli Marketing Group  
Author of *Tales from the Impossible Dream Red Sox*

*The Competitive Edge* is an incredibly motivating book for anyone striving to succeed in this world. It will change your perspective on what it truly means to win and what each victory should and shouldn't cost. Your integrity and overall character will be challenged for the better as you take in the wisdom and experiences offered to you by author Dr. Jeff Brown.

**Joe White**

President, Kanakuk Kamps

Jeff Brown's modern-day parables are valuable lessons we can all learn and abide by in the perpetual quest of bettering ourselves. *The Competitive Edge* reminds us that our day-to-day ambitions need to be examined and conform to the proper perspective of our overall lives. I am honored to issue my very own Letter of Authenticity and encourage readers of all faiths to indulge in such a fine compilation.

**James Spence Jr.**

Autograph expert

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Getting a book into the hands of readers is truly a team effort. And I've had the privilege of playing with all-stars who also believe in the priceless value of character and integrity. I'm indebted to many people for believing in and sharpening *The Competitive Edge* so others can win more in life.

First, thank you Mavis Sanders. I didn't realize how our conversation in Boston would eventually affect my life in such a meaningful way. Thank you for being the perfect messenger.

Next, Jan Long Harris. I'm grateful for you—a keen, savvy visionary who lives by faith. I'm sure you already know that your leadership is highly respected and regarded by the rest of your team. Thank you for making me a part of the Tyndale family and encouraging this project from the beginning.

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Special appreciation goes to many individuals who have been willing to share their lives through interviews so the rest of us can learn more about finding the competitive edge. Thank you Ed Carnett, Ernie Haase, Michael Moncrief, Rico Petrocelli, Dusty Rogers, Jim Spence, Jim Vitti, and Danny Wuerffel. I'm especially indebted to Curt Schilling and his publicist Katie Leighton, as well as Danny Wuerffel, his personal assistant Beverly Tillery, and the staff at Desire Street Ministries—all of whom have agreed that character and integrity should be a priority in life. Thank you for letting your character and integrity serve as examples to others.

On the home team, I'm thankful to my parents, Lowell and Gretchen Brown, for their support and encouragement in my personal and professional endeavors. They also helped me first grasp the understanding of what character and integrity are about. And finally, I'm thankful to my beautiful wife and best friend, Carolynne, who



invested an hour for every hour that I did in this book. Carolynne, I love you for your patience, selflessness, encouragement, and loyalty. It took teamwork to get this book written, and you are no doubt my most valuable player.

# FOREWORD

When I first met Jeff Brown, something just clicked. As I have gotten to know him, I found that he knows what he's talking about when it comes to character and integrity. This book is full of wisdom and insight into what it takes to win – but I'm not talking about winning at all costs.

Since the day I was born, my mother and father taught me what is most important in life. Winning is good, but the way you play the game is even more important. Some of my Gator fans may not believe this, but in the end, it's going to matter very little who won or by how much. It *is* going to make an eternal difference how the race was run. As a Christian, I believe that thinking and acting with integrity is absolutely critical in my relationship with God and with other people. I think a lot about the fact that most everything I do and say either brings glory to God or reflects poorly on me and Him.

A person's character really comes out during both the highs and the lows of life. Those of us who survived Hurricane Katrina and its devastating effects might say that the low points and hard times are the biggest challenge to moral and ethical behavior. During the days and weeks after the storm, I felt exhausted and discouraged and literally cried out to God to sustain me. But I have never felt closer to Him. At times like that, I really think that He is doing all the work because I don't have anything in myself left to give.

On the other hand, when things seem to be going really well and

## The Competitive Edge

I can see we're making good progress, I find I have to work harder to keep focused. It's easy to want to relax, let down my guard, and just kind of take it all in. (I'm not talking about physical rest here, although with a three-year-old and an eight-month-old baby in our house that sounds like a great idea!) The long process of recovering from Hurricane Katrina taught me that although reaching a peak is exciting, the valleys always come too. So I have to learn to pace my efforts and develop a sustainable balance that can carry me through the long run.

This book has so much good information in it, that if you only take away a little portion of it, you will still have gained a lot. I commend it to you with my encouragement to think about the eternal perspective and make your life here on earth count for the important things.

Danny Wuerffel  
Former NFL quarterback  
Destin, Florida  
May, 2007

# PREGAME WARM-UP

When was the last time you found yourself in a competitive situation? Not so long ago, serious competition was associated only with professional athletes on television or major corporate players assembled in a conference room with a spectacular view of a city. Well, the view has changed. Today, competition is commonplace; every day we find ourselves vying for some sort of prize. Maybe the prize is quality time with family or favorite friends. Maybe it's respect from coworkers and neighbors. Or perhaps it's simply making it through a barely red traffic light or choosing the shortest checkout line at the store. Whether we like it or not, we live in a world of competition and the game can be fierce.

Maybe you are an athlete or business leader who has had to ratchet up your skills in order to keep up with the demands of performance and productivity. Or perhaps you're a parent, teacher, or pastor who feels pressured to take your personal game to the next level. The compelling urge to compete is real and can't be ignored. As a faculty member at Harvard Medical School and McLean Hospital for nearly a decade, I've had the fortunate opportunity to consult with a variety of athletes, businesspeople, entrepreneurs, students, professors, and colleagues who feel the intense pressure of performance and competition in their lives daily. Every day you get yourself out of bed, out the door, and off to work, the temptation to sacrifice your integrity is staring you down. Our competitive culture

has effectively duped many people into believing that regardless of how we play the game of life, any strategy is acceptable as long as we win. Whether in the boardroom or athletic arena, at home or school, in the pulpit or the carpool, you're in the game too.

Everyone is playing the game. Everyone wants to win—no matter the cost. And it's clear that countless people *still* seem to think that nice guys are doomed to finish last. In many competitive situations, character and personal integrity are simply regarded as old-fashioned strategies for climbing one's way to the top. They are frequently undervalued as being too conservative, clear signs of weakness, or simply a waste of time.

If competition were a virus, we would have an epidemic on our hands. Have you noticed any symptoms of the outbreak around you? The evidence is everywhere: colleagues frantically grabbing for the next rung on the corporate ladder, rookies claiming overstated accomplishments on their résumés, athletes using drugs to improve performance, white-collar corruption around every corner, business-people cultivating shallow relationships just to get an advantage.

For Christians, however, life isn't supposed to feel like a contest—even though on many days it does. God has already given us the ultimate rule book, one that shows us how to win every time we play. Christians are not only to enjoy life, but enjoy it abundantly. And God doesn't need for us to cheat so that His will can be accomplished in our lives. When it comes to competition, His rules place character and integrity above everything else. By keeping character and integrity intact, you'll never compete *against* God for His will in your life.

It's easy to become distracted by trophies, money, promotions, and attention. So if we want to guard against grabbing the low-

hanging fruit, we must realize that we're in this game for the long haul. But this doesn't mean you will never be a winner. It simply means that you'll win the *right* way: according to God's plan for your life. Proverbs tells us that a person who has integrity also possesses wisdom, understanding, mercy, and favor from God. When we follow His rules, using character and integrity to win, victories are translated into spiritual strength.

Each spring I don the hat of sport psychologist for the Boston Marathon medical team. At the finish line in Boston's Copley Square, I consult with runners who have trained for months in preparation for the holy grail of marathons. They feel the intense, do-whatever-it-takes pressure of competition. Whether daily in my private practice or once a year at the finish line of a major sporting event, clients often tell me they struggle to make the right decisions when faced with situations where their values can be compromised. Some are satisfied with a decision to stick with their values, while others regret later that they gave in so quickly. Athletes and businesspeople who have confidence in their character and values still find themselves going head-to-head with cutthroat competitors too. Regardless of whose integrity and character are compromised, the sweet taste of victory can still have a bitter aftertaste of guilt, shame, regret, or compromise.

Max was a runner I met at the Boston Marathon. By the time we were introduced, he was already having both legs iced and he was in tears. His physical pain, however, didn't compare to his emotional pain. Max described his emotional aftertaste to me. You see, Max had forfeited hundreds of hours with his wife and kids so he could train for the marathon. He had numerous discussions with his wife that flared into arguments about his priorities with her and with

their children. While that conflict was occurring, Max had also been advised by his physician to avoid running lengthy races because his previous knee injuries would almost certainly be aggravated in both legs. Max didn't want to hear his doctor's advice, nor did he consider the pleas from his wife. He wanted to run the marathon for himself. He wanted the bragging rights, he wanted the admiration, he wanted his friends and colleagues to talk about him, he wanted his kids to be proud of him and tell their friends at school.

With five miles left to go in the marathon, Max's legs began making a crackling noise and literally stopped working. He couldn't run; he couldn't even crawl. Race volunteers brought him to the medical tent, where he had no other option but to consider how his decision to nurture his ego would now affect his wife, his children, and his character. He regretted his shallow priorities and was ashamed that he placed his superficial ego needs over his family. Max's bitter aftertaste was only washed away later by his family's forgiveness. It was a tough lesson to learn, but Max finally realized that the lure of accolades was not worth compromising his integrity and character. Given the state of our competitive culture and the indisputable truth that most people want to win at all costs, you must bulletproof yourself against the temptation to play by the wrong set of rules. As a person of faith, you have an extra resource — a competitive edge — in this fight to do right over wrong.

After conducting several thousand hours of therapy with clients, I've come to learn at least seven basic, yet crucial, principles that can guide every serious competitor to victory every time he or she competes. Those seven principles make up the competitive edge that strengthens your character and integrity in a world where traditional values, sportsmanship, and a good work ethic are undervalued and

frequently mocked. When it comes to competing, your character and integrity will be under daily attack. You will either sacrifice your integrity at the great cost of losing face with yourself and others, or you'll increase your confidence and faith by being a legitimate winner every time your character is challenged in competition. When you pull all of the principles together, you've found your competitive edge. *The Competitive Edge* will give you an advantage over the competition by giving you vital principles that you can use to guide your character toward victory. If you are a champion, you can win every time you compete.

Make no mistake: Success has many different faces. So don't think your character and integrity are of any less value because the final outcome isn't as significant as you want it to be. Whether it's winning the Stanley Cup or selling the most cupcakes at a school fund-raiser, your character and integrity are of equal importance.

Maybe you think you already have your integrity game face on and that you are not like other competitors who are apt to throw integrity under the bus just to get ahead. Do you consider yourself a winner? If so, do you dream of endorsing an athletic company's new line of clothing? Or desire to be a spokesperson for a charity that you believe in with all of your heart? Maybe you think you'd look chic on a trendy magazine or on the evening news. If you've ever felt a buzz from the lure of celebrity status, you're in good company. Many people like the idea of fame. You should also know that you are just as vulnerable to compromising your character and integrity as anyone else.

You know the signs of a big winner: glossy photos, tell-all book deals, dream salaries, newspaper headlines, gated-community living, speaking tours, and a table of your choice in any restaurant you



choose. These are the images of fame and success for those who are declared winners by societal standards. Don't ignore what is going on around you. Don't think for a minute that your character and integrity aren't at risk. We live in the reality of stiff competition, and everyone wishes they could be the champ. Even if you're already competing on the side of character and integrity, you can sharpen your competitive edge so you won't be sucked under by the current of extreme competition.

Many people want to be a champion so badly that they can think about nothing else. Just the sound of it—*top dog, numero uno, the big cheese*—can make anyone want to be an admired VIP. Your character and integrity should rise above the fading limelight. It should be more highly valued than a tarnishing bronze trophy or tattered blue ribbon because trophies and ribbons don't influence children. They don't encourage friends. They don't honor spouses. They don't stand up for what is right. They don't last in meaningful ways like character and integrity do. Why spend time investing in temporary fame when you can have lasting victory from day to day?

If you develop your competitive edge, winning can happen every time you compete. Let the guiding principles of the *competitive edge* lead you to victory, regardless of the outcome. Whether you compete against others in sport or business, or compete against yourself to reach personal goals, the means by which you win will reflect your true character—the core of who you are. Even when you stand alone, you will still be a champion.

### Know the Rules of the Game

*I try not to break the rules, but merely to test their elasticity.*

**Bill Veeck**

MLB owner, 1991 National Baseball Hall of Fame inductee

One afternoon in my office, I sat in an after-school session with Sean, a fifth-grader who was having trouble getting along with his friends, parents, and teachers. He had a reputation for being a stubborn bully and clearly didn't think highly of himself. His self-esteem was low, and he knew that people didn't really like him. I wanted to connect with him so we could eventually have some conversations about tough topics. Sean said he was glad to be in my office and took himself on a self-guided tour before accepting my offer to play a game of Electronic Battleship.

Sean said he was familiar with the game but that no one had ever been willing to play with him before. After firing missiles back and forth for a few minutes, I sank one of Sean's vessels by chance. He immediately stood up, tossed the game to the floor, and stormed out of my office. I found Sean sitting by himself in the waiting room with his arms crossed, staring at the floor. I sat across from him, and together we waited in silence. After a few minutes, Sean glared at me and blurted out: "You didn't tell me the rules. Now you sunk my boat and made me lose the game." I thanked Sean for expressing his

thoughts and feelings about losing and invited him to return to my office, where we would review the rules together. He was relieved to know that losing one boat didn't mean losing the game.

Sean isn't the only one feeling the need to win these days. Just as Sean needed to know the rules of the game he was playing, it's important for us to know the rules of our game as well. Without knowing the boundaries and rules of a competition, it's easy to become emotionally off balance and compromise integrity while trying to salvage a victory. When we know we are under-informed, feelings of inadequacy come to the surface quickly. That alone can be

*Rules were made  
to be broken.*

Anonymous

embarrassing, deflating, and unfair. We want to perform well, so we may be tempted to take shortcuts in order to compensate for what we don't know.

Parents of a teenager I see in therapy wanted their son to be well-prepared for his college entrance exams, so they hired a tutor to help him. Their son met with the tutor several times before his parents discovered that the tutor was also teaching him how to cheat by using a cell phone, iPod, and other technical devices. Up to this point, the parents had not realized just how intensely competitive these exams could be, and to what lengths people would go in order to succeed. Even the tutor compromised integrity to improve his own reputation as a teacher. They never intended for their son to cheat in order to elevate his test scores; they simply didn't understand the rules some people play by in the college entrance exam game.

If you are going to be good at a game, you must have a clear understanding of the rules. Sometimes beginner's luck can make

others think you have natural talent, but they won't be fooled for long. Whether your personal playing field is athletics or business, academics or politics, church or parenting, you'll surely remain an amateur if you have only a vague sense of how your game is played. In order to become a pro, you must understand all of the rules, as well as how and why the game is played. In fact, not knowing the complete parameters of a sport or business can put you in a bind, particularly when your character and integrity are on the line.

## Know the Details of the Rules

UCLA coaching legend John Wooden once said, "When you see a successful individual, a 'winner,' a champion, you can be sure that you are looking at an individual who pays great attention to the perfection of minor details."

Coach Wooden's comment reminds me of a woman named Rebecca whom I consulted in my office. She had recently gotten married and joined a prestigious law firm. One afternoon, Rebecca came to her session and asked me to give her feedback about a decision she had made. Earlier in the week, she had received her first six-month employee evaluation. She met with a partner in the firm, who delivered a

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John Wooden  
UCLA coaching legend

stellar performance review, emphasizing her enthusiasm and praising her intelligence and dependability. The partner went so far as to suggest that with some minor improvements, Rebecca could easily be on track to make partner after a few years.

Rebecca asked how she could improve her job performance, and the partner told her that even though she was already billing many hours, she still wasn't generating enough income for the firm. Rebecca quickly read between the lines. It was clear that if she wanted to be in line for a promotion, she needed to bill more hours.

Rebecca had planned to balance work and professional growth with her family life. But the rules she thought she was playing by had changed. She was already working nearly eighty hours a week, and there simply wasn't enough of her to go around. She would now have to decide what values were more important to her – work or family.

Rebecca's heart sank and she left the partner's office disappointed, both in the firm and in herself. She was disappointed in the firm because, although it had a highly regarded reputation in the business world, its main motivation was money. Second, she was disappointed she hadn't learned all of the firm's rules before she accepted the job. To her credit, she *had* asked a variety of good questions during her pre-job interviews, but the business practices she discovered were not divulged until now.

Rebecca decided the rules the firm followed and the rules she used to define her character were appreciably different. She could not allow herself to build a career by sacrificing family values in the name of greed.

Rebecca didn't really need my approval for her decision that

day. She made a sound decision to avoid putting a price tag on her character. After that, she stayed with the firm, only one more month, billing hours that honestly reflected the time that she worked. She later transitioned to a different firm, where the rules were more explicit and individual values took priority over cash flow.

I'm guessing that Coach Wooden would say that Rebecca was a champion, even if she was perhaps a slow learner. Because she didn't initially have all of the rules of the game, she had to learn them the hard way.

## **Know the Value of Your Integrity**

If you've picked up this book because you want to have another set of strategies for beating the competition and coming out on top financially, you might as well put it back down or give it to a friend. On second thought, perhaps you should keep reading. You may discover more internal wealth than you ever knew you could possess. This book was written to help you protect your integrity and character, neither of which should bear a price tag—but they frequently do.

As you read on, you must ask yourself these questions: Is my character important to me? Is integrity a word I want others to use when they describe me? Do I want others to know I stand on personal principle? When it's all said and done, can I be satisfied that I stood for what I believed?

It can be tough to resist the temptation to compromise character, because winning feels good and is highly admired culturally. Clients often share with me stories of envy, frustration, and anger over the heavy-handed competitors they face in their daily lives. Sometimes they even fantasize about infecting their foe's computer with a virus,

or circulating a memo that reflects errors in their colleague's work and calls into question that person's judgment. These fantastic, often unreasonable schemes usually soften after a good discussion about what matters most to my clients. In some cases, the old appeal, "Do you really want to stoop to their level?" can still assuage the urge to "get even."

But let's be honest. Sometimes it feels much better to justify revenge and settle the score in a selfish way than it does to delay the gratification of watching your competition bite the dust. When you have to deal with an inflammatory teammate, colleague, or boss, the problem is not your anger about the situation, but it's what you *do* with that anger that affects your character.

I continue to be amazed that many Christians still believe anger is a sin. Anger is simply one of many God-given emotions that humans have. Even Jesus became angry when He saw the money changers in the Temple. But when we use anger as justification for our own bad behavior, we damage our integrity.

When someone provokes you to anger—and they will—when you know all you can about your personal playing field, you have a better chance of staying on your toes in a defensive stance, ready to respond. Once you know the rules, you'll be more equipped to recognize assaults on your character and decision making.

Can you recall a time when your character was challenged by an opponent and you were tempted to sacrifice your integrity for a win? If so, you deserve to be congratulated. Why, you ask? Because your opponent saw you as a challenge. He or she was convinced that you were worth beating and that a victory over you was important. If your character isn't under attack, then you probably aren't really participating in the game anyway.

## Guard Your Integrity with Knowledge

Regardless of their faith orientation, most competitors would agree with Proverbs 24:5: “A wise man has great power, and a man of knowledge increases strength.” Does the Schoolhouse Rock mantra “knowledge is power” resonate with you? Even unethical competitors live by this Sir Francis Bacon quote. Every competitor seeks knowledge, information, and strategy in an effort to gain the upper hand. They can be your competitors, your teammates, your supervisors, your employees. Don’t be paranoid; not everyone we play against or do business with is a bad guy. But let’s be honest—character and integrity aren’t at the top of everybody’s priority list.

Regardless of whether or not character and integrity are priorities for them, many competitors think the more they know, the more they will win. They tell themselves they will get a bigger salary with more power and prestige. They want to supervise more people and long for greater respect. They want their coach to call on them first. They want to own the limelight.

By increasing your knowledge of your sport, your business, your field, or your specialty, you can insulate your character against unethical competitors and preserve your value-based integrity at the same time. Think of knowledge in the same way you think of rules in a game. The more you know about a game, the more expert you will become. The more expert you become, the more you will play at advanced levels. Ecclesiastes 7:12 guarantees, “the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors” (NASB). When your character remains intact, you will win big every time.



## Be Prepared for the Rules to Change

For well over a century, the Harvard and Yale football teams have faced off each fall in what is known as “The Game.” As with most rivalries, these Ivy League schools are rich with tradition and have obvious enthusiasm for this gridiron clash. Similarly, just down the Charles River from the Harvard campus is the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where another tradition of sorts is alive and well.

For years, MIT students have stolen the focus of The Game by designing a prank that relies on perfect timing and the element of surprise—not to mention intelligence and creativity. T. F. Peterson confirms in his book *Nightwork* that Harvard and Yale players should be on guard, because the playing field can change at a moment’s notice when MIT students are on the prowl. Pranks have included a rocket soaring over the football goalpost with an MIT banner in tow, an inflatable MIT-tattooed weather balloon that eventually exploded on the playing field, and crowd participation activities that deliver a punch line aimed at unsuspecting Harvardians—led of course, by MIT students disguised as Crimson loyalists.

The lesson here is to expect rules to change, particularly when a rival or competitor has an agenda other than your own. So maybe you don’t play for Harvard, Yale, or MIT, but you do expect people to keep their word when they agree to do something. When they don’t follow through, their integrity and character come into question, and it’s not so funny. These collegiate antics are done in the name of cleverness and old-fashioned entertainment, but when the rules change in the workplace, the motive is often money, prestige, or influence. The stakes can be much higher,

and rules can be adjusted to fit an unethical competitor's agenda without notice to you.

## **Search Out Good Role Models**

How many classes have you ever taken that focused on integrity, character, or principle? I'd guess not too many. Maybe you had an ethics class at some point while pursuing your education. If you sat in such a class for very long, you probably participated in a debate over whether ethics can be taught to someone. That discussion usually ended with an agreement that ethical principles can be learned as a set of rules, but they won't always reflect the values a person actually has. I would agree with that notion.

While many theories for learning exist, social learning theory seems to be one useful perspective for understanding learning in our culture. Eminent psychologist and Stanford professor Albert Bandura identified that people learn behaviors or modify current behaviors by observing someone else doing it first. For example, a coach might yell at a referee following an apparent bad call at a game. By watching the coach yell at the ref, players learn to express their anger using poor sportsmanship, a negative behavior. The next time a bad call occurs, the players are now apt to yell at the official.

In another example, a child may observe one parent who lies to the other parent about something insignificant. Now the child has learned that telling an untruth is acceptable. On more grown-up terms, a boss who encourages an employee to embellish services or make empty promises to gain business is teaching his novice supervisee fraudulent business tactics. Remember the line from the children's song that says, "Oh, be careful, little eyes, what you see?" I'm sure Bandura didn't write the lyrics, but he would likely agree

that we learn rules about how to behave by watching and listening to others.

You may not even realize it when you are being exposed to images or behaviors that later influence your character. Modeling can occur before you know it's happening to you. The media has created a reality entertainment niche by setting high stakes for people who are willing to compete. *Survivor*, *The Apprentice*, and *The Amazing Race* are all part of our cultural vocabularies now. We even know many of the players by name. Viewers watch intensely competitive episodes built on a simple formula that includes ruthless strategy and a big payoff. How often have you seen a contestant lie about a relative dying, a friend having a terminal illness, financial ruin, or some other fabricated tragedy offered with an honest face? Contestants often form alliances with other contestants, only to find out later that their loyalty to each other was a ruse used in the name of strategy. Unfortunately, some shows use this self-defamation of character to generate a loyal fan base and keep viewers coming back for more.

Reality television might have had some devoted viewers in biblical times. Commercials would have sounded something like, "You won't believe the lengths that Jacob will go to scam his blind father, Isaac, out of the family blessing. Watch next week to see how Jacob's actions change their family forever."

In Luke 10, the parable of the Good Samaritan serves as a clear example of how one man wasn't influenced by the popular culture of his day. Instead, he chose to disregard cultural norms and help a Jewish man who had been left for dead along a road, even after a priest and a Levite had passed the injured man by. The Samaritan and Jew were radically different from one other—racially, socially,

and financially. They had nothing in common except a relationship in which each overlooked what their culture had defined for them. Scripture is replete with individuals who can still serve as role models for us today: Noah demonstrated faith, Job showed patience when life got tough, Ruth was kind, and Abraham was generous. If your role models don't possess integrity, it's time to find new ones.

## Keep Your Head in the Game

The Yucatán Peninsula is home to Chichén Itzá, a historically powerful Mayan civilization whose massive stone structures remain relatively intact. For all practical purposes, Chichén Itzá looks much like it did hundreds of years ago, with the exception of crumbling rocks and deeper crevices chiseled away by centuries of wind and rain. When visiting there a few years ago, I was awed by an enormous centerpiece pyramid called El Castillo that towers above Chichén Itzá. Visitors can still climb the narrow steps to the top of the pyramid if they think they are up to it. If you need to balance yourself for the dizzying descent, a rope is there to hold on to.

While El Castillo is an architectural wonder in its own right, I have to admit my strongest memory of the sultry 103-degree tour of Chichén Itzá was the expansive ball court located just northwest of the massive pyramid. It was a vast sporting arena that would have served as a perfect backdrop for an *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Whatever* movie. There in the echoing ball court, our veteran tour guide and lifelong Chichén Itzá native, Alfredo, described the gaming history of the Mayan people and their great love of competition. Their loyalty to sports was more than impressive.

Among the sports they played, the Maya played a game called pok-ta-pok. It seems there are a few theories about how pok-ta-pok

was played. Some historians believe it was a cross between soccer and basketball, with a bit of head-to-head football thrown in. Etched inside the walls of the pok-ta-pok courts are stone carvings of athletes in various poses. Alfredo pointed out a particular carving of one headless athlete who had seven snakes coming out of his neck, then asked our unsuspecting group of tourists to guess the symbolism of that figure. After a few reasonable guesses by his sweaty onlookers, Alfredo explained we were looking at the captain of the winning – not the losing – team. He had been decapitated as a sign of honor and respect for being the champion. The seven snake heads growing out of the captain's neck supposedly pleased the Mayan gods.

I immediately knew that sport psychology would have had no real meaningful place in Mayan culture. Can you imagine being a sport psychologist who was consulting with a pok-ta-pok captain and establishing goals for working together? "So you want to get your head lobbed off? . . . I see." If you ask me, second place sounds pretty inviting. Not all rules make sense.

As we continued with the tour of the ruins, I mulled over this notion of losing one's head for winning. Surely, I thought, the captain didn't understand the rules. Maybe the captain was somehow a prisoner set up to die in the name of entertainment. On a deeper level, I tried empathizing with the values of the Mayan people and the strong desire they had to please their gods. For them, winning was an incredible sacrifice.

Isn't it interesting to think about what motivates us to compete in our world today? We might not have our heads chopped off, but we may be more like the Mayan culture than we think. In athletics, in the business world, or in other cultural arenas, we are frequently

offered opportunities to lay priceless possessions—such as personal principles and values—on the line. How many times have you or a colleague or a teammate had character and integrity lobbed off in the name of winning?

Just as we need to know the rules of the game, we also need to be very clear about what the payoff will be. Knowing our rules will help us strategize our next move. Knowing where that move will take us will help us to decide whether we want to play the game in the first place. Do we really want to place our character on the chopping block?

## **Be Willing to Change Your Perspective**

It was a Saturday evening in late winter. My wife was out of town visiting relatives, so I had the opportunity to be a bachelor again. For a few years, I had wanted to make a trek to Lowell, Massachusetts, to watch its minor-league hockey team in person. Regardless of the sport, minor league games tend to be family-oriented, allow for crowd participation, and offer the chance for kids to meet a favorite player. The atmosphere is fun-filled—particularly with hockey. It didn't take much thought before I jumped into my Jeep and blazed a trail to the arena, where I hoped to get a decent seat, enjoy the energy of the local crowd, and indulge in unhealthy food.

My plan turned out to be a pretty good one. Logistically, I couldn't have scored any better. I arrived as the national anthem was cranking up. After clicking around on her computer keyboard—just after “the rockets' red glare”—the box office clerk said she had a single seat in the best section of the arena. I eagerly paid her and took the ticket for Section A, Row 1, Seat 1. Perfect. My seat was against the glass, with a fan-pleasing view of the game. This tall barrier of

unbreakable glass surrounded the rink to contain the game and to prevent any airborne pucks—or players for that matter—from colliding into the fans. I looked to my right. The penalty box! Not only could I see the action, but I had also purchased the chance of becoming seatmates with some of the most aggressive players on the ice.

As great as my seat was, it wasn't all perfect. I didn't realize that while sitting in Section A, Row 1, Seat 1, I ran the risk of having my evening meal destroyed by an audience participation game called Chuck-A-Puck (not to be confused with the Mayan favorite, pok-ta-pok). The announcer yelled over the public address system, "Chuck your pucks!" and a downpour of foam rubber hockey pucks started falling on the ice.

The pucks flew from the luxury boxes, the general admission section, and the food court area. I figured everyone must be aiming at some sort of target and that a lucrative prize was probably guaranteed for the puck chucker who had the best strategy and most amount of luck. The bad news for me was that two women behind me seemed to be shooting better than the hockey team that night as they each chucked their puck into my chicken strip basket with pinpoint accuracy. In fact, the second woman's intensity for winning the big prize was so strong that she came down to Row 1, Seat 1 to retrieve her puck in order to throw it again. I warned her that throwing the now barbeque-sauce-soaked puck could be a pretty messy ordeal, especially once it hit the ice. She reluctantly agreed, apologized for adding another course to my meal, and went back to her seat.

So is there any good news about Section A, Row 1, Seat 1? It's not actually about the seat, but the perspective the seat gave me. A great seat didn't keep me from possible harm.

Just like character, rules keep us safe even when we don't know

it. About eight minutes into the first period, I noticed a boy in the next section over get up from his fifth-row seat and run proudly down to the glass to pose for a photo. He was sporting a hockey jersey and logo hat. It was clear by the expression on his face and his price-tag adorned shirt that he was a hockey scene “newbie” who was thrilled to be at the game.

He turned around with his back to the protective glass, smiling at his mother’s camera lens. At the same moment the camera flash went off, two of the hockey players who were wedged together trying to get at the puck slammed against the glass behind the boy. The crowd yelled, saliva flew from one player’s mouth, his sweaty arms and an unshaven face flattened against the glass—just behind the smiling kid. Don’t worry, the glass didn’t break. In fact, within seconds the situation was over. The safety glass worked just like it was supposed to, and the child never knew he was literally inches from danger. Just like the glass safeguarded the young fan, our personal rules keep our character and integrity from being bruised and broken.

Like that safety glass, our rules may not be obvious or stand out, but when we’re under attack, they offer a shield of protection, keeping us from harm and danger. Others may not notice these rules until they slam into them. The kid at the hockey game was protected by the safety glass and never knew how close he was to being hurt. For many of my clients, integrity works just like the safety glass at the hockey rink. If it’s in place, they are fully protected and may never even know it.

## **Know the Rules of the Game**

Just like Sean who learned to play Electronic Battleship with me, we’ve come to see the importance of rules and how they affect the



way we play the game. After Sean understood the rules and what to expect, his relationship with me improved. Even more important, his relationships with friends and family deepened. They didn't deepen because Sean became a better Battleship player, but because he learned that he possessed character.

In today's world, the phrase "rules were made to be broken" has probably never been truer. However, when we learn the rules of our game, establish our own rules, and learn to respond when others break the rules, our character and integrity are strengthened and win out.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "Somehow, we learn who we really are and then live with that decision." By knowing the rules well, you'll be better prepared to respond to situations where your integrity could be compromised, attacked, or exploited. When you know the rules of the game you are playing as thoroughly as you know the rules of your personal values, you are on the right path to becoming a capable competitor.

## POSTGAME REVIEW

- × Learn the rules of your game as well as or better than your opponent knows them.
- × Don't assume the rules are obvious; ask for details.
- × Make sure character and integrity are actual priorities before you compete.
- × Know how you will respond when rules change unexpectedly.
- × Find good role models and watch them closely.
- × Remember daily the true value of character and integrity.