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COMMENTARY

An open letter to Western New York seniors

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Senior high school athletes, allow me to offer a little advice based on experience. For the vast majority, this is your final year playing competitive sports when they matter. This year will take you farther than any class and mean more than you ever imagined.

If you're still playing the same sport in which you participated as a child, when you didn't know the rules, the uniforms were too big and they didn't keep score, you're lucky. Most kids quit years ago for one reason or another, but not you. You kept pushing. You kept practicing. You kept improving. You kept listening and learning.

Now you're playing as a senior. Congratulations. You're in the minority.

This is an opportunity you have earned, but please, I'm begging you, do not take this year for granted. The next several months are fleeting. You'll wake up one day, and they'll be gone. Enjoy the season knowing you gave a full effort. I promise, you will not be sorry.

Our society equates success in sports with dollars and cents, as if anything less than an athletic scholarship or professional career means failure. It's hogwash. My definition of success in sports isn't becoming an elite athlete but maximizing your athletic ability. Failure is looking back and realizing you did not.

Remember that as you approach your senior year knowing it goes beyond sports. The worst feeling for any competitive person isn't losing. It's coming to the conclusion later in life that you could have accomplished more. Make the sacrifice and commitment because there is no greater feeling in sports than playing for a team that reaches its potential.

In my senior year, we turned a group of decent but competitive athletes into the last championship football team at Frontier High. We won a Section VI title in 1984, beating a superior Jamestown team with one player - tackle Blake Bednarz -- who earned a Division I football scholarship. For the most part, we were a bunch of knuckleheads.

We won because we cared about football, yes, but mostly because we cared about one another. The chemistry was just right, and we won our final five games. Looking back, we simply had a blast playing for the same team. For most of the seniors, our final game at Rich Stadium wasn't just our last game together. It was our last game, period.

Understand, sports don't always go your way. It's not your right as a senior to get playing time you think you deserve. Don't cop an attitude like I did in basketball, or quit out of frustration, like I did. You'll regret that

decision years later, like I do, because it was a wasted opportunity. Instead, be a good teammate. You'll become a better person.

And while it's fun -- and necessary -- to crack jokes about coaches, keep in mind that they're giving and you're taking. It's one of the greatest deals in history. Coaches know more than you do. Coaches want you to succeed. If that's true, and it usually is, it would be wise to listen to the coaches. Eventually, you'll thank them for the memories.

Mostly, take time to appreciate your teammates. They're not just kids from the same school who wear the same jerseys. You have built a special bond with many who will be brothers and sisters for life. The same crew that spent years ragging on each other will make up your wedding party, celebrate the births of your children and console you when you need it most. Simply, they will be there.

I'm 44 years old and have been fortunate to turn sports into a career. My closest friends now were my teammates when we were 8- and 9-year-old boys, when it all began. Barto, Waffle and Junior still have nicknames that stuck in high school. And when we get together, it's like we never left high school.

That relationship is more important than any game we ever played. Someday, if you're lucky, you'll understand.

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