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His Losing Season?

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Have you read Pat Conroy, author of *The Prince of Tides*, *The Great Santini*, and *The Lords of Discipline*?

After some urging, I read *The Prince of Tides* a few years ago. I didn't like it, but I couldn't put it down, finished it in two nights. It's full of linguistic bombast and pyrotechnics, and characters and situations I found implausible at best. Conroy writes at the top of his voice.

Maybe it's a Southern thing and I'm too much the Yankee.

Anyway, Conroy has recently published *My Losing Season*, a memoir of his basketball career, which culminated in 1966-67 in his senior year at the Citadel where he was point guard and captain of a "sad and humiliated team" that won 8 games and lost 17.

His losing season coincides precisely with my losing season, my senior year here at the local diploma mill. If Conroy gets a best-seller out of an 8-17 season, I ought to get a Pulitzer Prize for Literature: my Middlebury College team went 1-22 in 1966-67.

Our one win was against Brandeis, coached by the erstwhile Celtic star, K.C. Jones. We were 0-16 at the time. We creamed 'em, 82-69. I contributed 3 points.

Conroy consistently disparages his talent ("as a basketball player my career was trainwrecked by mediocrity"), yet he averaged 12 points a game and scored over 20 four times, playing at a high level of collegiate competition.

You could count the lay-up drill and I still couldn't get 20 a game.

The villain in Conroy's piece was his coach, a man of withering and unrelenting negativity ("my Ahab," Conroy calls him, "dark icon of madness"). Athletes of a certain age know the type: a coach who drains every ounce of enjoyment from the game.

The coach in my losing season, Gerry Alaimo, had some "old school" tendencies: he could be angry and profane, but he was young and enthusiastic and we knew he loved us despite our inadequacies.

My losing team in 1966-67 lost by a lot - by 36 to Northeastern and 33 to Norwich, and we lost by a little - one point to Hamilton and UVM. We won nine games, total, in my three years on the varsity. We could score; in this era before a shot clock and three-point line, we scored 75 points or more in 11 games in '66-67, but we were small and couldn't stop anybody.

In my losing season, I was a sub, generally the second or third player off the bench. Too slow to play guard and too short to play forward, I had great versatility and could be inserted ineffectually anywhere on the floor.

Once we intercepted a scouting report the Trinity (CT) coach had prepared on our team (a Middlebury friend had a brother on the Trinity five). It went over our offense and defense and the individual abilities of our players. Next to my name was the notation: "also plays." That was all.

Despite our record, that 1967 Middlebury team was actually the best I played on in my three years on the varsity. When Gerry arrived after my freshman year, one of his first gestures was to upgrade our schedule by eliminating the Canadian schools, whom we scheduled precisely to accommodate our weakness.

In my sophomore year, we defeated Loyola and Sir George Williams of Montreal and the Royal Canadian Military Academy (their players wore dark socks above their white Converse All-Stars and took a cigarette break at the half). By my senior year they were gone, replaced by Northeastern, Springfield, and AIC, who defeated us by a combined 85 points.

We also played in the State Series, which meant two games, home and home, against UVM, Norwich, and St. Michael's, which was a national power at that time. We actually played the Catamounts a third time that season in a Christmas tournament in Springfield.

That third UVM game was our toughest loss, a "heartbreaker," according to the *Free Press*. We were 1-20 when State U. came to Middlebury on February 27. The 15 or so people in attendance were treated to a wonderful game. We could have mailed it in, but we didn't. With 51 seconds left in the game, I hit two foul shots to put us up by three, 77-74.

A win would have been a powerful salve at the end of such a bruising season. Alas, it was not to be: my man scored five points in the last 30 seconds, and we lost 79-78.

In my losing season, we really tried so very hard. At practice, we ran "suicides" till we dropped. We steadfastly maintained training rules (no drinking). We were well-prepared by Gerry for games. Our continual losing was agonizing in its immediate aftermath. But we never quit. We never quit on our coach and he never quit on us. That losing season was a triumph, really.

At one point in his memoir, Conroy laments, "losing is a cause for the deepest shame." At the end, however, he writes of his losing season, "It was the year I learned to accept loss as a part of natural law. My team taught me there could be courage and dignity and humanity in loss."

Mine too, Pat.