

On the wall of the Utah Blaze locker room is a massive blackboard. Inscribed on the board in large white letters is an inspiring (and very long) sentence:

*Nothing fills the warrior's heart more with courage than to find himself and his comrades at the point of annihilation, at the brink of being routed and overrun, and then to dredge from one's own discipline and training the presence of mind not to panic, not to yield to the possession of despair, but instead to complete the acts of order which are the supreme accomplishment of the warrior; to perform the commonplace under far-from-commonplace conditions.*

The quote is attributed to a Spartan warrior, Dienekes, who was one of the 300 Spartans who stood against the overwhelming Persian forces at Thermopylae. This is the same Dienekes who, when warned that the rain of Persian arrows could block out the sun, reportedly replied, “Good. Then we shall have our battle in the shade.”

I don't know how far we can trust the accuracy of either quote. The Spartans left no written records, so all our accounts come from Sparta's enemies. (Sparta had no lasting friends.) The Dienekes quotes came to us through Heroditus, an Athenian, but regardless of the source, I think the quote on the locker room wall is appropriate because it represents fairly how Spartans viewed battle and honor, and it also reflects the realities of life in the Arena football league.

When I became the Head Equipment Manager for the Blaze, I learned quickly that professional football operates on a peculiar mentality about “winning” that might offend most Americans today but would have made perfect sense to the Spartans. Although I am only a part of the staff, in profession football everyone—from the head coach to the third-string quarterback to the equipment manager—knows that their fates are intertwined. If the team wins, we all are successful. But if the team loses, the coaching staff may be replaced, and when that happens,

players and staff are replaced along with them. That's why you won't hear the phrase "winning isn't everything" coming from coaches, players, or staff. As far as our careers go, winning *is* everything. Or rather, everything we're working and fighting for ultimately depends on winning. As the legendary pro football coach Vince Lombardi said, "Winning isn't everything, but losing is nothing."

On the morning of a home game, my staff and I are usually the first to pull up to security. We drive down that steep concrete ramp and park in the shadows of the Delta Center, which, that early, is still just an echoing shell. We start by prepping the visitors' locker room, and I tell you, seeing the names on those jerseys as we hang up the pads is surreal. Name after name of former college star and NFL casualty; it's like reading a scroll of names of fallen heroes. By three o'clock in the afternoon my preparations are complete and the countdown begins. There are clocks hanging in the hallways and rooms of the locker area, and as the hands of those clocks turn, they seem to be measuring the rising temperature and pressure in the rooms. About forty minutes before kick-off, all the players are there, suited up, gloves and pads on, ankles and wrists taped. They sit in a rough circle, shoulder to shoulder, in their black, orange, and silver jerseys with their sparkling helmets hanging above their heads. They stare across at their teammates, and the feeling in the room leaves no doubt: they are preparing for war.

I've tried to explain to other people what it feels like to be in that locker room, knowing that your season and your job are on the line, knowing that mistakes are not acceptable, and hearing (every time the door swings open) the screams of 20,000 fans. As I describe it, people always comment either on what a "rush" it must be or how nervous they would be under the pressure. For me, the experience is about neither. I know I'm prepared as I possibly can be, so I'm really not nervous. I don't really feel a rush either, not even when our team wins—not like

the euphoria a fan feels. For me, winning simply feels...*satisfying*. I don't do this to see my name in a headline or to triumph over some other team. I do it because, like most of the coaches and players in the game, I have a family at home who depends on me. We do it for them because we don't want to let them down.

That is why success is imperative. When your back is against the wall and you simply *must* win in order to save and protect what is dear to you, then this amazing phenomenon Dienekes described begins to emerge. It is, I believe, the secret to winning. Whether our team is ahead or behind, the key to winning is the same: it is not to fall into a frenzy of mad abandon but to draw from our "discipline and training the presence of mind not to panic...but instead to complete the acts of order...to perform the commonplace under far-from-commonplace conditions."

As I've been filling out law school applications and laying out a plan for a career in the law, I've been thinking about the lessons I've learned in football. I know there are many careers I could choose that would provide for my family, but I want to have a career where I can feel the deep satisfaction of having stood my ground when it mattered, fought a good fight for the right cause, and won. I don't believe in "winning for the sake of winning," and I think a lawyer or any other kind of warrior can become a kind of monster if he or she believes that. But there are some causes worth fighting, which *must* be won regardless of the odds. Thermopylae comes to mind. So does Valley Forge. So do the legal battles that finally reversed segregation in the U.S., and many other battles. I don't know what issues will be fought in my lifetime or what role I can play, but I want to prepare myself now because I refuse "to yield to the possession of despair." Winning isn't everything, but having something worth fighting for—and giving everything you've got for that thing—is.