

Episode 9: Boys gain comfort in their teams and groups

Brave Hearts Bold Minds

Episode Transcript

Leigh Hatcher: Hello and welcome to the Brave Hearts, Bold Minds podcast: Growing Fine Young Men. I'm Leigh Hatcher. Thanks for joining me as we explore a whole host of ideas and opportunities and seek to help the boys of today grow into the fine young men of tomorrow. Each week I'll be interviewing an educator from The Scots College in Sydney to find out what makes boys tick and how to equip parents of school age boys with practical insights so their sons can be built up and their characters strengthened for wisdom and compassion. Let's ring the bell and meet our guest for this week's podcast. With me today is Brian Smith. Brian is Director of Rugby at The Scots College and his title is 'Boys gain comfort in their teams and groups'. Brian, welcome.

Brian Smith: Thank you, Leigh. It's my pleasure to be here.

Leigh Hatcher: Great to meet you. You come to this question from a very long and significant involvement in sport, but this really does apply to all groups. My question is why is there comfort and I guess strength as well to be found when boys get together as one?

Brian Smith: Well, I think the comfort is an interesting concept. I think that the comfort from being involved with groups, that's really fraternity. I think on the most superficial level we find comfort in being parts of groups or teams. In sport it's very easy because you put a group together; they have got a challenge to get over so it's easy to bring people together. It's the same thing that happens in families and I guess we've all got a sense of wanting to belong to something greater than ourselves. I think at the most basic level in terms of teamwork and what that can provide for boys initially it's really social acceptance.

Leigh Hatcher: What are some of the principles of life and character that are played out in teams and groups, Brian?



Brian Smith: Well, initially I think you go from that superficial level which is just being part of a team, that social acceptance, and being part of a group and then what happens is life throws a challenge at you. In sport, it's the challenges every Saturday. A challenge is thrown and then it's a matter of okay, so as a group can you take the next step and can you actually grow into, do you understand what teamwork is and making self-sacrifice, being able to share resources, being trusted to do your job, being able to trust other people to do their job. I guess that whole sense of teamship goes from initially social acceptance to teamwork which is actually being able to get something done.

That's the thing that allows you to get there is a challenge and life throws challenges at you at school in the classroom, certainly in teams every Saturday and clearly in the workplace afterwards as well.

Leigh Hatcher: What about the pursuit of a goal? How significant is that?

Brian Smith: Well, that's part of the challenge. The challenge is reaching that goal. I think early on when you bring a team together, clearly, there are some goals. If it's a sporting team, it'll be to win a premiership, but those goals sort of facilitate things. I think when goals start to come into play; there are added pressures as well. We talked about initially that social acceptance and then going from social acceptance into a teamwork based on well, there's a challenge at hand. Then there are other diversions that come into play. In sport, they're things like selection. Did you get selected? Did you not get selected? Are you in the position you want to play? Are you injured and how you're going to cope with that?

I guess if you go from social acceptance to teamwork based on being able to work through a challenge and then the next level really is that resilience. The resilience really comes through when people are able to put the team's needs ahead of their own. It's not an easy thing to do because we all have egos, but that's the master challenge. I think if you can cope with that diversion, the diversion sometimes of setback and disappointment. The easy thing is social acceptance. The next thing is working together as a team. Finally, the building of resilience, if you can put other people's needs, your team's needs ahead of your own, then that's probably when you've mastered what I think teamship has to offer and you can call yourself a genuine team player.

That's a challenge I think that people constantly have to work through. You don't get your badge of "you're a team player" and you got it for life. No, you have to understand that you're putting your family first or you're putting your classmates first or you're putting your teammates first. That's a difficult thing to do.

Leigh Hatcher: There's so much of what you're talking about including the setbacks, probably especially the setbacks that speaks to me about character building. What do you say to a boy in how to cope with disappointments, setbacks?



Brian Smith: Deep down they all understand what they need to do, but it's not so easy particularly if you're talking about 1st XV or wearing the gold jersey and being able to wear a kilt in their full blazer to the College. It's very difficult when someone either gets injured or someone has to make room for another player to shine.

Leigh Hatcher: Who might be better than them.

Brian Smith: Yeah, for that purpose. It might be a better match up this weekend to play with two big strong wingers as opposed to two quick wingers, what have you. Deep down the boys understand that and they can accept that. The coach's job really is just to guide them, and remind them, and help them through that and acknowledge the job that they're doing, the self-sacrifice they're making. Overall the character building that you're talking about is what we probably call ... The common buzz word for that is resilience, being able to cope with triumph and disaster and treat the two imposters just the same.

I think that's the wonderful thing about sport is it throws everything at life that's interesting and complicated, thrown into an 80-minute contest certainly if that's rugby and you live the highs and the lows and there's so much emotion that it's a very steep learning curve. At the end of it, through the highs and lows of a season, the ideal and the aim for certainly our Rugby Program and I think most sports teams is just to make sure that the boys are a better proposition at the end of the season than they were at the beginning of the season. What that really means is that they're more resilient.

Leigh Hatcher: Because these are lessons for life really, not just for the match or for the premiership. This will stick with them.

Brian Smith: Absolutely. This is the training grounds. Sport provides a great opportunity for these boys to develop these skills and go on. If they don't develop them now, I'm sure those challenges will continue to be thrown in their path until they do meet them. I think their resilience is just the boys ... The opportunity in sport is that they're able to grow their skill set and dealing with and coping with diversions and challenges that are thrown at them. If you can master that as a teenager, it will make life a lot smoother down the track.

Leigh Hatcher: Talk to me about discipline because that is a really critical aspect of what you're talking about and indeed of life.



Brian Smith: I think whenever a team comes together and a challenge is put in place, it becomes a competitive scenario. If you're going to be competing, then you have to give of your best. In order to give of your best, you need to make some sacrifices. In order to make those sacrifices, that requires discipline. Your teammates need to be able to trust you. You need to be able to trust your teammates. That discipline, it's a collective thing, so the overall group's discipline. If it's on the rugby paddock, it's not to give away silly penalties. If you're preparing for exams, then it's about getting up at 6:30 in the morning and getting into the library and getting the work that you need to get done.

The element of competition just makes us all want to bring out the best in ourselves and clearly, in order to do that, discipline is the thing that fuels that fire.

Leigh Hatcher: It's an opportunity, but also a challenge for boys to think beyond "well, it's all about me you know" because it's not.

Brian Smith: It's completely not. The next level probably then you're talking about leadership and that leadership within a group, the easy trap is "oh, I'm the leader. I'm the captain."

Leigh Hatcher: It's all about me. Yeah.

Brian Smith: Leadership is not about me. Leadership is about service. The best leaders are those that listen. If you're talking about a captain, those that can reinforce the message of the overall leader which is the coach and they can serve their team and be selfless in the way that they do that and set a cracking example for the rest of the boys.

Leigh Hatcher: You'll find that this is also an arena where boys are able to, in fact, need to, see life beyond their family unit. Not saying the family unit is not critically important, but this is an arena outside that family unit.

Brian Smith: It certainly is. That feeling, that comfort, that esprit de corps, it's the, I guess sense of belonging and the sense of fulfilment, you can really only get that working in teams. It might be working on an Olympic committee bid to host the next Olympics Games or it might in a team environment on a Saturday about pitching in, working hard for each other, trusting each other and having to sometimes do that with people you're unfamiliar with. Outside of the family unit, it's important to be able to relate that way.

Leigh Hatcher: It can be a challenge for parents. Questions of not only injury but say selection, "My boy deserves this."



Brian Smith: Yes. We deal with that every season. I can understand the parent's natural instinct because I'm a parent and a coach. The parent's natural instinct is to protect their children. A boy comes home from training and he vents it, "They're playing me on the wing and I'm a centre." The emails will flow. They'll be an immediate reaction and the emails will flow. I think there's a lot of literature out there at the moment about how to be a good parent. Parenting is the same thing as coaching and is the same thing as teaching. It's all the same skills. It can be tugging on the heartstrings for a mum to see their son distressed about being injured or about maybe not being selected or selected in the wrong position.

Leigh Hatcher: To say nothing of dad.

Brian Smith: Correct. Yeah. The mum or dad, it doesn't matter who it is, their natural instinct is to jump in and fight the battle for the boys. In the long run, it's far better for the boys to go through the ups and downs of a season and develop those resilient skills. I think by and large the parents they understand that as well, but there's some good literature in where we're quite ... We get on the front foot in trying to provide that information as well, as subtly as possible, but the parents get the story too.

Leigh Hatcher: It's a really good practical point way beyond Scots, way beyond rugby or even sport that parents need to be able to allow them to go through the full cycles of life.

Brian Smith: Yeah. Certainly, when the boys are Prep age, it's clear that parental instinct to really protect. That's understandable. Then it's a slow release as the boys go through the years. Certainly by the time they get to their Senior years at the College, in Year 11 and 12, that's a really good transition time where the boys go from boys to young men and they really need to be able to stand on their own two feet, develop coping skills which is resilience and meet those challenges certainly with the support and guidance from their parents, but the boys need to fight their own battles at that point.

Leigh Hatcher: You spoke interestingly before about social acceptance. In these groups and teams, there's also the potential for the very significant power of peers to be given oxygen and given in a good way. It's a very powerful dynamic.

Brian Smith: Yeah, absolutely. In my experience that peer pressure in the team environment is only ever in a good way. I know that socially there may be peer pressure, kids on a bus and what have you, but that's not a team environment. In a team environment, I think that positive peer group pressure, everyone pitching in, everyone buying into the common goal, everyone putting their own interests behind those of the team ... that fraternity, that esprit de corps, that understanding that you can be a complete team player if you buy into the goal and if you play your role.



Leigh Hatcher: Brian, in all your years of coaching, can you think of one particular boy for whom this whole dynamic was really significant, even life-changing maybe?

Brian Smith: Yeah. I won't get in trouble because this young man is an English boy, a prodigious schoolboy rugby player. I tried to recruit him from his school to the club that I was coaching at. I missed out. I didn't get him to come across to my school, but then by coincidence two or three years later he ended up at the club that I was coaching at. He was a prodigious talent, but he had a reputation for being very selfish. He was in a position. He was a fly-half. He was like the general of the team. The general of the team, you can have a captain anywhere in the team, but the guy who's really the driving the show has to be the general which is the fly-half. He just didn't get it. When I got to work with him – initially a wonderful skill set, beautiful player.

He went on to do great things. He went on to play for England and have a 50-cap career. Those things didn't happen until the penny dropped and he realised that it wasn't all about him. I'd take him goal kicking and he'd kick the balls, kick the balls. If two or three balls went over the fence, he wouldn't go and get the balls. Those 50 quid or \$100 a ball, he was selfish in that way. He wouldn't put himself out.

Leigh Hatcher: How was old was he?

Brian Smith: Well, he was only 18 when I first started working with him. He had a few setbacks and an injury. The penny just dropped. In order for him to go to the next level which went from a very promising player to a full on, a full-blown international player in that position, the key position, he had to understand that the team had to come before himself. Once he did that, the whole change room got behind him and his career took off. It was only when he realised that there's no 'I' in a team that things started to happen for him. He's so much happier and he's a far more resilient character now and I still keep in touch with him to this day.

Leigh Hatcher: Infinitely beyond the sport.

Brian Smith: Yes. He's set up for life now, but he wouldn't have learned those lessons without the sporting environment which provided that team environment.

Leigh Hatcher: It must be a fantastic deeply gratifying thing for you to see. What's it do to you to be involved in this process, Brian?



Brian Smith: You develop lifelong bonds. Invariably in the change room, you'll have chemistry with these players and not so strong with other players or what have you. At the end of the day, that shared respect, that mutual respect. I follow the players' careers. I've been doing this for quite a long time and I follow their careers. I keep in touch with them. Most recently we toured New Zealand and one of the players I coached in the UK was actually now living in New Zealand. He came out and watched the Scots boys play in Wellington. We caught up afterwards. These relationships you develop in these team environments when you've had to share a common goal and meet these challenges and face diversions and the ups and downs and it's not always positive.

There are lads that I've had to drop from teams and sometimes at significant games, cup finals, that sort of thing. What remains is a very strong bond because coaches are part of the team as well.

Leigh Hatcher: What a wonderful work to be involved in. Brian Smith, I thoroughly enjoyed that conversation. Thanks so much for joining us.

Brian Smith: Thank you very much.

Leigh Hatcher: If you'd like more information about growing your boy into a fine young man, you can subscribe to receive really useful articles and news from The Scots College. It's free and offered to every parent who wants the very best for their boy in their journey to manhood. In your internet search engine enter 'The Scots College enewsletter' to subscribe. I'm Leigh Hatcher. Hope you'll join me again next week on the Brave Hearts, Bold Minds podcast: Growing Fine Young Men. Our time is up Brian. Will you please ring us out with that bell?

Brian Smith: I'll ring you out with this – teamwork makes the dream work.

Leigh Hatcher: Now press that thing.



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