

"A Position of Respect"
Told by John B. McLendon, Jr. to Pamela Grundy
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One of the best ways to play the game is avoid confrontation.
The next is to make the adversary ridiculous. . . .
It's a matter really of learning –
not your place.
But learning how to maintain a position of respect.
And to do this you do try to avoid confrontation.
Because if you're made to lose your dignity,
stripped of your manhood in front of your players,
you can't be in a position to tell them to be a man,
about life,
about anything.
That's what you're trying to make of them, men who can handle life well.
And you can't do it if . . .
You might have to almost be ready to sacrifice your life
to maintain that position in their respect.

Because you can't afford to be put in that position.
Now some coaches I know have told me about times when it devastated them
to be talked down to
and called names and so forth
in front of their players.
Because they recognized that person is the leader,
and they're going to make an example of him.
Just ordinary little silly things. . . .
Of course the players understood, but there's something –
it's better when you don't have to be put in that position.
So you do what you can to avoid it.
At the same time, you had to be a man about it.

On one occasion, we were leaving Charleston, West Virginia,
going on to Bluefield to play a game.

We had just beaten West Virginia State.
That was something in itself.
It was in the mid-forties.
I just had seven players.

So we were on our way to Bluefield, going to play the next night.
Got on the bus, and the bus was filled.
One seat vacant.
So that meant we all had to stand up, except this one seat.
So I said to the players:

"Let Henry Thomas"
(his nickname was "Big Dog")
"Let Big Dog sit there."

He's our center, you see.
He needed the rest.

"He's the one that's really carrying us, so
let him sit down and we'll stand up."

"Okay, Big Dog, take the seat.
You've got everything – we're just along for the ride."
(that's what they kidded him about)

But all the black people on the bus had seated from the rear,
to this point.
But this one vacant seat was beside a young white girl
who had a little baby in her arms.

And Thomas said to her:

"Is it all right if I sit here?"

And she said:

"I don't mind at all.
Have a seat."

Very friendly, really.
And he sat down.
And we all stood up,
hanging onto the bar.

And the bus driver came on the bus,
was getting ready to start the bus, and he looked up in the mirror.
I can see him now.
He looked up in the mirror,
and he saw Henry Thomas sitting beside this girl.
So he came back.

And on the way back, I said to the players –
they were all lined up, hanging on –
I said: "Don't forget, now, I'll do the talking."

So when he came back there, he said:

"You have to get up."

Said to Henry Thomas, said:

"You have to get up."

And Thomas didn't say anything.
He just looked at me.
So [the driver] looked at me.

He said:

"He has to get up"

He recognized that Thomas was going to leave it up to me.

I said:

"He doesn't have to get up, because he's
inside the law.
The law says we seat from the back,
they seat from the front.
It's the last seat on the bus, and he can sit in it if he wants to."

The girl spoke up:
(she was a girl)

"I don't mind."

Just like that.
That burned the bus driver up.
He was about twenty-three or four years old, I guess.
And looked the part he was playing.

He said:

"He hasn't got any business sitting there."

I said:

"Well, she doesn't mind,
And he's within the law,
And I don't know what you're objecting to."

Well he looked at me,
then he went to the front of the bus and sat down.

He came back again.

He said:

"He has to get up."

I said:

"He doesn't have to get up."

And Thomas was a big guy, too.
He was the biggest guy we had.
And I didn't want Thomas to start flying.
He didn't say a thing.
Never said anything, and none of the other players said anything.
But then the people on the bus started saying some things.

"Go sit down and drive the bus."

"Come on bus driver, we've got to get where we're going."

"Get on, and let's get out of here."

"Drive the bus."

So he could see that now everybody on the bus practically was in our favor.

But he got an idea

A flash.

He started up the bus.

Sailed out of the bus station.

Got up in the mountains right outside of Charleston,

stopped the bus up in the mountains.

Got up and came back.

Said:

"He can't sit there.

I'm not moving this bus till he gets up."

And so we sat there.

We sat there two or three minutes and people started grumbling.

"What kind of driver are you – what's wrong with you?"

"Drive this bus."

Now these are people that are supposed to be on the other side, you know.
Of our thinking.

And it made him upset
It really hurt him.
I mean he was angry, and he was red-faced.
I knew he had a gun under his front seat.
He went back and sat down.
He sat there a good two minutes, or three.
Which seemed like a *long* time.
And then he came back again.

He said:

"He's got to get up from there."

I said:

"I'll tell you what
Since this is such a big problem to you,
these people have to get where they're going:
Ladies and gentlemen, I'll tell you what we're going to do.
We're going to get off this bus."

So we all got up and got off.
And the players just laughed and had a good time.
Picked up rocks and started throwing them at the squirrels.
A bus came along in about thirty or forty minutes.
We knew there was one came along every hour.
And we went on to Bluefield,
because they didn't have hardly anybody on that bus.

They laughed about it.
They thought . . .
They really thought we had won.
Because you can see what kind of position you can put that kind of person in.
That you're better than he is.
If that's what the problem is.
He's not making any points by doing that.
And we did a lot of that kind of thing.