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Tribute to a Coach

Andrew J. Thompson

“Make pain your ally. The more familiar it becomes, the easier it is to manage.”

—Phil Emery

Many years ago, I experienced leadership and coaching in its purest form. From 1991 to 1996 my life was forever changed by a coach named Phil Emery. Coach Emery was the innovative strength and conditioning coordinator for the United States Naval Academy (USNA) football program. His background as a collegiate football player and coach enabled him to foresee the needs of each trainee. While keeping the needs of the team as a whole in mind, his leadership inspired individual and collective growth.

That growth was fueled by Coach Emery’s high expectations and by competitive public benchmarks of performance and progress. The weight room had a “leader board” (much like the whiteboards at CrossFit Santa Cruz), where the top sprint times and bench press, squat, and vertical jump test scores were publicly displayed. A 350-pound bench press or 500-pound squat also earned photo recognition on the weight room wall. A photo on the wall represented more than

a number. It indicated commitment and sacrifice. Over the years, Coach Emery’s training methods evolved. His mantra of “always gain, never maintain” crushed the status quo. Complacency was unacceptable. Coach Emery’s approach to strength and conditioning was an extension of the Naval Academy’s mission. He prepared players mentally and physically for the rigors of collegiate competition. He complemented the weight facility’s normal equipment with gear of his own devising. Steel pipes, buckets of gravel, sledgehammers, 4×4 wood beams, and inner tubes filled with gravel were used regularly to develop functional strength and conditioning. The players gave nicknames to Coach Emery’s devices—the “Torture Table” and the “Electric Chair” were

particular favorites. Slow lifts (bench press and back squat), Olympic lifts (clean and snatch), weighted pull-ups and hill sprints generated explosive power and speed on the field. Cardiovascular training developed stamina, and position-specific drills enhanced agility. His unconventional training

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methods increased the team's physical readiness, and players' improved physical performance in turn inspired confidence in their abilities to conquer the demands of college football.

At the time, the Navy's strength and conditioning facility was small and equipment was limited. The facility was limited to six power racks, a 10-foot by 40-foot multi-purpose platform, a small dumbbell storage area, and no free floor space. Coach Emery devised a detailed schedule that maximized space and time, minimized waste, and sustained a steady flow of trainees. Trainees were grouped by position to match relative sizes and strength capabilities. Coach Emery also understood the needs of each athlete and designed workouts accordingly. On top of military duties, tutoring and study time were daily priorities for all the trainees. Coach Emery understood this and allowed players who were "athletically inclined, yet academically challenged" to study first and finish weight workouts at the end of the day's rotation schedule. His organizational acumen and the way he "walked the talk" on his values fostered both academic and athletic improvement.

In addition to innovation, the supporting framework behind Coach Emery's effective and innovative training methods was the way he held his athletes (and himself) accountable for their actions and performance. His expectations included, but were not limited to, adherence to his training standards, open two-way communication, and punctuality. Coach Emery was relentless when it came to enforcing these standards. Players who were not able to meet his expectations moved on to other pursuits.

Coach Emery's insistence on details ensured quality athletic performance. As demanding as he was, Coach Emery was also the first person most players would contact regarding personal matters. He handled academic, personal behavior, and disciplinary issues discreetly and with a view toward longterm resolution and learning opportunities. Most importantly, any corrective actions he had to take were done with the players' best interests in mind, and administered without either public or private retribution.

Coach Emery's influence at the Naval Academy remains legendary, almost mythical to some. He was even mentioned in John Feinstein's bestselling 1996 book *A Civil War: Army vs. Navy, A Year Inside College Football's Purest Rivalry*:

"Satan" was their nickname for Phil Emery. During his years at Navy, he had become the most stable force in the lives of the football players. He was a master at torturing the players during their off-season conditioning drills, driving them to their absolute limits and beyond. One winter morning, an ice storm had completely shut down the eastern seaboard. Since Emery lived outside of Annapolis, the players arrived for their 5:30 AM running and conditioning session fully convinced they would end up with a morning off. But as they walked through the darkness to Ricketts Hall, they saw a lone car sitting in the parking lot waiting for them—Emery's. Only the devil himself could have made it there before dawn—and taken such pleasure in being there on a totally miserable morning.

Coach Emery knew that the demands he placed on the team would be effective only if they were reinforced by his example, his own accountability, and his genuine investment in the team's pursuits. That cold winter morning exemplified Coach Emery's unwavering commitment.

In retrospect, it's not hard to see why Coach Emery was such an inspiring, influential, and effective coach. If I could boil it down to a few key points, they would be these:

- His innovative training techniques, time management skills, and unconventional methods of training led to highly skilled, competitive collegiate athletes.
- His demand for quality work and thorough preparation was cemented by his ability to hold others accountable. Coach Emery's administration of corrective disciplinary action was fair, firm, and without resentment.

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- Coach Emery had high personal expectations and led by example. Therefore, it was a natural exchange to ask for so much from so many. His personal level of commitment permeated the entire football program, lending it credibility, effectiveness, and respect. He did anything and everything he asked of his players.
- Each conditioning session was personally designed and created and by Coach Emery. Predawn runs, brutal weight-room sessions, injury rehabilitation, and football conditioning all were intended to foster individual and team strength and collective struggle. Collective struggle strengthened team cohesion.

Coach Emery guided the Navy football team through some difficult times (consecutive disappointing seasons, a player's suicide, a head coach's firing). He mitigated unfortunate circumstances and his influence transcended strength and conditioning. He took time to guide, teach, and mentor, and fostered many lifelong relationships

with his players. Dozens of his athletes enjoyed successful football careers. And newly commissioned officers were well prepared for their respective military journeys after years of his teaching.

Coach Emery's former players include Navy Sea Air and Land (SEAL) commandos, jet fighter pilots, Marines, and wellrounded citizens. He equipped people with the skills to live physically fit, mentally acute, and productive lives. Coach Emery prepared me personally for a lifetime of challenge. It's been said that leaders take people where they've never been, to places they're afraid to go. My teammates and I never doubted Phil's love for us on our journey down that difficult road. We know he knows the feelings are mutual.



Andrew Thompson is a Major in the U.S. Marine Corps and a level-3 CrossFit certified trainer. Phil Emery is now the Director of College Scouting for the Atlanta Falcons.