Disappointment and Character Education
by Paul Maes, HB Director of Athletics

As a high school basketball coach, I know what the wish is of every parent of my players: They wish that the starting five could be made up of their son or daughter and the four next best players. Everyone knows that this can’t happen and this is one of only many disappointments that will happen to a student/athlete during their time in high school. Not everyone can start, be the leading scorer, be all-conference, all-state, etc. Not every team can be state champion. On the contrary, there is only one varsity level team in each sport in each classification that will end their season with a win. Every single other team finishes their season with a loss. Disappointment. Not every athlete necessarily loves her coach. She may not get along great with all of her teammates. She may be fighting through injuries through most of the season. The referees may seem to also be against her!

The stings of childhood can be some of the most sharp and long-lasting experiences of a person’s life. There are numerous novels and movies that have centered on the pre-adolescent and adolescent coming-of-age experience in which the story’s central character has an eye-opening, heart-stopping, emotionally challenging experience and life is never the same afterward. Even our own memories as adults are filled with clear recollections of our childhood and the pain of life’s early disappointments.

One of the central aspects of Hathaway Brown’s educational mission is the task of character education in all of its dimensions. The school’s most successful graduates, I would guess, have been the ones who have, with the school’s help, learned to persevere through disappointment and keep striving toward their goals. Resilience is the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune (disappointment) or change. Hathaway Brown is a great place to learn this resiliency. There are many times when things might not go a student’s way, but there are so many people and avenues here for these same students to get the help and support that they need to get them through these experiences. There’s a saying that goes: “Whatever your plan for your life is, get ready for Plan B.” What a great time of life it is for a student here at HB to start getting ready for these “Plan B” experiences. The students will begin to see that, in many instances, they learn the most about themselves when they don’t get what they want. It is not about disappointment as much as it is about how one handles that disappointment.

In particular, high school athletics are an important testing ground for this type of character development. Sports are regularly filled not only with examples of wonderful athletic accomplishments, but also are filled with many instances of student disappointment. The litany of possible student disappointments contains the usual suspects:

- not making the varsity
- not being a starter in a game
- not getting enough playing time
- not being a captain
- not being named all-league/all-state
- not getting a special award at the end of the season
- getting “cheated” by the refs

As student-athletes and parents struggle with answers or reasons for these true disappointments, several targets usually surface:

- the coaches don’t know what they’re doing
- coaches don’t like you
- only the favorites get chosen
- the same kids get selected all the time
- new kids don’t have a chance
- I didn’t play with the right club team in the off-season

While these excuses give temporary comfort and deflect the blame for disappointment, they avoid the true necessary reflection and action for developing the type of inner strength, resilience, and character that can process disappointment and lead to renewed effort and enthusiasm for the activity. One of the first steps toward a mature awareness of disappointment is to understand the nature of the activity.
At Hathaway Brown, the athletic program provides many built-in opportunities for student participation and achievement. The athletic program offers teams to match ability levels in many different sports to reach diverse student interests. For many student-athletes, sports are the first area in their lives in which they will begin to get a reality check on their true abilities. Their abilities will be measured not only against their HB classmates, but also against the best talent of their opponents. In addition, all of this will happen a couple of times a week in front of the public for all to see. How one handles these instances, both positive and negative, are also the first steps in developing the character strengths necessary to grow into healthy adults.

Athletics (as well as any other performing art) contain certain truths. These include:

• The top levels are always competitive.
• There aren’t enough special positions for all the students who want them.
• How you handle disappointment, regroup and come back, really is a test of character development and maturity.
• There is always another time and another chance if you want it and allow it to happen.

So what should a student and her parents do when life’s inevitable moment of disappointment arrives? Here are several of the suggestions we offer that have proven to be most helpful over the years:

• Talk to the coaches.
• Ask the coaches why you were not selected.
• Ask what you can do to improve your skills.
• Don’t blame, but accept responsibility for your own improvement.
• Enjoy the activity. Try not to be focused on what you didn’t get.
• Don’t quit, try again.
• Parents: talk to your children about disappointment. Talk about examples from your own life experiences when you faced disappointments and how you handled them.

Good coaches and teachers are always willing and available to assist students and families on the important task of aiding in the area of development of character strengths necessary to experience disappointment and bounce back stronger than ever. Coaches and teachers cannot do this job alone, however. Only with the cooperation of parents and students can the school fulfill one of its most important missions, the development of character strengths in children. We may not all end up as we had originally thought or dreamed, but we just may find out that “Plan B” turns out to be pretty great!