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National Columnist

Life lessons humble suspended players on high school football team

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Matt Labrum doesn't want this story to be about him, so that's his second outlandish demand in a week. The first one, maybe you heard about: Labrum is the football coach at Union High in Roosevelt, Utah, and after some discipline issues on the team he demanded their jerseys. He was suspending the Cougars.

All of them.

Labrum and his staff handed each player a piece of paper after their game last Friday night. It was a prepared statement that said a lot of things -- harsh things, honest things, tough things -- but the sentence that got the most attention was this one:

**TURN IN YOUR JERSEYS NOW!**

Whole team -- suspended. Ever heard of such a thing? No? Neither had anyone around that part of Utah, which is why the suspension of the Union Cougars became a story in the Deseret News. And once it was there, it was everywhere. The networks wanted to talk to Labrum. National websites. USA Today. All of them, all of us, wanted to talk to the wacky football coach with the notion that football is nothing without character and respect.

By the time I found him, Matt Labrum was tired of talking about it. And he'd never wanted to talk about himself in the first place.

"The last thing I want is for this to be about me," he emailed me. "I'll talk to you -- if you make it about the players."

Um. What? Not sure that's possible. The star of this story, the hero, is the football coach. The players? The ones who were acting out in class, skipping school, making poor grades? The ones who started cyber-bullying another student, ganging up on the kid on a social media site -- a textbook example of the strong and numerous picking on the weak and isolated? I didn't want to make this story about the players.

But then I called a few of them. Talked to some of their parents. Then a few more. Found out exactly how the Union Cougars have been spending their time since being suspended.

And now I'm thinking Matt Labrum might be onto something. Sure, I could make this about the coach.

But I'd rather make it about the players.

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Karter Rook shoveled pig crap.

That's how Rook paid his penance -- well, that's how he started to pay his penance -- for being part of the Union High football team. Understand, Karter Rook isn't necessarily a bad kid, and he seems actually like quite a nice one. Lots of these kids are no doubt good and decent people, but what was happening at Union High was too pervasive for the coach to pick and choose who to punish. Besides which, Matt Labrum didn't know exactly who had been behaving the worst.

He knew which kids were acting up in class, who had skipped some school, whose grades were slipping. Labrum teaches gym at Union, so if any of his player have issues at school, he's going to hear about it.

It was the bullying that drove Labrum to act. It was done anonymously, on a social networking site called Ask.fm, but the victim went to a Union High guidance counselor and laid out the evidence that suggested the tormenters were members of the football team.

Enough, Labrum decided. Enough. He met with his coaching staff a few days before Union's game last Friday against Judge Memorial Catholic High, and deep into the night they kicked around disciplinary ideas until finally settling on this one:

Everyone's off the team.

Everyone.

There were 50 kids on the varsity -- the freshman team wasn't affected, Labrum says -- and as they cooled down in the locker room after Union's loss to Judge Memorial, each of them was handed a piece of paper that started like this:

"Gentlemen, we are not pleased with how our football brothers are representing OUR family, school, community, alumni, and yourselves."

The letter went on to say, "We want change -- and are going to make changes now."

First, the jerseys. Turn them in. To get them back -- to be reinstated to the team -- players would have to perform service for their family. And they would have to perform service for their community. They also would have to report for a two-hour study hall after school, "and we better have specific items to work on," the letter said.

All of that went down late Friday night. Sophomore offensive tackle Karter Rook went home after the game, went to bed, woke up the next morning and grabbed a shovel. His family has a pigpen. And it was filthy.

"Cleaning the pigpen was something I was going to do," said his mother, Jennifer Rook, "but Karter just realized, 'I need to contribute more.' Now we have the best looking pigpen in the county."

That was Saturday. And that's just one kid. There are 49 others on the team, and each spent the day working around his house -- and documenting it, with pictorial proof -- to show Labrum.

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About six months ago some jerk in a car crashed through the fence in Rick Nielsen's front yard. It's an eyesore, and an embarrassment. See, Nielsen isn't just another citizen of Roosevelt -- he's the principal of the high school. And for six months his yard has looked like, well, like somebody drove a car through his fence.

The principal's son, Gavin Nielsen, is a senior running back for the Cougars.

On Saturday morning, Gavin fixed the fence.

And then he started looking for something else to do. The family's deck also had been a mess, dangerous in spots where the boards are missing, so Gavin grabbed some wood and a drill and he fixed that, too.

Rick Nielsen had known about Labrum's plan to suspend the team before the team did. Labrum had run the idea past him one day earlier, and as the school principal -- and a father -- Nielsen loved it.

"After the game we came home and Gavin wanted to talk about it," Rick Nielsen said. "We were up way, way late, and he said he'd been doing lot of thinking and decided: 'You know what? We can be better. And I can be better as a leader.' After a week of this, they've all seen how they can improve. That's the most amazing thing about this story -- the impact it's had on the kids."

Well, that might not be the most amazing thing.

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The Uintah Basin Rehabilitation and Senior Villa is a nursing home in Roosevelt. It's called "The Villa," and the high school kids know all about it. They know enough to know they don't want to live there, or even think about it there.

Matt Labrum wanted his team to visit patients there.

The Villa is small, a 15-bed facility that caters to patients with Alzheimer's, and it would be overwhelmed by 50 high school football players. So Labrum sent some kids to The Villa and the rest to Parkside Manor, another nursing home in Roosevelt.

And the kids apparently loved it.

"Jordan said he had a great time," said Andrea Gurr, whose son -- Jordan -- is a junior center. "He got to meet a couple people at The Villa and played some games with them. He was telling me about a gentleman that just seemed so happy to have a visitor. Jordan came back and said, 'Yeah, we probably should do that again.' "

Karter Rook went to Parkside Manor, where he tried to help one resident with her computer's slow internet -- to no avail; she was using dial-up -- and where he was taken aback by her screensaver. A picture of four men in military uniforms, during World War II. It was four brothers, and one was taller than the rest. That was her late husband.

"It was humbling -- a humbling experience," Karter Rook said. "I know there were people [on the team] who didn't like the idea of going originally, but we had a good time. The whole week has been fantastic. It was great in every possible way. I think we all grew as people and we learned the meaning of service."

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OK, so you have part of the timeline. The Cougars' game against Judge Memorial was Friday. They were suspended that night. On Saturday and Sunday they did projects for their family. The trip to the nursing home was Tuesday. On Wednesday the players had that two-hour study hall during their normal practice time, then gathered in the locker room and were reinstated. Well, most of them. A handful of players have grades that still need improvement, Labrum said; their reinstatement could come later.

On Thursday morning the Cougars met before school at 6:50 a.m. for their first and only practice all week for their game Friday. It's homecoming.

So that's the schedule, except for ... oh, right. Except for Monday.

Well, after school on Monday the Cougars went to Roosevelt Junior High to pull weeds and clean windows. That night Union High held its "Unity in Athletics" banquet, an annual gathering where the school honors several people -- a coach, a former player, a faculty member and maybe a community member or two. The football team is invited, and it normally eats dinner with everyone else.

This wasn't a normal week.

This time the football coach suggested his players show up at the banquet, but not to be feted -- to serve. And they did, all 50 of them, dressed in slacks and shirts and ties. They set up tables and chairs and served food and refilled drinks. They got whatever needed to be gotten, and did whatever needed to be done. A local restaurant, Café Rio, had provided sweet barbacoa pork enchiladas, and eventually those enchiladas were gone.

The players never ate. They were too busy serving.

"Good stuff," said Jennifer Rook, giggling mischievously. "The boys totally missed out."

No, I don't think they did.