



T-SHIRT

What might be unusual for some was commonplace for Brandon and Learie. Deep conversations might be avoided by many but not these guys. The life-long friends had been there for each other through the good times and bad times of growing up, and they weren't afraid to tackle some tough issues along the way.

"Which brings us back to your dad," repeated Brandon. "Have you been totally straight with him about your missed practices, questionable attitude, and constant excuses?"

"Dude, if you weren't my brother from another mother, I'd probably punch you right now," said Learie.

The Eagles' co-captains looked at each other for a brief moment as they considered the conversation they had been having.

"If we weren't close, I wouldn't be telling you this," responded Brandon. "I care about you and want you to do well. I also care about our team and want the team to do well. If you do better, then the team can do better. I also know from the situation with my mom and the high school baseball team that we sometimes only see our side of things. Sometimes, we only see our tree and not the whole forest."

"You know you sound like Jaylen, right?" said Learie as he thought about his roommate and some of the late-night conversations they had through the years. "He says some of this stuff sometimes. He doesn't

bang me over the head with it like you are right now, but he gets his little digs in. Have you two been talking about me or my situation behind my back?

“Nope, but because Jaylen is your roommate, he cares about you. You and I have been tight since we were kids. You know I have your back, which is why I have to speak up. I know that you feel wronged and I know that you think it’s coach’s fault but you might be a little too consumed with that and putting your energy there instead of putting your energy toward things you can control.”

Brandon paused for a moment, squinting his eyes, and smiling as he looked at the shirt that Learie was wearing.

“I know that we think Coach is a little cheesy sometimes with his clichés or sayings. We probably haven’t even given much thought to it but look at the shirts that we’re all wearing. Yes, even you. You’re wearing our team shirt that says ‘excUses’. Have you ever thought about that? The ‘u’ is bigger than the other letters. What’s in the middle of all excuses? You are. We’re. When we make excuses, we’re the reason. We’re in the middle of them. We’re not taking responsibility for things. Do you remember when we had that hard rain our senior year of football for homecoming?”

Even though it was painful at the time, Learie now laughed at the memory.

“How could I forget that monsoon.”

“Yeah, we got upset by like four touchdowns in our homecoming game,” said Brandon. “All we could talk about afterward was that if it hadn’t been raining so hard, we’d have killed that team. It took me a while, but it finally dawned on me one day that they also played on that same wet field with the same wet ball. The conditions were the same for them as they were for us. We just didn’t react well. We had penalties. Passes were dropped. We slipped instead of getting low or sitting down in our cuts. I remember that halftime was full of excuses and that just led us to play worse in the second half.”

“I never thought of that,” said Learie.

“I love these t-shirts that coach got us. Every time I see them, I think about the excuses I’ve made in my life. I can’t remember a single time that an excuse has gotten me closer to a goal that I had. Last summer, I saw this Navy SEALs documentary and it also inspired me to eliminate excuses. I decided that if something is important, I will find a way to get it done. If it’s not important then I will find an excuse. I think excuses are for people who don’t want something bad enough.”

“Alright! Seriously, enough. I get it. I’m a bad person, who always has an excuse on standby,” said a frustrated Learie.

“You’re not a bad person. I’m your friend and I just want to see you take responsibility for the things you can control. You’ll be much happier that way.”

“Happier?!? You know how I’d be happier?” asked Learie with a smile.

“By taking responsibility for your actions?”

“Well, there is that but, no. I was thinking that if I had a few more dollars in my pocket like those rich tech guys, then that would make me happy!”

“I think we’d all be happier if we had more money. Way to change the subject on me.”

“You noticed that, huh?” said a smiling Learie.

“Sure did. Speaking of those rich guys, though,” said Brandon. “Did you know that a few years ago, Amazon ordered something like four thousand pink iPods from Apple for Christmas? As it turned out, Apple couldn’t fulfill the order in time for Christmas. This was not good for Amazon because they had already sold all of those to their customers and were just waiting for Apple to send them to Amazon. What would you have done in that situation?”

“I probably would have just apologized to my customers that were silly enough to buy a pink iPod,” answered Learie.

“That might have been what I’d have done, also. Not because they were pink or any other color but because it wasn’t our fault that they weren’t available.”

“Exactly. It wasn’t Amazon’s fault.”

“You’re right. It wasn’t their fault, but Amazon believed that it was completely their responsibility to do what they could do to make the situation right. What Amazon did reminds me of how we should be approaching basketball or anything else. They took responsibility for something that happened.”

“Oh, here we go,” joked Learie.

“Yes, here we go again. Just because you tried to change the subject earlier, doesn’t mean that I’m done with you.”

“Okay, I give in,” said Learie. “How did Amazon take responsibility for Apple’s mess up?”

“Amazon figured that people didn’t care about why or what happened. People just wanted the stuff that they ordered,” Brandon continued. “If you advertise it, then you should have it. Amazon literally went out to stores and bought pink iPods at the retail cost. They repackaged these brand-new iPods in Amazon packaging and then sent them out to all of the customers that had preordered them.”

“I bet that killed their profit margin.”

“Definitely but they figured they can make excuses, or they can be the best, but they can’t be both. True champions find ways to get done what needs to be done. Amazon was willing to take a loss on an item because they were ultimately responsible for what they offered on their site. Instead of making excuses and giving lame explanations, they just found a way to get things done.”

“Yes, yes, yes. I get it. Be responsible. Quit making excuses. Remember what’s on the front of my team t-shirt. I get it,” exclaimed Learie.

“And they said you were hard-headed. I don’t think that’s the case at all. You aren’t a bad person. You’ll actually listen to reason after all.”

“Ha ha ha!”

Learie laughed in a mocking tone but it was obvious that he was joking around with his fellow co-captain.

“By the way,” Learie continued. “The reason Coach made me sit back down on the bench...”

“You said you didn’t know,” responded Brandon.

“That’s not entirely true,” confessed Learie. “I asked him which player he wanted me to guard.”

“That sounds like a good question. I don’t see how that should’ve been a problem.”

“It might’ve been a good question at the appropriate time. But just like academics first in the appropriate time that we were talking about earlier, it wasn’t a good time.”

“I don’t quite follow. Why was it a bad time?” Brandon asked.

“My question was right after the timeout when he told us that we were in the Blitz for the rest of the game, no matter what. I wasn’t paying attention at all during the timeout. I was actually complaining to Demetrius that it didn’t look like I was going to play in that game, either,” admitted Learie. “Hashtag, oops.”

“That makes more sense now. You’ve got to tell your dad that. In fact, you probably need to level with him about a bunch of stuff when it comes to your playing time. Tell him that you are going to do better and become one of Coach’s favorites. Tell him that he doesn’t need to talk with Coach yet because you haven’t taken care of your business yet. You haven’t controlled what you can control.”

“In other words,” said Learie with a smirk. “Tell my dad that I’m going to do my best to become more like Jaylen in how he leads and performs.”

“Whatever works.”

Brandon looked up at the TV monitor above his seat and then back over to Learie.

“Good talk. You know I want to help you and all. I feel that I’ve kind of accomplished that mission tonight. But I’ve got to be honest

with you. I can't be this serious much longer. It was a good talk and you've got a lot to think about. We've been serious for quite a while. I either need to take a mental break from being your shrink, or I need to get paid. Since you're broke, I think I'll this break time to watch this game on TV."

Learie looked at his long-time friend and just shook his head. It had been a good talk and he had a lot to think about. He didn't expect this tonight, but it could prove to be an important conversation. Learie's thoughts were interrupted by Brandon and his parting wisdom.

"Maybe you should think about texting your dad back and letting him know that you'll call him at the next stop. I'm guessing that you have a few things to discuss with him."