

Beaverball:

A (Winning) Season with the M.I.T. Baseball Team

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Introduction

Many who attend MIT hate MIT. Carved into desks and scratched on bathroom stalls throughout campus read the letters IHTFP, an acronym for “I Hate This F***ing Place.” With its 24-hour libraries and ever-humming laboratories, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology can seem cold, impersonal, and intimidating. An intellectual boot camp, the Institute takes satisfaction in the often repeated analogy that learning at MIT is like trying to sip water from an unthrottled fire hose. Not only is the material difficult to control, but there’s lots of it. For those who finally graduate, these common struggles fuel a sense of pride in having survived, like former POWs and West Point graduates. For in the end, graduates of MIT love being MIT graduates.

How hard is MIT? Students, who had never seen the underbelly of a 98 on any high school test, score 10 or 20 or 40 out of 100 on calculus, chemistry, and physics exams in their first semester. To minimize panic and suicide rates, MIT replaced letter grades over the years with variations of pass/fail grading for freshmen, allowing for a period of transition.

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Regardless, students still stress and seek support groups. Fraternities, sororities, and dormitories offer refuge, food, and copies of old exams. The fraternities, located across the Charles River in Boston's Back Bay, burn enough nervous energy and creativity on parties to have once earned a place on Playboy's list of top 25 party schools. Alternately, anonymous counseling services, both student and professionally run, provide a friendly ear and 24-hour support.

Traditional extracurricular activities also provide relief at MIT. Students participate in theatre, music, community service, and religious groups. On-campus newspapers and the yearbook, *Technique*, also attract students. And, its mere existence a surprise to many, the MIT Athletic Association (MITAA), a program with as many varsity athletic teams as any accredited NCAA university in the country, boasts 60 years of strong participation, living out MIT's "Mens et Manus" motto of developing students physically as well as mentally.

While one might not connect MIT with a vibrant athletic program, the academic pressures on students create a need and demand for effective outlets for students. From this perspective, the varsity baseball team and Head Coach Francis O'Brien supported me, and many others, as we struggled through MIT. In fact, Coach went beyond the required MIT curriculum; he taught us to work as a team, to deal with adversity, and to remember what's important. Coach wanted us to win, on and off the baseball field.

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I first met Coach O'Brien during a trip to visit colleges in Massachusetts after my junior year in high school. His office sat toward the end of a long hallway on the second

floor of the old Rockwell Gym. Along the wall on the left hung black-and-white photos of MIT athletic teams going back dozens of years.

After I entered his office, Coach O'Brien sprang up from behind his paper-covered desk and greeted me with an energetic two-handed handshake. Coach looked the part of the traditional "silver fox," a long-time baseball coach with silvery hair and tan skin. However, his most distinctive features were his smiling green-grey eyes and sharp nose. The tan skin accentuated the crow's feet at the corners of his eyes, and his faced beamed charisma. Meeting Coach for the first time, you could just as easily picture him managing a Major League Baseball team as you could coaching college players.

Coach immediately introduced me to the captain of the 1988 baseball team, Mike Griffin, who, like me, was a left-handed pitcher and first baseman. Mike had been a star player at MIT, and Coach encouraged us to visit for a while so that Mike could answer my questions about the program.

Prior to meeting Coach in his office, the campus tour had wowed me.

"You'll notice the Bose speakers in this lecture hall. Dr. Amar Bose is a professor here."

"Ah, these examples of strobe-photography, with the bullet going through the apple, are by Doc Edgerton. Professor Edgerton teaches here."

"Yes, the Economics Department here is very strong. Nobel Prize winner Paul Samuelson wrote *Economics*, the best selling textbook of all-time. Dr. Samuelson teaches here."

However, MIT had already been on my mind since sixth grade when my family lived in Cockeysville, Maryland. I had seen a program on public television about MIT's

annual 2.70 mechanical engineering competition, where students cobble together robotic machines from a common set of random parts to accomplish a task that seemed akin to competing in open mechanical warfare. As a kid, I collected robots, rocks, and NASA photographs. I had a small microscope and telescope and took apart old radios. MIT always resonated.

So Mom sent Coach O'Brien articles about my baseball season, even knowing full well that he, like all MIT coaches, had little pull with Admissions. But I applied early and was admitted on my birthday in December 1988. In the fall of 1989, I entered MIT and started practicing with the varsity baseball team.

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At MIT, baseball predates programs in management, economics, political science, and linguistics. Chartered in 1861, MIT has fielded baseball teams since the 1880s. In the early days, informal teams played on available sandlots. In the early years, seasons focused on interclass competition and games with local colleges or high schools. The Institute ultimately recognized baseball as a varsity sport after World War II in 1948. Between 1948 and 2007, the varsity team won 542 games, lost 784, and tied 14, for an overall winning percentage of 40%.

MIT baseball players know athletic adversity. In 1965, *Technique* wrote, "Opposing pitchers seemed to find new talent as they faced MIT batters." The team won six, lost 12, and batted .199 that season. In 1966, the yearbook reported, "the basic hitting and fielding too often fell short...the outlook for this year is about the same...the hitting should still be weak." The team went 4-15 that year with a team batting average of .239.

If nothing else, the baseball tradition at MIT persists. For a Division III program with no scholarships, the team has survived thanks to dedicated coaches and a steady flow of baseball-loving students, some of whom can run, hit, catch, and throw. Occasionally, enough of these students show up at MIT within the same four-year cycle to field a competitive team. And, occasionally, a real baseball stud arrives.

In 1956, Al Houser pitched both games of a doubleheader against Brandeis, winning both and marking his place as MIT's first "iron man." In Houser's final game at MIT, he struck out 22 batters in 15 innings against Boston College. The team went 5-11 that year.

In 1961, thirteen years after baseball had become a varsity sport, the team managed its first winning season, going 8-7 under a new Head Coach, Jack Barry. (The next winning season, 7-5, occurred in 1970 during Fran O'Brien's second season as Head Coach.)

Outfielder Jeff Weissman hit three homeruns against Brandeis on April 12, 1967. Two of them were grand slams. MIT won the game 26-0.

In 1972, pitcher Al Dopfel led the NCAA in strikeouts per game, produced a 0.64 ERA, and signed with the California Angels three weeks after graduating. (Al never made it to the Major Leagues; he fell back on his degree and eventually became a Vice President at IBM.) Two years later, the varsity baseball team received its first bid to the NCAA tournament.

In 1989, catcher Tim Day set a team record by batting .420 over a 29-game season. He also quarterbacked MIT's football team.

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In the summer of 1991, I herniated two discs in my lower back while doing lunges in the weight room at the YMCA in San Mateo, California. Instead of adding five miles-per-hour to my fastball as intended, the weights forced me off the field for my junior season. I was distraught. It was the first time in fifteen years that I couldn't play with my team.

The injury carried beyond the baseball field. Unable to sit comfortably, I wore a back brace and stood up in the back of the room taking notes on a clipboard during most of my classes. (My professors knew me as “the guy who stands up in the back with the clipboard.”) By the summer of 1992, with my back unchanged, I decided to get on with life and play ball my senior year.

This inspired me to keep a journal. Originally, I had decided to record the progress of my back. However, my writing soon began to focus on game performances, individual players, and team stories. Teammates noticed how, after each game and most practices, I would pull the brown, spiraled journal from my locker and write for ten or twenty minutes while icing down my back. As the season came to a close, they were interested in its contents and I was interested in sharing.

It wasn't until years later, after I started writing this book, based on that 1993 journal, and sharing stories with others as a professional speaker that I recognized the power and relevance of the lessons we learned from Coach and from playing together. We learned to manage teams of all types, lead organizations, and motivate others to achieve their best.

Through practices and games, Coach emphasized key lessons: work hard on the things we can control, be mentally ready to perform every day, expect to succeed, and

have fun. While I never heard him use the phrase, he believed – and believes – in self-fulfilling prophecies. You are what you think. Go up to the plate every time expecting to hit the ball hard and get the job done.

From the way Coach managed our team, we also learned lessons about leadership and working with people. Often, we focus solely on the win-loss record that a coach accumulates and forget the subtle management of individuals and situations that takes place day-to-day. These lessons weaved their way into our lives forever: remember your priorities, train with a plan, communicate and reinforce expectations, and give back.

Coach always told us, “You have to give something back to the game.” Many of us, myself included, went on to coach little league teams and volunteer in our communities and support the MIT baseball program as alumni. Coach not only graduated improved baseball players, he graduated player-coaches. He produced players who valued integrity, professionalism, and fair play. Coach O’Brien developed leaders.

I loved playing baseball at MIT under Coach O’Brien, as did most of my teammates and hundreds of alumni. For many, MIT had few human connections. Perhaps what really mattered for us, as players, was that Coach O’Brien and the baseball program allowed us to pursue with passion something we loved.

When we get together and talk turns to MIT, it turns to MIT baseball. This book, dedicated to Coach Francis O’Brien, is meant to help you see why.