

“Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”
—Robert Frost

FIRST QUARTER: AUTHENTICITY IS YOUR SUPERPOWER

One of the first questions I ask any member of a team is: What’s something we should know about you to truly understand who you are? I like this question because while it is a simple one, no one has to share more than they are comfortable with, and it allows a team to see each other with much more clarity and depth. I’ve had time to reflect on my own answer, after all, it’s my own question. Over time, I’ve developed three go-to traits that represent who I am: First, I can be a bit stubborn; second, I’m a little cheesy; and third, I’m a crier.

Here’s the thing: by sharing our authentic traits, we open the door to deeper connection and understanding. We’re not just talking about behaviors or habits; we’re showing the why behind the what. Our personalities don’t come from nowhere. They’re shaped by biology, upbringing, and life experiences. While they can stabilize over time, they’re never set in stone. That’s the beauty of it—we’re always evolving, always growing, and we always have room to improve!

Growing up, my dad was both my biggest cheerleader and my toughest critic. He was the one who believed in me, no matter what I set my mind to. But he was also the one who pushed me to be better, even when it was hard to hear. And looking back, I realize how much his unconditional love and influence shaped me. One distinct memory stands out, a moment that went on to define so much of who I am today.

I was just four years old, waking up early on a Sunday morning with my sister to watch cartoons on PBS. While sitting in our den, where the one household television was, I decided to color a picture and give it to my dad when he woke up. Crayons in hand, I added colors to the black outlines of the drawing. As I scribbled the colors on the page, I was so proud of it and could hardly wait to show him. When I saw him come into the kitchen, I ran to him, holding up my drawing with a big grin, expecting a huge smile, a bear hug, and all the praise a little kid could hope for.

After my morning hug and kiss, he said, “Thank you, but I know you can do better. Your colors are outside the lines. Why don’t you try again?”

Ouch. That stung. That moment stung. Hands on hips, I stormed off. My four-year-old heart was crushed. But as harsh as it was, something shifted in me—something between frustration, sadness, and determination. Maybe there were a few tears—I’m sure of it—but I wasn’t going to let that be the end of it. I went back into the den, took out another picture, and concentrated on carefully staying within the lines as I colored. I came back to him with a second version. When I presented it, with a little sarcastic edge of “*Here,*” his praise was exactly what I wanted to hear: “Terrific! I knew you could do it.”

That moment planted a seed inside me. I applied that same determination to everything I did—school, music, sports, you name it. Whatever came my way, I gave it my all. Mostly within the lines, of course.

And then there was the time my stubbornness really showed up. Once again, my personality was shaped by experiences in my youth. My dad, a die-hard Boston sports fan, took us to all the professional sporting events—Red Sox, Patriots, Bruins, and Celtics. In those days, ticket prices were reasonable, and sometimes the arenas weren’t even sold out. I loved being with my dad, not to mention the energy, the crowd, and of course, the popcorn. But what I loved more than anything was the competition. There’s nothing like being a fan when each win or loss of *your team* you feel to the core.

I remember one Sunday when I was twelve, sitting at a Celtics game with my family. I was absolutely captivated. The Celtics of the 1970s were my idols—John Havlicek, Dave Cowens, JoJo White. I would practice their moves in the driveway, pretending to be them. This was long before the beginning of the WNBA. But that day, sitting during timeouts listening to the organ playing rhythmic chants, I noticed the Celtics’ sneakers most of all. They were all wearing these deep, dark green shoes that weren’t available to anyone in the stores. At the time, before the days of endless sneaker options, they were mostly black or white Converse and perhaps a gold or red. But these? They were green. *So cool.*

On the drive home, I proudly declared just how cool it was that the Celtics' sneakers were green. Never did I expect the swirl that would follow. My dad disagreed. "No, they were black." What? I wasn't having it. I was so confident. They were green, and there was no way anyone could convince me otherwise. The debate went on the duration of the ride home and continued in the kitchen, where my sister and mother urged me to back down. Eventually, I stormed off, my stubborn streak in full force.

With no internet to settle the argument, we had to wait until the next game to find out. The suspense was killing me. And when we got to the Boston Garden, as we walked closer and closer to the court, there they were—the sneakers were, indeed, a dark green. I was right. We all laugh about it now—the legend of the green sneakers—but my stubbornness? That's here to stay.

Then there's the cheesy side of me. I find joy in the little things—whether it's collecting good-luck charms or sharing nostalgic moments with the people I love. To this day, my daughter and I still recite "Starlight, star bright" together, and I add to my collection of good-luck charms every year. I even edit team highlight videos to Disney theme songs. Because sometimes, it's the little moments that make life a little brighter.

And of course, there's the crying. I'm not afraid to admit it—I'm a crier. Movies, TV shows, and real-life moments can get me choked up. *Glee* and *America's Got Talent* are absolute tearjerkers for me. But real-life emotional moments? Waterworks. I'll never forget my daughter's high school graduation. I was standing on stage, presenting her diploma, and I lost it the moment they started reading the long list of her accomplishments—ugly crying and all. Marcia still teases me about how I ruined the photos. But honestly, I wouldn't change a thing. It was one of the proudest moments of my life.

So, who is your authentic self? What is your superpower? Have you thought about your gifts? Who and what shaped you? Are you able to find your "aha moments" that help define who you are? In the First Quarter section of this book, you will read that being my authentic self has never been a struggle. I've always embraced who I am, flaws and all. It's not about being perfect—it's about being real.

My authenticity is my superpower. It's what helps me navigate challenges, connect with others, and stay true to who I am, even amid the most challenging times. When we show up as our true selves, something magical happens. And that, I believe, is where the real connection begins.

Each pre-game speech in this quarter tries to peel back that corner of your authentic self, to eventually reveal the unfiltered power that's been there all along—because when you stop performing and start showing up as exactly who you are, flaws and all, you tap

into something no one else can replicate: your unique perspective, your specific experiences, your unrepeatable voice. Authenticity isn't just being honest—it's being your authentic self, and authenticity is your superpower.

Diamond or a Pencil

Everything is made of atoms. The arrangement of those atoms determines their strength, value, and purpose. Take carbon. Arrange it one way, and you get graphite: soft, fragile, the lead of a ten-cent pencil that snaps under pressure. Arrange those same carbon atoms under extreme heat and compression, and you get a diamond: rare, enduring, invaluable. Composed of the exact same building blocks, yet physically, they are very different.

Today you have a choice. Will you play like a diamond—brilliant, resilient, forged by pressure? Or will you be the pencil—common, easily broken, quickly worn down?"

I pause, letting silence fill the space. Eye contact matters here. I lean in closer now before I continue.

The difference isn't what you're made of—it's how you choose to be shaped. Your attitude. Your mindset. Your willingness to embrace the pressure instead of breaking under it.

By now, they're nodding. Some scribble the words in their mental notebooks. Others just stare back, eyes hungry.

So choose today. Choose to play inspired. Choose to play aggressively. Choose to play smart. Choose to hustle on every single play. Choose to lift your teammates higher than yourself.

My voice drops to nearly a whisper.

A ten-cent pencil? No! Choose to be the priceless diamond.

Choices define us. Not the big ones that come along every few years, but the thousands of small decisions we make each day. The words we speak to others. Every action we produce. Every response to adversity. These are the moments that reveal who we truly are.

That's why I begin each season with my "Diamond or the Pencil" speech. The team hears it before our first game, when possibility hangs thick in the air and every team's

record still reads 0-0. It's more than just coach speak. It's the foundation of everything we build together.

These words have resonated with hundreds of players over the years, but none embodied them more completely than Alicia.

Standing 6'4", Alicia combined an imposing physical presence with fierce dedication, approaching every practice with a relentless drive to improve her game. She would eventually earn a Division I scholarship to Manhattan College. Her younger siblings eventually attended Worcester Academy too, and her parents rarely missed a game, cheering from their usual spot in the stands.

What I didn't know—what none of us knew—was the weight Alicia was carrying beneath her composed exterior.

It was 2004. We had just won our first NEPSAC Class B Championship, and the energy in Warner Auditorium was electric. We were celebrating the end of the season with a pizza party, gifts for the seniors, and the highlight video I would always edit. In typical fashion I would use Disney Songs for those uplifting moments. What I loved about highlight videos is that the opposition never scored and we never missed. Our highlight video had just finished playing on the big screen and the players and parents were beaming with pride.

As we were all saying goodbye, Alicia's mom Nancy pulled me aside, her eyes filling with tears. She started with, "I don't know if Alicia can come back to Worcester next year." Words that I never anticipated hearing after such a stellar freshman season and growth. Her next words were like a dagger.

"Ed has ALS," she whispered.

The world seemed to stop. Ed—Alicia's father. The gentle giant who always thanked me after games. The man whose pride in his daughter radiated without saying a word. Ed has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS)?

"We don't know if Alicia can return next year," Nancy reiterated.

I squeezed her hand. "We'll find a way." We hugged.

And we did. Through the generosity of the Worcester Academy George B. Berg Family Scholarship, Alicia returned. But she didn't just show up—she transformed.

Every day she walked into that gym with grace, with grit, with steely resolve. Never complained. Never made excuses. Never let her teammates see the weight she was

carrying. She practiced harder. Competed fiercer. Embraced every challenge as if it were a gift rather than a burden.

And Ed—he showed up too. At an away game at Kingswood Oxford in Connecticut, I went down the hall and down the stairs to get a bottle of water from a vending machine. Ed was entering the building and we greeted each other with usual pleasantries. I started to run back quickly to watch warm-ups, and I'll never forget what I saw when I turned around. Ed was slowly climbing the stairs, cane in hand, each step a deliberate act of love. "I'll just take my time," he said with a quiet dignity.

Ten years later, when I went through my own cancer treatment, those words came back to me. I finally understood what that kind of perseverance truly meant.

That same week, Alicia marked a career-high in points then broke her own record the very next game. She wasn't just finding her rhythm on the court. She was choosing—daily, hourly—to be the diamond.

In 2006, we captured the NEPSAC Class A Championship with an undefeated season. In the celebration-filled locker room afterward, Alicia walked in clutching a basketball and a Sharpie. "Could everyone sign this?" she asked. "It's for my dad."

Ed was waiting on the court, now wheelchair-bound and unable to speak. We gathered around him, our victory shouts replaced by silent tears, as we placed the signed ball in his lap. His eyes said everything words couldn't. He knew what his daughter had accomplished. He understood the heart behind her triumph.

Ed passed away that August, just before Alicia's senior year.

But true diamonds don't lose their luster when the light dims. Alicia thrived at Manhattan College, then came home to become a teacher and later, my assistant coach at Worcester Academy. In 2022, I attended her wedding at Aldrich Mansion in Rhode Island. The forecast had promised perfect weather and breathtaking ocean views. Instead, rain poured and thick fog erased the horizon completely.

The ceremony was a beautiful and emotional affair. I was so grateful to share in her special day. As I hugged her goodbye, Alicia whispered, "Coach, I wouldn't have gotten through today without all you taught me. I woke up to a cold, rainy day—but I chose to embrace the joy."

That's what the diamond looks like!

Driving home from her wedding, I felt that rare, complete satisfaction that reminds me why I coach. It's never been about championship banners or win-loss records. It's about

these moments—witnessing young women like Alicia become resilient, gracious, grounded leaders long after the final whistle blows.

The “Diamond or the Pencil” isn’t just a pre-game speech. It’s a daily decision we all face. When life applies pressure—and it will—you have a choice. You can crumble like graphite, point fingers, make excuses. Or you can harness that pressure to become something extraordinary.

Be mindful. Be present. Be intentional.

And when life squeezes hardest, remember: Diamonds are just carbon that refuses to break.

Choose to be the diamond. Every single time.