



FOURTH PLACE RECIPIENT

# The Goal that Matters

Z.P. TRI-CITY PREP HIGH SCHOOL

It was an extraordinarily beautiful day in late September. The air was thick with a mix of nervousness and intensity. We were playing around dusk in Sedona, Arizona. Four weeks prior, I had made the Varsity soccer team at my high school as a freshman: an achievement I was extremely proud of. With the red rock looming around us, the whistle was blown. The game had started. It wasn't going to be easy. We were playing an exceptional team in the league, but not one without a range of competition. We fought hard as a team in the first half of the game, but the score was still tied 0-0.

Not five minutes into the second half, I was defending a tall forward on the other team. He shot. Whack! The shot hit my right hand, but almost no one, including the referee, saw it. I had jumped in a way that looked like I had blocked it with my body. If I hadn't hit the ball, it likely would have been a goal. I froze. The ball had gone out of bounds, and the forward was screaming for a handball.

I was nervous. I was in the 18-yard box, which meant the foul would be an automatic penalty kick, an almost certain goal. I was a freshman. I was barely a starter. What would my teammates think? What if I were the reason that we lost the game? Everything in me screamed for me to shut up and continue on with the game. What if I lost

my reputation with the team and lost my starting role? My heart pounded out of my throat from indecision. I could be a leader and own up, or I could just get on with it. My stomach churned, and my soul twisted in my chest as I told the referee that I had made a handball in the box. He pointed at the penalty area and whistled. Almost all my teammates were angry with me. I was a freshman. Why couldn't I just keep playing? Why did I just give up an almost certain goal? Why would you ever admit that to the referee?

For a moment, I regretted my decision. The opposing team scored the penalty. However, my best friend on the team, our captain, said, "Hey man, it's ok. We all make mistakes; Pick your head up." I knew I had done the right thing. The game continued, and I could feel the audience judging me, some angry, some skeptical, and a small percentage: respectful. We ended up losing the game. I didn't know what to feel, but I knew this: Even though I didn't walk away with a win, I walked away with my character and a clean conscience. Even though we had lost the game and I had conceded a goal, I learned that the real goal is, in life and leadership, to make honesty and responsibility come before success and results.