

The Right Thing **By Payton Lyon & Brendan McNerney**

*“[The athletes], it makes them think I am more than just a basketball player.”
-Lynn Flanagan, LMU Alumnus and current Women’s Basketball Coach*

In 2011, Former LMU student, Stephen Peters, succinctly stated that “the thing that makes Loyola special is that they are going for the [education] of the whole person.” For Peters, this means that LMU equips its students to be able to “lay down and do the right thing” when confronted with difficult choices. While what the “right thing” actually means, can sometimes be contested terrain, there are times when it is abundantly clear: just look at the history of LMU’s athletics department.

When asked about the relationship between sports and the education of the whole person, current Women’s Basketball Coach, Lynn Flanagan, noted that “one of the things that LMU does...is make sure that you know there’s so much more that you are [than an athlete].” Speaking specifically about the women’s basketball program, Flanagan explained that “taking... academics seriously” is a belief that is continually reinforced. As a result, the education of the whole person –the most important principle – is integrated into anything from a routine practice to a championship game. Brian Quinn, a multi-sport athlete at Loyola University in the 1960s, and later, LMU’s Athletic Director, echoed Flanagan’s assertions. As Quinn put it, “You’ve got to be the whole person. You’ve got to have values and community service, all of those things.” Explaining further, Quinn noted that “discipline, commitment, teamwork...common goals, working together, playing by the rules,” are expected and instilled in LMU’s student athletes. “All of those things,” Quinn continued, “fit right into the mission of the University.” Summarizing this marriage between LMU’s mission to educate the whole person and their athletic programs, former LMU baseball player Billy Bean remembered how multi-faceted his education was. Bean, who played centerfield for LMU in the mid-1980s, and then went on to play professional baseball from 1987-1995, remembers that his education at LMU was “about the complete education: socialization, growing up, taking care, obviously the academics, good decisions in your personal [life]...”

Over the past century, there have been countless instances when the athletic programs of Loyola University, and later Loyola Marymount, have had to rely upon those values that it attempts to instill in its students as the University strives to educate the whole person. Over time, one incident clearly stands above the rest; it occurred in the early 1950s when the Loyola Administration, staff and members of the football team had to make the choice to do the right thing.

The Loyola football program began to develop in 1930, when the university hired Tom Lieb, a former assistant to Notre Dame’s Knute Rockne (you may recognize this name as belonging to the man who helped popularize the forward pass). According to former Loyola student, Henry Bodkin Jr., “[Lieb] built up an excellent program,” and though it dropped off due to the demands of the Second World War, the foundation was built for a successful program in the early 1950s under the new management of Coach Jordan Olivar. Olivar then ran the team from 1949 until its final season in 1952.

During Olivar’s tenure, the magical season that everyone remembers began in the fall of 1950. It was an exciting time to be a Loyola undergrad. According to both Bodkin and another

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former student, Joe Callinan, if the Loyola Football team had beaten Santa Clara, they would have been invited to a major Bowl. “A Loyola victory,” Callinan later remembered, “would have . . . guaranteed them an invitation to the Orange Bowl.” Henry Bodkin remembered both the excitement as well as the disappointment of that season: “. . . we were all set and . . . we played . . . against Santa Clara, which was not having a good year. And damn if they didn’t beat us.”

But despite the excitement of the Bowl hunt and the disappointment of the loss to Santa Clara, there was a more important game that season. The story of that game has been recounted in greater detail elsewhere. Briefly, early in the season of 1950, the Loyola football team was scheduled to play a game against Texas Western College. Though Texas was by no means exclusively mired in the social stigmas of the time, it embraced regressive views on segregation and legalized racial inequality. As a result, there were significant issues surrounding the fact that Loyola had several black players on its team. Special living arrangements were made for the black members of the Loyola program, but apparently that was not even enough for the Texas league, which had a long standing rule that no “colored” player was allowed to play for or against any team in the league. In a resounding move of team solidarity and clear-minded defiance of racism, the team aligned with the Loyola Administration and staff in refusing to play the game under those restrictions.

That game against Texas Western College that never happened is like a snapshot in time. It is an occasion to reflect on what the ideal of the education of the whole person looks like in action. And the connectedness between the actions of football players in the 1950s with baseball players in the 1980s is remarkable. Commenting on his own experience at LMU three decades later, Billy Bean’s words could easily apply to the solidarity among the players of that 1950s football team: “I felt like there was a community there,” Bean stated. “It wasn’t like I was on an island by myself and I was going to sink or swim and nobody would care.” Commenting further on his experience at LMU, Bean summarized: “I think I learned that everyone is human and everyone makes mistakes. . . you know you just see people making their own choices as young adults, and a lot of those choices are not great, and some are, and it’s fun to see people make good ones and make the most and do some really great, great things.”

Bean’s reflections on the possibility of making great choices make clear that the football game against Texas Western College in the early 1950s is actually much more than a snapshot in time. Instead, it is a clear marker of a thread unbroken over time. To be sure, in the history of LMU, there have been grave imperfections and a host of choices, to use Bean’s words, have not been great. But the recollections of a football team’s choices in the 1950s, a multi-sport athlete in the 1960s, a baseball player in the 1980s, and the current women’s basketball coach, collectively demonstrate that the University’s mission and commitment to the education of the whole person does make a difference. In the end, it has at the very least, equipped its students, as Stephen Peters noted, to be able to “lay down and do the right thing” when confronted with difficult choices.