

Thanks to Mark for asking me to come out here to speak to you; and to all of you, of course, for listening.

I, myself, am not a huge fan of public speaking. Add to that the fact that I am addressing a rather accomplished and discerning group of individuals, and my anxiety only amplifies. So prior to speaking to all of you today, I thought I'd mine the experiences of the great orators of the past to see if I could harvest any wisdom that might help me out. And I stumbled upon the following story:

Woodrow Wilson, before he assumed this country's highest office, was asked, "Mr. President, what's the secret to your success as President of Princeton?"

To which he replied, "That's easy. It's the ability to give the same speech over and over again."

"But, Mr. President," came the retort, "how many times can you give the same speech?" "I don't know," he said, "I'm still giving it."

So even though in the eyes of Woodrow Wilson the statement I am about to make will effectively disqualify me from seeking a Presidential office (which is just fine with me), I want to make clear that I have *no* interest in giving this speech over and over again; I have *never* given this particular speech before; and I doubt I'll ever give it again. It was written specifically with this audience in mind and with the sole intent of trying, in a scant 30 minutes, to cover topics as far-ranging as the health and viability of the modern Olympic movement, the lamentable state of U.S. education, the unprecedented upwelling of philanthropic activity in this country, and the role that the elite athlete can play in leveraging all of the above for the greater social good. That's not too tall a task is it?

In all sincerity, I believe Mark invited me to speak to all of you because I have tried to create a professional life that exists at the nexus of all of those trends: Olympism, children being left behind, this emerging second wave of philanthropy and the role and responsibility of the elite athlete in all of it. If, as it has been said, genius is the ability to invent one's own occupation, then while I may not, in Woodrow Wilson's eyes, be fit to assume the presidency, I may in fact be able to lay claim to some measure of intelligence, although the jury is very much still out on that one.

Just over a year ago I founded a non-profit organization called In the Arena. For any of you history buffs out there, the name was plucked from a speech given by Teddy Roosevelt, our country's 26th President, who, on a side note, was the first and only President to convene a group of his advisors to discuss the rules of American football. TR gave the speech, "Citizenship in a Republic," on the steps of the Sorbonne in 1910 and the relevant excerpt goes like this:

It's not the critic who counts, not the man who points out where the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and who spends himself in a worthy

cause. The man who, at best, knows the triumph of high achievement and who at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly so that his place is never among those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

The entire speech is a rousing call-to-arms for civic engagement, although as you athletes can surely hear, it doubles nicely as a sport-specific exclamation as well.

Simply stated, In the Arena is a youth development organization.

Our mission is to change the trajectories of the lives of American youth, by deploying in their communities today's elite athletes, who teach them how to make habits of self-inquiry, accountability, leadership and achievement.

If that sounds complicated, it's not. It's an incredibly simple model really, but one with wonderfully rich and far-reaching implications. One by one, In the Arena brings on to the Roster qualified athletes who have pitched a community service project to the organization, a project that anchors that athlete in a specific youth population and with the aim of providing the highest-caliber mentoring services to those children. In exchange for the work they do in their communities, these athletes are awarded stipends commensurate with their financial need and the breadth of their proposed project.

Think of it as a virtuous circle, a small capital market for social good. In this sports-crazed country, our youngest generation is suffering from a lack of positive role models. Simultaneously, you have a population of Olympic aspirants, most of whom are college-educated, and many of whom are woefully under-funded. Those athletes are toiling away in relative obscurity, arriving on the country's radar screen once every four years. And during the interregnum, they're training, what –20 or 30 hours a week? –and working part-time in a running shoe store or a coffee shop to finance their athletic goals. And yet they're possessed –*you're* possessed –of this wonderfully unique and robust skill set that's not being deployed to a fraction of its maximum good. So in steps In the Arena and we say, "We'll pay you what you'd make in your part-time job if you take those X number of hours a week, and rather than pouring espresso shots, go work with kids. Tell them what you know, what you've learned through sport. Help to inculcate in them all of those virtues that a successful athletic career presupposes: discipline, tenacity, a desire for self-improvement, a thirst for excellence, to name just a few."

I could talk all day about mentoring theories, US Education innovations and the privileged place sport holds in our culture, but I'm fairly certain I would bore the pants off of you guys and, having glanced at your ambitious agenda, I know you've already survived Code of Conduct revisions and USADA updates. So what I'd rather do with our remaining time is to tell you a few stories, all true, and each one of which provides a unique lens through which to view the role of sport –and athletes in particular –in society. Each of the following stories is offered in an effort to evoke a central question, and in the aggregate, these questions aim to create a bit of a dialogue: between me and you, among yourselves as a group, and among your peer athletes in your specific sports when you leave here and report back to them.

DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW FAR YOUR INFLUENCE REACHES?

The first story I'd like to tell you is about a boy named Cade.

Cade lives in Temple, Texas, a small town of 60,000 residents located 65 miles north of Austin and 35 miles south of Waco. Cade's mom works at a large accounting firm where she's an administrative assistant. Neither of Cade's parents are athletes, nor has Cade ever attended an athletic event. Cade is two and a half.

Three months ago, on September 14th, Cade's mom arrived to work to an energetic and chaotic scene. One of her co-workers, Darlene Hazle, was at the center of a group of their colleagues; the President of the company was there; and an American flag was draped over Darlene's desk.

Cade's mom soon learned that the night before, Darlene's son, Mike Hazle, had thrown a season best and a personal best in the javelin in Huelva, Spain. Mike had thrown the javelin just shy of 82m, the 9th farthest throw in American history, but more importantly, an Olympic A standard throw, one that, given the intricacies of the track and field Olympic qualification process, all but effectively punched his ticket to Beijing for the 2008 Games.

Mike had sent his Mom a short video of his throw, which he had also posted to YouTube. And at just over a minute long, the feed was looping endlessly to the delight of the group of onlookers, who were all congratulating Darlene and asking if she'd be making the trip to China.

At home later that night, Cade's mom turned on the computer, surfed over to YouTube, pulled up Mike's video and asked Cade if he wanted to see something neat. Cade climbed up into his Mom's lap and together they watched the video of Mike throwing the javelin the night before. After the first showing, Cade asked his mom to play the video again. And again. After a few revolutions of this routine, Cade's mom said "enough, this is the last time and then we're going to bed." So Cade leaned forward, planted a wet kiss on the monitor and trundled off to bed.

The next morning, on their way to take out the trash, Cade and his mom were marching in lock-step when Cade broke stride, bent down, picked up a stick from the ground and went tearing down the sidewalk with it, carrying it like a spear. After a short run-up, Cade launched the stick down the street, letting out a two-year old yelp, and came skidding to a stop just short of a line in the sidewalk. He turned back and raised his little fists in the air, victory style. His Mom was floored.

So the first thing I am here to tell you, through the prism of that story, is that the Olympic movement is alive and well. Kids are watching... and they are captivated. They are enthralled. You have their attention. And this is a glorious thing *if* that attention is used wisely. Less glorious if it's squandered. And downright inglorious if it's ignored.

Today's youth *will* find role models. They will mimic behavior. And if it's not positive role models they're seeing, if they're not presented with admirable examples of how to behave, they'll turn somewhere else; they'll find their mentors on ESPN and MTV, on Monday Night Football's chest-thumping, bicep-kissing, rooster-strutting pageantry (and I'm a big NFL fan; I just wouldn't want my children getting their behavioral cues from the likes of the Ravens' defensive unit).

Given the privileged place that sport holds in our culture, today's youth revere athletes, for better or for worse. Any other class of people: doctor, investor, painter, plumber, walks into a room full of children and they have to *earn* those kids' attention. You walk into a room, introduce yourself as a professional athlete or an Olympian, and I guarantee you they will listen to what you have to say. They won't listen indefinitely, you'll have to continue to magnetize their attention, but you *will not* have to earn it. That puts you a step ahead of any other group trying to effect meaningful change at the youth level.

The quality and the clarity of that attention, the attention that today's youths award elite athletes, is, in my opinion, the single-most undervalued, underperforming commodity, we, as a country, have produced. It's like we've won the lottery and we've stuffed all ten million under the mattress and are refusing to invest it. If we, as a group, can find a way to put that capital to work in a sensible, meaningful manner, then I think we can take some impressive strides towards mitigating root causes that plague adolescents as they navigate their way into adulthood.

So my question to you is: **do you have any idea how far your influence reaches?** Because given social networking and all of the web 2.0 tools, it reaches farther today than it did yesterday. And tomorrow, and next year, and in 2010, it will reach farther still. If a two-and-a-half-year old boy in Texas can watch a one-minute YouTube clip and be inspired to mimic the behavior he's observed, think about your collective power to affect change. Think how far your influence reaches.

WHAT ARE YOUR SKILLS?

The next story I'm going to tell you is one of my own. And it's one that happened not too long ago. Here's a bit of a confession: along with my fear of public speaking I also have an aversion to being photographed. It's not a religious thing or an insecurity thing (although a psychologist might tell me otherwise). I don't like seeing pictures of myself just like I don't like hearing my voice coming out of a speaker. Draw what conclusions you will.

Nevertheless, last year I got roped into doing a photo shoot for a small clothing company. The photographer was a friend of mine and he and his client needed a runner and they swore up and down they'd be shooting everything on the move (no studios, thank goodness), so I agreed to do it. What they didn't tell me until we all convened for the shoot was that it was a winter catalog shoot. And this was July. In Boston. And it was hot.

They had me dressed in fleece tights, long underwear, a winter jacket, mittens and a hat. When they asked if I needed to “warm up” prior to shooting I gave them my most withering look.

On top of the difficulties inherent in asking a camera-shy model (I am using that word as loosely as it has ever been used) to sprint back and forth wearing Arctic-rated clothing on a 90 degree day, our little staff was also constricted geographically. This was a winter shoot and so it could feature no trees, no flowers in bloom, no bushes –in short, nothing green at all. This, of course, severely limited our choices of location. We were pretty much confined to the most urban of settings, ones that were completely devoid of anything “natural.” Of course these neighborhoods are also the less advantaged neighborhoods, the “under-served communities” in non-profit parlance.

But off we went, five of us and a bunch of cameras, packed into a Subaru and driving into South Boston. We scoped out a few possible locales and finally settled on a rather dark and deserted alley in an unattractive part of town. There was an abandoned church on one side of the road and a boarded up building on the other. For longer than I care to remember I ran up and down the cracked and crumbling asphalt, probably until the photographer decided that I had sufficiently soaked through the wardrobe.

At this point he called it a day and suggested we all pack it in and head for home. Good by me. The other fellows on the shoot rushed ahead to the car to get the AC cranking, while Chris packed up his cameras. I stripped down a few layers, happily, and began to amble back towards the car. I was a couple hundred yards away from Chris and not far from the head of the street when a man came barreling around the corner. He was moving with purpose, but towards (or away from) what I had no idea. A few seconds later a very young woman, more of a girl really, shot around the corner after him. She was bleeding from a cut on her forehead and the football jersey shirt she wore was ripped open at the neck. She was shouting after the man, who looked to have about ten years and a 100 pounds on her. I froze, stranded between them and Chris, far too close to pretend that I hadn't seen them, but with my egress blocked.

The young woman was shrieking at the man, who had stopped, and taken a few menacing steps towards her. She was asking if he wanted to see the bruises he'd given her. He was telling her to go home. She started to take off her shirt to show him. He said don't make me hit you again. It was at this point that they both realized they had company: me. Eager, I think, to pick a fight with someone a little closer to her size, the young woman took a series of alarmingly quick steps towards me, demanding as she approached: “What are you looking at? You want some of this?”

At best, this was a domestic violence dispute; at worst, I don't even want to imagine. But either way, the unspoken answer to her question was “No, I wanted none of that. No part of it.” I wished I hadn't seen it. And I wished even more fervently that there was something I could do to resolve the situation, right then and there. My overheated brain worked double-time to settle on the right collection of words, the proper disarming gesture, something that would allow me to play peacemaker in this conflict. But I

surfaced nothing. There wasn't a tool in my social skills toolbox that I could bring to bear on that situation. Someone else, maybe, someone with experience in that field; but not me. Regardless of how much and how deeply I wanted to help this situation. It wasn't in my skill set to do so. And so I walked away.

I thought about this for days. I replayed the incident over and over, retrofitting different actions onto the scene. But it was a useless exercise. None of my skills matched up with a solution to disarming the volatility of that situation. Which begged the question, the same question I want to ask of you: what *are* your skills?

If I couldn't improve *that* situation, then were there other situations I *could* improve? What tools did I possess and where would they be most skillfully and artfully deployed? What problems was I qualified to attack? I was a trained teacher, and a coach; I'd spent my life paying attention to sport, as both participant and spectator. I had –and have –a deep-seated belief in and passion for the power of sport to inspire; and I was simultaneously alarmed by the ways in which we were failing our country's youngest generation both within and outside of the educational system. You might say this was the moment that In the Arena was born. I may not have been able to rectify that situation in the alley in South Boston, but I could try to prevent others from finding themselves in a similar situation in the future if I applied my skills in a targeted manner.

As athletes, you are possessed of a remarkable power of self-inquiry; you're accustomed to process-oriented thinking. You know innately what your strengths are and how to optimize them; and what your weaknesses are and how to mitigate them. Both in the realm of competition and outside of it.

So at the risk of sounding like Napoleon Dynamite: **What are your skills?** What tools can you bring to bear on the situations facing us today? What might your message be?

WHO ARE YOU IN A POSITION TO LIFT?

The next story I'd like to tell you is one of my favorites. It's a story from an athlete on In the Arena's Roster: a man named Tim Broe.

Tim was raised in East Peoria, Illinois. He and his brother were children of a single Mom and they grew up on the proverbial wrong side of the tracks. Literally. Tim attended East Peoria High School, where he developed a talent as a distance runner. But, and he'd be the first one to tell you this, he goofed around quite a bit, and when it came time to go to college, the word was out that he was a trouble-maker and to steer clear of him. Even so, the coach at Alabama took a flier on him and brought him down there to run. Tim attended Alabama, ran and ran pretty well, but never quite fulfilled his potential. Then, in 2000, he jumped into the Olympic Trials in the steeplechase and narrowly missed making the team by four-tenths of a second. If I had what I call "a moment of obligation" in that alley in Boston, this was Tim's "moment of obligation." He got serious, moved to Ann Arbor, remade himself into a professional athlete, and, on his way to making the US Olympic Team in 2004, claimed 12 US titles and set an American record at 3000 meters.

Back in East Peoria he was a rock star. So when Tim approached In the Arena with the idea of returning to East Peoria, to his alma mater high school, to serve as a volunteer coach for the boys and girls cross-country and track teams...well, I thought this was a pretty great idea. So Tim became In the Arena's Athlete number four last fall.

Early in the season, long before any meets were on the near-horizon and at a time when Tim was largely trying to figure out how to handle the record number of participants who had flocked to the track program after news of his involvement had spread, Tim assigned his women's team a short run followed by a set of drills, strength-building and core exercises. As is usually the case, Tim ran the 20 minutes with his student-athletes and then supervised and instructed them as they embarked on their conditioning circuits.

Tim had his team striding, skipping and jumping, doing sit-ups, push-ups and balancing exercises, and even trying a few pull-ups using an available bar. Some of the student-athletes could step right up to the bar and manage a full set of pull-ups, others got in a few before fatiguing. But one student-athlete, who had, to put it kindly (as Tim did) a different strength-to-weight ratio than the others, and who will, Tim is sure, grow into a powerful shot putter, took one look at the bar, one look at Tim and said, "Coach, I can't do this."

"Sure you can," Tim replied in his disarming way. "Go ahead. Give it a try."

"Nope. I can't do that. There's no way." And at this point the young woman grew visibly shy and began to back away from the bar.

"Oh no, no, no, you don't," Tim jumped in, and he corralled her back towards the bar. About as excited at the prospect of trying a pull-up as one would be at the thought of attending a novocaine-free dentist appointment, the student-athlete fixed Tim with a look of trepidation and shook her head "no."

Tim, undaunted and with a clear sense of what was at stake –namely: not merely a successful pull-up but a much greater accomplishment –guided the student-athlete back over to the bar, and asked her just to give it a try, one try. Reluctantly, she reached up to bar and when she did, Tim crouched down and grabbed hold of her feet. As she pulled up, he lifted, and lo and behold, the young woman did her first pull-up. And her second. And her third. She completed a full set.

After practice was over and the team had disbanded, the student-athlete circled back around to Tim and asked if she could speak with him for a minute. "I just want to say thank you, Coach," the young woman explained. "No one's ever told me I can do something like that before. I didn't think I could do it and I wouldn't have tried if you hadn't asked me. So, thanks." Nothing overblown. Nothing hyperbolic. Just a brief statement of gratitude for a good deed well done.

And yet in her adolescent expression, that student-athlete captured the essence of In the Arena: to empower young Americans to recalibrate their lives' trajectories based on a new understanding of their very own skills, capabilities and potential. The Arena Athlete's purpose is to lift, as Tim did, to elevate the expectations of their program participants so that long after the program has concluded, each participant will continue to thrive.

So my question to you is: **who are *you* in a position to lift?**

The folks at NASA have a rule of thumb: when they're launching a rocket, if the vessel is on target and true to its mark in the first six seconds after blast-off, then their job is largely finished. If, however, it is off target by even a fraction of a millimeter in those first six seconds, it will most likely miss its target by millions of miles. The same is true of children.

If you can intervene early in the lives of today's youth, you give them an opportunity to launch into adulthood with the same precision, skill, courage and attention as attend a NASA spacecraft. It's just a matter of finding a place to stand and then applying a well-timed boost. So who are you in a position to lift?

WHY NOT? WHAT'S THE WORST THAT COULD HAPPEN?

And here is the final story I want to share with you today. It's about a woman named Zoila Gomez, who is also an athlete on In the Arena's Roster.

Zoila was born in Mexico in 1979. She is one of sixteen children in her family. When she was five, her father was killed, an episode that so shocked the family and the larger community that one of Zoila's older brothers packed up his siblings and moved them to Southern California. Zoila enrolled in the California public school system, secured US citizenship and began to run. By the time she was in high school, her talent was evident. And so she turned her sights towards college. She enrolled in a junior college whose campus was near her home, and as her JuCo career drew to a close, her cross-country and track coach asked her where she was thinking of continuing her education. Continuing her education? Wasn't this it? Wasn't she in college?

"No," her coach explained to her carefully, "this is Junior College and you, Zoila, are plenty talented enough to consider finishing your education and earning a degree from a four-year college." So Zoila embarked on a second college search. At this point, however, she needed to look no further than the cover of *RunnersWorld* magazine, which that month happened to feature an up-and-coming US distance-running star: Deena Kastor. Deena, said the photograph's caption, attended Adams State College in Alamosa, Colorado (for those of you who know Deena, this was before she transferred down to Arkansas). Zoila's college search was complete: she wanted to go to Adams State.

So Zoila boarded a bus and traveled up to Mt. St. Antonio College, where she read that the Adams State team would be competing in an early season track meet. She strode

directly up to the coach, stuck out her hand, and announced, “I am Zoila Gomez. And I’m a runner. And I want to run for Adams State.” Well, it’s not exactly the way recruiting works, but the coach said he’d have a look at Zoila’s transcripts and her athletic resume. And not surprisingly, later that year, Zoila boarded another bus, this time to the mountains of Colorado, where she began her tenure at Adams State. There, Zoila rewrote the Division II record books. She was an 11-time All-American, a 6-time NCAA Champion, the College’s Athlete of the Year, the Division II Athlete *and* Scholar-Athlete of the Year and, in 2004, she was named the state of Colorado’s Sportswoman of the Year.

And yet despite the cascade of accolades, Zoila had one major item remaining on her “To Do” list: to don a US uniform and represent her country in international competition. So after graduation, Zoila stayed on in Alamosa with the aim of attempting to master the behemoth of all running events: the marathon. Her sister and brother-in-law and their two-year-old son moved to Alamosa to provide support and the four of them moved in together while Zoila ramped up her training to 125-mile weeks in preparation for her first marathon.

She ran a conservative first marathon in New York City in the fall of 2005 and it was enough to whet her appetite for more. So she targeted the US Marathon Championships in Minnesota the following year. The day that Zoila ran that race, my husband and I were returning to Boston from a friend’s wedding and were mired in leaf-peeper traffic on the Mass Turnpike. We have an unspoken rule about talking on our cell phones when we’re in the car together, but when my phone rang and I saw it was Zoila, and considering that we were going nowhere fast and had all but exhausted viable conversational topics 50 miles earlier, he encouraged me to answer it.

What came next was a play-by-play account of a marathon that, I think, took almost as long to render as it had taken Zoila to run. As Zoila tells it, she ran the first 20 miles largely alone and in fourth place. But as she moved into the final ten kilometers, she caught a glimpse of the third place runner up the road. I don’t think anyone feels particularly “good” at the 20-mile mark of a 26-mile race, and Zoila confessed the same. She said to me, “Amory, I was feeling a little bit tired. But I said to myself, ‘Zoila, fuk-us. You must fuk-us.’” At this point, *I* did a double-take, thinking Zoila was slinging some sort of profanity my way. But I soon divined that she was imploring herself to “focus.” Not something else altogether. So as she told it, Zoila *focused* and set her sights on trying to catch the woman up the road.

She began to close the gap on her competitor, who apparently was feeling not much better than Zoila, but with just over a mile remaining, she still hadn’t made the pass. Zoila is nothing if not unfailingly positive and she told me, “Amory, I was running so hard and I wasn’t sure if I could catch her. But then I said to myself, “What’s the worst that could happen? Why not? Zoila, what’s the *worst* that could happen if you push yourself to go a little faster? And I thought, I could die. OK, well then I could die. So I tried to go faster.”

And she did. She went faster. And she passed the runner in front of her, thereby nabbing the third spot on the podium and earning herself the honor to travel to Japan this past September to race in the World Championships, yes, sporting the US uniform for the first time.

So my question to you is borrowed directly from Zoila's self-catechism: **what's the worst that could happen? Why not?** To the best of my knowledge, no athlete has yet lost his or her life serving as a community mentor, so we can take that off the table.

It's a bit like contemplating going to the gym or going out for a run: you can come up with a hundred excuses for why *not* to do it, but ultimately you know you'll be glad you did; you'll feel better. Serving kids in your community is like that, too: there are a hundred reasons, especially in this time-strapped culture, *not* to do it. But none of the athletes on In the Arena's Roster exits their daily mentoring experiences saying, "you know, I wish I hadn't done that."

So what's the worst that can happen? Why not?

Those are the stories I have for you today. And the attending questions, too. Please feel free to follow-up with me with any questions *you* may have for me in return, either now or offline.

In parting, the last idea I want to leave at your feet before I happily relinquish the stage is a quick calculus of the ramifications of a grass-roots community idea like this. Let's do the Olympic math, shall we?

- 537 US athletes competed in Athens. Another 211 competed in Torino. That's just shy of 750 US athletes participating in an Olympic cycle.
- And for every one of those athletes who made the team, it's probably safe to assume that there were two other athletes who were vying for that spot and who also had a legitimate shot at making it. That's 2,250 athletes.
- If you take 25% of those 2,250 out of the picture because they're NBA or NHL stars and they're financially solvent or they're running their own foundations; and you take another 25 or 30 or even 40% out of the equation because they either have yet to earn their college degrees, have no interest in civic engagement or quite simply, wouldn't pass the character test to qualify them as superlative mentors; you're still left with 1,000 athletes.
- If, over the course of a four-year period, each of those athletes spends an average of two years on the Roster, and in each of those years they're able to touch the lives of 500 children (which is the number In the Arena's current athletes are achieving), then that's a thousand athletes positively impacting the lives of a thousand kids.

- In a single Olympic cycle, that's a million children –a million children—who have a better chance at success as a result of the opportunity to be mentored by an aspiring Olympian.

I'm an English major by trade, but I like that math. And so the question I ask myself every day is: Why not? Why not try to bring about that large-scale change? What is the worst that could happen?

Thank you.

*Delivered by Amory Rowe,
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