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GOVERNOR SHARES LESSONS LEARNED FROM ATHLETICS

Watching Gov. Sonny Perdue on television at the Little League World Series, where his hometown Warner Robins team defeated Japan for the world championship, reminded me that he was a pretty good athlete in his day. How good?

"I was small," he said when I dropped by his office recently to ask him, "but I made up for that by being slow." A funny line, but not true. The governor was a very good quarterback at Warner Robins in the early 1960s and held the region passing record for a number of years. He was a pretty fair baseball player, too: an all-star catcher, playing on the last Warner Robins Little League team to make it to the playoffs some 50 years ago. Could his team have beaten the current world champions? "I'm not sure," he said, "but it would have been fun to find out."

Perdue said watching Warner Robins win the World Series made him feel like a "proud grandparent." The governor has high praise for Mike Long, the team's head coach, for keeping the game fun, unlike the Lubbock, Tex., coaches, who had their 11 and 12 year-olds studying game films. A much looser Warner Robins team beat the uptight Texans easily to advance to the finals against Japan.

Therein is Perdue's major criticism of today's athletic programs at all levels: Too much pressure. "It is, after all, a game," he says. "It should be fun, but too many parents — particularly the dads who probably weren't very good athletes themselves — are living vicariously through their children and ruining the experience for them. To those people I say 'Lighten up,' and let the kids enjoy the good lessons that athletics can provide."

What kind of lessons? "The first thing I learned at Little League practice at the age of eight was the sacrifice bunt," he says. "One of the most influential coaches in my life, Charles Davidson, said a sacrifice bunt means you are giving up your chance to get on base in order to advance a teammate. He taught me that athletics isn't about 'you'; it is about the success of the team. The team always comes first. That is a lesson all of us in politics would do well to remember."

He didn't know it at the time, but perhaps the governor's most valuable lesson in athletics came when he walked on at the University of Georgia in 1965, after his successful high school career. "I had some offers from out-of-state," he said, "but I wanted to be a veterinarian, and the University of Georgia was the place I wanted to go. Coach Vince Dooley was in his second year and had already recruited an outstanding group of athletes. Naturally, the emphasis at practice was on those scholarship athletes, not the walk-ons.

"For the first time, I realized what it felt like to be excluded, not to be a part of the 'in club,'" he said. "All of a sudden, I understood how people of other races and those on the low end of the economic scale felt. It's a lesson I never forgot. Doc Ayers, my freshman coach and another important influence in my life, said, 'When you get knocked down, get back up in a hurry.' That's what I did. I began to focus on my career. That experience made me more determined than ever to succeed." Perdue said knowing what it is like to be an underdog was an asset for him when he decided to run for governor against a firmly entrenched and well-financed incumbent.

As we sat in his office, it was obvious he was enjoying a chance to talk about something other than budgets, partisan politics and media sniping, but with staff members slipping him notes and an anteroom of supplicants awaiting an audience, our time was up. There was just one final question I had to ask: What is his official position when Georgia and Georgia Tech meet on the gridiron? "That's easy," Perdue grinned as he left the room, "I'm a 'Dawg.' No way I can feign being ecumenical." Once a Bulldog, always a Bulldog. Woof! Woof!