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Dramatic Publishing

ROUNDING THIRD

by

RICHARD DRESSER



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(ROUNDING THIRD)

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For Rebecca and Sam

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One day my son, Sam, came home from Little League practice and announced that his coaches had provided the team with new strategy for the upcoming playoffs. When one of the slower kids on the team got on base, he'd receive a signal which meant that upon reaching the next base, he should slide and pretend to be injured. That way, the coaches could take him out of the game and replace him



with a faster runner. When Sam said, “Coach, isn’t that cheating?” the coach replied, “No, Sam, that’s called strategy.”

I was horrified. Is this how our children are being trained to deal with competition? How many future Enrons are brewing on our Little League fields and in our school gyms under the watchful eyes of over-zealous coaches? What about building character and encouraging fair play? Or are such notions laughable in this country at this point in history? At that moment I knew that I had to write *Rounding Third*. But, as the play was germinating in my head, I found myself thrust more intimately into the fray, first as an assistant coach and then as the coach of my son’s team.

Philosophically, there was no question about where I stood. Little League should be fun and the kids should be encouraged to progress at their own speed, free of the overwhelming pressure that awaits them in practically every aspect of their lives, just around the corner.

And yet, when I found myself actually coaching, I discovered that I wanted to win. I really wanted to win. That voice I heard bellowing across the diamond was, sadly, my own. Perhaps to rationalize the extent of these feelings, I concluded that since we

live in such a highly competitive society, don't we have an obligation to teach our children how to succeed? Given that this is the arena where they will be playing out their lives, shouldn't we equip them with the tools it takes to win?

By the time I wrote the play, I believed passionately in these opposing points of view. We should protect and nurture our children during this brief, precious time in their lives. And we should teach them how to compete and how to win.

The two mismatched coaches in *Rounding Third*, the “win at all costs” Don and the “can't we just have fun?” Michael, reflect this conflict. In my mind, they never agree and they are both right. And as they struggle to communicate their opposing philosophies to the team, they reveal who they are. The play ultimately became an exploration of what it is to be a man in this culture, how having children changes one's self-perceptions, and what it truly means to succeed.

Now, when I hear Don's exhortations to the team—which are delivered directly to the audience—I hear the voices of the many coaches I've had, starting with my first year of Little League. And I hear my own voice, more impatiently than I'd like, instructing, imploring, urging the team on to victory.

And when I hear Michael encouraging the team after a tough loss or fervently praying for his own hapless son to catch his first fly ball of the season, I hear the hopefulness and the innocence that seems both entirely appropriate and somewhat out of touch.

The horror I felt at hearing my son's description of his coach's “strategy” provided a powerful trigger to write a play. But writing the play was an act of discovery, reflecting my own conflicts about how we live with some kind of dignity and raise our children in a culture so ruthlessly obsessed with material success.

— RD

Photo of Rick and Sam Dresser by Mike Disciullo

ROUNDING THIRD

A Play in Two Acts
For 2 Men

CHARACTERS

DON, a man

MICHAEL, a man

TIME: Next season

PLACE: A small town near a big city in the United States
of America.

The play is performed on a set featuring a ballfield with a
bench, a bar, a van and a school gym.

The Northlight Theatre in Chicago, Illinois, presented the premiere production of ROUNDING THIRD on October 15, 2002. The production was directed by BJ Jones and included the following artists:

Don GEORGE WENDT
Michael MATHEW ARKIN

PRODUCTION STAFF

Set Design TODD ROSENTHAL
Lighting Design CHRIS BINDER
Sound Design LINDSAY JONES
Production Stage Manager LAURA D. GLENN

ROUNDING THIRD opened off-Broadway at the John Houseman Theater in New York City on October 7, 2003. It was produced by Eric Krebs, Ted Tulchin, Robert G. Bartner and Chase Mishkin in association with M. Kilburg Reedy. The production was directed by John Rando and featured the following artists:

Don ROBERT CLOHESSY
Michael MATHEW ARKIN

PRODUCTION STAFF

Set Design DEREK MCLANE
Lighting Design F. MITCHELL DANA
Original Music ROBERT REALE
Sound Design JILL B.C. DUBOFF
Production Stage Manager JACK GIANINO
General Management EKTJ/JONATHAN SHULMAN
Casting Consultant BARRY MOSS
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GANDY
Production Supervision PETER FEUCHTWANGER/PRF
PRODUCTIONS

ACT I

(A BAR. DON is at a small table nursing a beer. MICHAEL enters.)

DON. Are you Mike?

MICHAEL. Michael. Yes. You must be Donald.

DON. Don. Never Donald. Don.

MICHAEL. Great. Don. Well, hello. *(Sits down at the table.)* I'm not late, am I?

DON. No, no way. But let's not make a habit of it, okay?

MICHAEL. I got hung up at work. What a crazy day! I was trying to leave and something came up and I never thought I'd finish. Then, well, long story short, I finished.

DON. Nice going. You want something to drink?

MICHAEL. No, I'm fine. But thanks so much for asking.

DON. You honestly didn't know who I was when you showed up?

MICHAEL. We've never met. Have we?

DON. No. But I figured you'd know *of* me even if you didn't know me.

MICHAEL. You're pretty well known?

DON. Let's just say...yes. People who go out of their houses tend to know who I am. You're not a shut-in, are you, Mike?

MICHAEL. Michael. Oh, no. I get out a lot. Every single day.

DON. Good for you.

MICHAEL. I'm just new.

DON. That explains it. How new?

MICHAEL. A few months.

DON. Beautiful. Like it so far?

MICHAEL. Overall. People have been—

DON (*cutting him off*). That's just the kind of place it is.

And the people get more like that the longer you stay.

Sure you don't want a beer?

MICHAEL. Sorry.

DON. Don't apologize, man.

MICHAEL. Right.

DON. I mean if it's a problem, hell, it's a disease, some of my best friends, out of the bar, into the program, back to the wife, who are we to judge? But honestly, Mikey, just between you and me, they sure as hell aren't as much fun.

MICHAEL. I just don't want a beer, Don.

DON. You said that.

MICHAEL. I mean I don't have a problem, if that's what you're thinking.

DON. I'm not thinking anything. It's just interesting how you keep bringing it up.

MICHAEL. I want to be clear.

DON. Got it. But if you do have a problem, it's not your fault. Because it's a disease. You wouldn't blame someone for having cancer, would you, Mike?

MICHAEL. Not me.

DON. So I think we should be understanding rather than judgmental. I think that's important.

MICHAEL. I'm pretty sure we're on the same page.

DON. Well, enough preliminary chit-chat, let's get started.

MICHAEL. Perfecto!

DON. Incidentally, Mike, you and I will be spending a lot of time together. So if I choose to unwind with a beer, there's no need for an intervention. I don't have that particular disease. Just so we understand each other.

MICHAEL. This is not an issue with me. You do whatever you want to do.

DON. Thanks. Nice to get permission from the new guy. Mike, if there's one key to my own personal success it would be this: I draft well.

MICHAEL. Nice going! *(Beat.)* What exactly does that mean?

DON. Getting new kids on the team. My son, Jimmy, he watches the other kids play at school and he clues me in. Who the best prospects are, so we can be smart in the draft and not stupid. We're in sweet shape. Eight kids are coming back from last year. Which means we only draft four.

MICHAEL. That's good. A solid core of able-bodied returnees.

DON. I guess you could put it like that. Jimmy also helped me compile a list of kids to avoid.

MICHAEL. All the kids get on teams, right?

DON. Of course! Like I said, this is all about the kids. But the ones you'd like to avoid are the ones who'd rather be in *Brigadoon*, you know what I'm saying?

MICHAEL. Just as long as everyone gets a chance.

DON. Mike, you can relax. Your kid got a very good scouting report from my kid.

MICHAEL. Really? Wow. Don, that means a lot. I'm embarrassed.

DON. Why are you embarrassed?

MICHAEL. Look at me. My eyes are misting up. This is very emotional. This is big. I'm sorry. Whew.

DON (*long look, then to clipboard*). Hits to all fields, strong arm, needs work on ground balls.

MICHAEL. How much work?

DON. Hey, it's Little League. All the kids have trouble with ground balls.

MICHAEL. Oh, good. Misery loves company. They'll miss the ball and strike out and run to the wrong base—

DON. Whoa! Not that.

MICHAEL. Not what?

DON. No one on my team runs to the wrong base. I'll never yell at the kids for physical errors, but mental errors, they'll get an earful. They need to learn the mental side of the game or what are we doing, Mike?

MICHAEL. Excuse me?

DON. We're jerking off.

MICHAEL. Oh.

DON. In which case we don't need to make schedules and practice—

MICHAEL. Definitely don't need to practice!

DON. What's that, Mike?

MICHAEL. I'm just saying...we don't need to practice...

DON. I'm afraid I don't understand. We don't need to practice?

MICHAEL. Jerking off.

DON (*long look, then turns to clipboard*). Here's the other list. Philip Bailey, Douglas French, Arthur Camilli, Frank Nassiter-Wise...don't you just love the hyphenated kids?

MICHAEL. What exactly is this list, Don?

DON. Bottom line, these are kids we do not want on our team.

MICHAEL. I think we might have a little problem with Frank Nassiter-Wise.

DON. Oh, I'm sure we'd have many problems with Frank Nassiter-Wise if he ended up on the team. Which, may I say, is highly unlikely?

MICHAEL. He's my son.

DON. Frank Nassiter-Wise is your son?

MICHAEL. Yes, he is. And I was told he'd be on this team.

DON. You're Johnson. Mike Johnson.

MICHAEL. Michael Johnson.

DON. I thought Dan Johnson was yours. The kid that can hit to all fields.

MICHAEL. I'm Johnson. My son is Nassiter-Wise.

DON. How come?

MICHAEL. How come? Because of my wife's first marriage.

DON. Boy oh boy. My mistake. Somebody get this goddamn egg off my face.

MICHAEL. Don't worry about it.

DON. I just stepped in it up to my ass. Jesus Christ. Great start, huh?

MICHAEL. Really, Don, it's okay.

DON. But I have to say, in my own defense, it's pretty confusing. How come you didn't get your own name up there on the marquee along with Nassiter and Wise?

MICHAEL. I guess at a certain point the child starts to sound like a law firm.

DON. Mikey, baby, what can I say? We all love our kids, I didn't know he was your kid, I'm a big enough man to

say I'm sorry. Even though I feel totally blind-sided by this whole Nassiter-Wise bullshit.

MICHAEL. Don't beat yourself up, Don. What concerns me is this policy of blackballing kids who don't have much experience.

DON. Nobody's blackballing anybody. My first obligation is to the kids. Every one of which will play, as long as they get there on time. But if I can field a better team, why shouldn't I do that? Wouldn't you rather win than lose, given the choice?

MICHAEL. Well...

DON. That's just common sense. So I talk to my son and you know kids, they shoot off their crazy little motor-mouths and act like experts—

MICHAEL. What did he say about Frank?

DON. Huh?

MICHAEL. What did your son say about my son?

DON. Said he's good. Good little player. Potential up the butt.

MICHAEL. Could I please see the clipboard?

DON. I'm sorry, Mike. There's stuff on this clipboard no other man will ever see.

MICHAEL. What did he say?

DON. You understand you are asking me to break a sacred covenant with my son?

MICHAEL. I'd like to know what was said.

DON. Your boy, Frank, apparently has areas where he could improve.

MICHAEL. Like...?

DON. Like hitting, fielding, running, throwing, general understanding of the game. Okay? Fact, I don't judge; all the kids need improvement. And rest assured every kid

on my team will learn and grow and sportsmanship and fun and how much goddamn baseball has your son actually played?

MICHAEL. He's played some soccer.

DON. Okay. Good. I wouldn't say the skills are directly transferable...but, hey, silver lining, this makes the draft easier. We're only looking for three kids.

MICHAEL. There you go.

DON. Mike, full disclosure, I demand a lot from my assistant coach in terms of time and involvement. If this isn't as serious a commitment as the one you'd make to your job or your marriage, I would respectfully suggest you bow out.

MICHAEL. Thanks, but I want to make a contribution.

DON. All I'm saying is: take a night to think about it.

MICHAEL. I've already thought about it. That's why I'm here. But I appreciate your concern.

DON. You know what I'm saying. Kick it around in your mental mind. Go back and forth. Throw things up in the air and see where they land. Promise me that?

MICHAEL. I'm sorry, Don.

DON. You're telling me you won't even rethink it for me?

MICHAEL. I could tell you I'm going to rethink it but I'd be lying because I've already made my decision. I don't want to start out by lying to you, Don.

DON. Sure, that can come later. Then I have no choice but to grit my teeth and welcome you as my assistant coach.
(They shake hands.)

MICHAEL. Thanks! Can't wait to roll up the old sleeve-a-rooneys and get started!

DON. So. I gotta pick up Chinese, Jimmy's at the orthodontist, wife's at group. You know, sometimes people

do things, people you love and honest to God, you could choke the life right out of them and plant them under the pool and sleep like a baby, you know what I mean?

MICHAEL. Right.

DON. You do understand what I mean?

MICHAEL. I think so. I mean...in theory.

DON. Interesting. I can handle the draft solo, first practice is Saturday.

MICHAEL. There's still snow on the ground.

DON. We'll be in the school gym. You can tell a lot about a boy by the way he handles ground balls rocketing up at him off the gym floor.

MICHAEL. It's really going to be a great season, Coach.

DON. God willing, and if we got the pitching. Thanks for helping. A good assistant coach is a treasure. I know from the last three years. Tony Barone. What a prize. Dedication, commitment, excellent teaching skills, deep knowledge of the game. And very punctual.

MICHAEL. Sounds like there's only one Tony Barone, but I'll do my best, Coach.

DON. Good to hear. And Mike, please be on time. (*MICHAEL leaves.*)

(A SCHOOL GYM. DON blows his whistle. Then he addresses the team [the audience] at the first practice. Nearby, baseball equipment is scattered next to a duffel bag.)

DON (*continuing*). Unfortunately, we don't have much time this morning. The Pep Club has the gym at ten, so I'll keep this brief. First, congratulations! You're the luckiest kids in town. You're on my team. I can promise

you'll work hard, learn a lot, and have fun. How do we have fun playing baseball? One word. Winning. Winning is fun. Losing stinks. I hope that isn't new information. I don't have a lot of rules. The main one is this: I am in charge, and what I say goes, without any backtalk or eye-rolling or wise-guy questions. When I blow my whistle? *(He blows the whistle.)* You run to me. If you dawdle, no problem, you just don't play the next game. Get to the ballpark half an hour before game time. "Is twenty-nine minutes good enough, Coach?" Sorry. "It's my parents' fault I'm late." Tough. Have your parents talk to me and I don't think we'll have any problems, assuming you remain on the squad. If you ask to play a particular position—"Coach, can I play short-stop?"—I guarantee you won't play shortstop for five games. That's it for rules. I keep them to a minimum and I take them seriously. *(Checks out the team.)* I'm glad to see most of you are wearing the equipment we suggested. *(Picking someone out.)* Philip? Philip Bailey? It is Phil, isn't it? Nice going, remembering to wear the cup. F.Y.I., it's traditionally worn *inside* the pants. But that's an interesting look, it could catch on. Whoa, you can make that change later, Phil! *(Beat.)* Now, we all drop fly balls, miss grounders, make bad throws, that's baseball. Those are called physical errors, and I will never yell at you over physical errors. What is it called when we forget how many outs there are or throw to the wrong base? Anyone? Those are mental errors, and yes, my friends, you *will* hear from me about mental errors.

(MICHAEL enters with two take-out cups of coffee.)

MICHAEL. Hi, Coach Don. Hello, team! Looking sharp!

DON. Well, look who's here! Our brand new assistant coach. We'd about given up on you, Mike.

MICHAEL. Sorry. I guess I'm just a few minutes late.

DON. Eleven, but who's counting? *(To MICHAEL's son.)*

Just find a seat in the bleachers, Frank. Oops! You okay?

MICHAEL. He couldn't find his glasses. I got you a mocha latte, Don. Extra foam, didn't know how you like it. *(MICHAEL gives DON the coffee.)*

DON. Much appreciated, Mike! Since this isn't the ladies' sewing club I think I'll save it for later. *(DON tosses the coffee into the trash.)*

MICHAEL. Don't care for the mocha? Or was it the latte?

DON. Cards on the table, Mike, I like plain old American coffee. But thanks anyway. *(To the team.)* Hey, anybody from last year remember how many times former assistant coach Tony was late? That's right. Once. *(To MICHAEL.)* Tony's a policeman. One day, stopping a burglary, he got himself shot in the groin area. What a sickening, bloody mess. He was ten minutes late to practice that day. So as long as you have a good excuse, you won't hear a peep from me. What's your excuse, Assistant Coach Mike?

MICHAEL. It was really unbelievable traffic.

DON. Fair enough, can't be helped. Unless of course you allow enough time to get here. I'm just outlining bullet points of what the kids can expect. *(MICHAEL's cell phone rings.)*

MICHAEL. Uh-oh. I think I have to take this. *(MICHAEL turns away and talks quietly on the phone. DON turns to the team.)*