

Why Clemson's Coach Inspires His Team To 'Remember The Titans'

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Clemson Tigers players celebrate defeating the Oklahoma Sooners (Photo by Streeter Lecka/Getty Images)

After the Clemson Tigers came from behind to win a regular season game, coach Dabo Swinney said, “Our team believes. I tell them ‘you’ve got greatness in you, but you’ve got to make a decision to be great’ and they made a decision to be great today.” If this line sounds like it’s out of a movie, it very well might be. According to [this Wall Street Journal](#) article, while most coaches are breaking down game film on the night before a game, Swinney’s players are watching cinematic movies. By doing so the players— who face Alabama in the 2016 national championship game— draw inspiration from the characters, their struggles and their successes.

According to the *WSJ* article, “On the night before every game of his No. 1-ranked team’s undefeated regular season, Swinney has sent his team to the movies. Then, once the lights come up and the players return home, Swinney holds a meeting to impart a lesson or theme drawn from the film to motivate, inspire or focus them on the following day’s challenge.”

It’s not the movie itself that ultimately motivates Swinney’s players; it’s the lesson that the relentlessly positive Swinney applies from the films. He takes a line from the movie, a scene or a theme and uses it as a teaching

moment. For example, after the team saw *The Martian* with Matt Damon, Swinney used the film to reinforce the lesson of dealing with the cards you've been dealt to overcome adversity. "Bloom where you're planted," he told the players.

Movies can inspire teams even better than speeches in many cases because of what professor Melanie Brock calls "transportation theory." When a person watches a well-told story on film, they become absorbed in the character's struggle and transported to the world of narrative. Remarkably, Hollywood is so effective at storytelling that movies often have the effect of changing our real-world beliefs long after they end.

Remember the Titans is one of Swinney's favorite movies. It's easy to see why. Denzel Washington's depiction of a football coach unifying his team despite the racial discord that grips the town is based on the true story of Coach Herman Boone. One of the most memorable scenes is when coach Boone is so fed up with the tension among the team members he drags them out of bed at 3:00 a.m. and leads them through a long hike in the woods to the battle field at Gettysburg.

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"Fifty-thousand men died right here, fightin' the same fight that we're still fightin' amongst ourselves today...take a lesson from the dead. If we don't come together, right now, on this hallowed ground, we too will be destroyed," says the character. It's hard not to be inspired upon watching the scene, even though we know it's not real. It is real to your mind's eye.

"Facts inform while stories transform," says Jeremy Kagan at the USC School of Cinematic Arts. Kagan oversees the Change Making Media Lab at USC, a program that leverages dramatic narrative to make educational films. Kagan believes that film is the most effective way to influence the way young people perceive the world.

"Stories that are personal and emotionally compelling engage more of the brain, and thus are better remembered, than simply stating a set of facts," says Dr. Paul Zak at Claremont Graduate University. Zak and his colleagues have identified oxytocin as the brain chemical most in play when someone is watching, listening, or reading a narrative that 'transports' them to another place. Zak says oxytocin is the neurochemical responsible for empathy and team building. "Stories can motivate us, like the characters in them, to look inside ourselves and make changes to become better people," says Zak.

According to Zak, the form in which the story takes seems to matter. Listening to someone read a story is good, but it doesn't have the same effect as watching the characters come alive on a screen. Zak's conclusion: "Go see a movie and laugh and cry. It's good for your brain, and just might motivate you to make positive changes in your life and in others' lives as well."

Zak is in the lab and coach Dabo Swinney is on the field, but both have arrived at the same conclusion: the secret to encouraging a team to work together is transport them to another place, and film is the one of the best transportation methods we have. Want to get your team fired up? Take them to the movies.

Carmine Gallo is a keynote speaker, communication coach, and author of several bestsellers. Download a free chapter from his new book, [The Storyteller's Secret](#).