Here's a sample from A Higher Court

CHAPTER 1
DAD'S DEATH

I couldn't really blame the soccer mom for ending my father's life. While she sat at the wheel of her SUV, her fourth-grade son bludgeoned her third-grade daughter with his shin pad in the back seat, causing a momentary distraction. That was all it had taken for her to miss seeing Dad step into the crosswalk.

The accident could have happened to anyone. It just turned out to be Dad.

Better him than a father of young children. One could give thanks for that much. My siblings and I were all middle-aged. Dad was 74. We could as easily have lost him to a heart attack or stroke. He was a heavy smoker, after all. As fate would have it, it was this poor woman's truck that had claimed his life.

My family had already learned there is never a good time for death. We'd lost Mom to cancer a few years ago. The ordeal had been agony. Her dying was a prolonged and painful process. Not like Dad's. At least Dad hadn't suffered.

But swift or slow, death is unpleasant, whenever and wherever it happens.

We held Dad's visitation at the funeral home the evening before we planned to bury his body. My siblings and I (two sisters and myself – the sole surviving male in the Kensey family) stood in the receiving line, shaking hands and exchanging hugs with well-wishers. We spared our children the ordeal of joining in that ritual. They gathered in a separate suite of rooms at the funeral home, exchanging Grandpa stories with their cousins.

No one is comfortable on either side of a funeral receiving line. There really isn't a ‘right' thing to say to the family. Or a correct response either. Standing until your feet ache, and robotically hugging near-total strangers, is just part of the dying process. It must be done.
Lined up for hours, we heard some of the more common condolences many times over.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"He was such a good man. It's a shame he died so young."

"You have our sincerest sympathy. Is there anything we can do? Maybe bring over lasagna?"
And then there was the occasional fool who insisted on explaining Dad's death to us.
"I know you'll miss him. But I'm sure it's for the best. It must be part of God's plan."
‘God's plan.' What I wouldn't give to have a clue as to what ‘God's plan' was. Whatever plan God had in mind, I'm pretty sure Dad getting run over by a two-ton vehicle on a sunny afternoon wasn't part of it. Nor the life-long guilt the young mother at the wheel would suffer.

‘God's plan.' What a crock!

The funeral was held the morning after the visitation at the Lutheran church I had grown up in, and of which Dad was still a member at his death. The place was packed with folks paying their last respects. Dad was a well-liked guy.

The minister offered moving words about my father from the pulpit. He was a "good man, a loving husband and father, and a child of God." He spoke for quite a while. But I was distracted – unprepared to focus on a sermon today.

When the minister had finished, I delivered the eulogy.

Standing there, a middle-aged man in a black lawyer's suit, I grasped both sides of the pulpit and hung my head. Rotating my well-coiffed graying hair solemnly side to side, I prepared to speak.
Most congregants probably thought I was praying. Actually, I was just setting the proper mood for the eulogy I was about to present.

My eulogy was short. But it hit the high points of my father's existence. I shared anecdotes extolling the great husband, father and grandfather Dad had been through the years. There were some tears from the mourners when I mentioned Mom's death.

When it came time to lighten the mood, I produced a large, green zucchini squash and laid it on the pulpit in plain view. There was laughter when I reminded everyone how Dad had forcibly shared his bountiful zucchini harvest with every sorry soul unfortunate enough to pass by his garden when the crop was at its peak.

After the service, the immediate family attended the committal at the cemetery. Oakwood would normally be a beautiful and peaceful place to visit on a late August morning. Today, I would rather have stood almost anywhere else.

‘Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.'

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I see. Is that all there is to it? Really?

We watched Dad's casket descend into the rectangular hole in the warm brown earth. My sisters sobbed. Some of the grandkids ran around the cemetery, playing tag among the elms. Others stood, shell-shocked at the grave side.

No one wanted to throw the first shovelful of dirt on Dad. So the reverend just gave us all his blessings and wished us well.

The committal was over. We were off to the reception back in the church fellowship hall.
As I rode in the rear of a black limo with my wife and two somber daughters, I wondered why I wasn't feeling more emotional about Dad's passing. I had loved him, certainly. Shouldn't his death make me sad, or angry, or something?

I just felt numb.

And where was he now? In heaven?

That's what I'd been taught through years of Lutheran upbringing. He had ‘ascended' and was with his ‘Heavenly Father.' I think my trouble believing all the memorized dogma was that, as a lawyer, I have both an innate skepticism of anything unprovable, and a tendency to remain vigilant for ways any circumstance can go wrong. Those traits certainly benefit my clients. They were not helpful to me today.

I hoped Dad had gone to heaven. But I was far from sure of it. He might just be . . . dead.

Frankly, I felt more compassion for the unfortunate woman who had killed Dad, than I did grief over Dad's death itself. What was wrong with me? Or was this just the way things are . . . the way they should be?

When we arrived back at the church, the pastor must have sensed my ambivalence. He pulled me aside to ask if I was okay.

"Sure."

"You seem distracted . . . distant. Is there any way I can help?"

"I don't think so Reverend. I'm good. I mean, I'm all right under the circumstances."

"Are you sure I couldn't say a prayer with you? Ask for God's peace for you and your family?"

"Ah . . . go ahead and say that prayer, Reverend. But I think I need to be with my wife and kids right now."

"As you wish. God bless you."

"You, too. Gotta go."

Praying and preaching and church etiquette had always given me the creeps. The last thing I wanted to do was hold some preacher's hand while he prayed for me. The thought sent shivers down my spine. I beat a hasty retreat to the safety of the mourning throng.

Dad was dead. Wasn't that bad enough? Should I have to confront religious zealots as well? I didn't think so.

Later that night, after the kids had retreated to their rooms, my wife, Jen, asked how I was doing.
"Fine. How ‘bout you?"

"I'm okay, Hon," she said. "I'm just a little worried about you, that's all. You seemed a little . . . distant . . . today."

"Jen. I'm sort of surprised how ill-at-ease I felt with the church ceremonies, the out-pouring of emotions from Dad's friends and the whole ‘ritual' of it all. I'm Lutheran, am I not? It shouldn't have seemed so . . . weird. Should it?

"I mean, if funerals are supposed to be for the deceased's family, I don't see why. I probably wouldn't have gone to the funeral at all if people didn't expect me to be there."

Jen slid over, nuzzling her head on my chest as we sat on the couch.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Sorry for what?" I asked without emotion.

"Sorry your faith hasn't brought you comfort today."

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

"I imagine that my ‘faith,' or lack of it, is likely at the root of my discomfort. I'll work my way through it. You don't need to worry. I'm a grown man, you know. I can deal with these things."
"I love you," Jen said.

"You too, Jen. So . . . how about we turn in? I'm beat."

CHAPTER 2
THE SUMMONS

The morning after Dad's funeral was a Saturday. I hadn't slept well and awoke at 6:00 a.m. My lack of distress over Dad's death still troubled me. I brewed some coffee and sat in the living room to read yesterday's paper, which remained largely untouched.

Jen and the kids were still sleeping when the mail arrived at 9:00.

As I stood in my slippers and robe leafing through the usual collection of magazines, bills and junk mail, one item stood out. The business-size envelope was made of heavy linen stock and gleamed a bright white. In the upper left corner, the return address proclaimed: ‘United States District Court, District of Minnesota.' An official-looking seal dominated the back flap. The letter was addressed to William Laurence Kensey and marked: ‘OPEN IMMEDIATELY. DATED MATERIAL.'

Tossing the rest of the mailbox contents on the kitchen table, I slit the top of the envelope open with my forefinger and slid out the single sheet of white paper inside.

A Jury Summons. The Federal Court was calling me for jury duty.

The Summons instructed me to appear at the seventh floor Clerk of Court's Office in the United States Federal Courthouse, downtown Minneapolis, a week from this coming Monday at 8:00 a.m.
Initially, I was irritated at the impending disruption to my work schedule. Then I decided that the day off from work, cloistered with a jury pool of strangers, might actually give me a chance to sort out my feelings about Dad's death in silence . . . and without having someone pestering to pray with me.

A familiar sound interrupted my contemplation.

"Good morning, Daddy," my daughters sang in unison as they skipped down the stairs, still wearing their summer PJs, their voices cheerful with the new day.

"Morning girls."

"What's for breakfast?" sixteen year old Annie asked, glancing at the void on the kitchen table, and sounding a bit disenfranchised. Annie was a slender blonde, like her mother. Meticulous and bright, she was a model student. She had reached the age where her parents' collective IQ was in free fall – but she usually put up with us in a respectful manner.

"Anybody want pancakes?" I asked, tucking the Summons into my robe pocket. The girls' favorite breakfast.

"Yay!"

"Okay. I'll tell you what. If you two will go out to the garden and pick some flowers for your mother, I'll get the griddle going."

"Deal," twelve-year-old Shannon called, heading for the patio doors.

Shannon favored my Irish blood. All red hair and freckles, she was full of questions, and could be stubborn as hell. I was sure this latter trait would serve her well one day . . . but for right now, it often made her a handful. She had embraced the flower project though. So out the door they both went.

Twenty minutes later, Jen had arisen, and all four of us Kenseys were gathered around the breakfast table. We said grace, after which the kids attacked the stack of pancakes like a pride of starving lions. Jen and I smiled at each other. Neither of us was a big breakfast eater. We each took a single cake, leaving extras in case the kids wanted seconds.

The girls had collected a bouquet of late-blooming tulips, which Annie had arranged precisely in a tall, clear vase and displayed on the table.

After Shannon had stuffed her mouth with pancake drenched in maple syrup, she stood up and plucked one of the tulips from the vase.

Annie expressed irritation.

"Dad, Shannon just messed up the flowers. Those flowers are for Mom."

"It's all right, Annie. Mom doesn't mind." I glanced at Jen, who was shaking her head in agreement. "And they still look beautiful."

Annie gave her younger sister a dirty look.

"And Shannon, what's up with the flower pilfering?"

"Daddy look." She held out the tulip toward me. "This one has two flowers instead of one. It's special."

Shannon was, of course, correct. The flower she held was an oddity. Unlike the other tulips in the vase, the one in her hand had grown a second blossom, which protruded oddly from its oval stem.
"Why does this one have two flowers instead of just one, like the others?" Shannon wanted to know.
Her frown demanded an answer.

"It's a mutant," Annie jumped in. "Its DNA is screwed up. It's a freak flower." Annie seemed to take just a smidgen of pleasure in deriding her sister's discovery.
"Hey! Hey! Hey! It is not a ‘freak flower.' " I glanced purposefull

y at Annie, who lowered her head a tiny bit. "It's just different, that's all," I said toward Shannon. "God made it that way."

Jen and I had been using the ‘God made it that way' answer with the girls all their lives. It generally defused an endless series of ‘why' questions.

"But, Dad," Annie objected, "that's not true. That stem is supposed to only have one flower on it. We learned it in biology. It probably started out normal and something happened to its DNA. So now it's a mutant," she said, flicking a glance at Shannon.

Parenting had become more challenging as the girls got older. Jen smiled through a sip from her coffee mug, peering at me over its rim to see what I would say next.

"My flower is not a mutant! Tell her, Daddy."

"I don't think we need to blow this out of proportion, girls. Maybe something changed the flower to make it grow this way. But maybe God made that something happen. Seems to me that two blossoms are better than one." I was pretty pleased with the cleverness of my solution.
"That's not how it works, Dad." Annie wasn't satisfied. "The flower DNA starts out as a perfect blueprint to grow the flower," she recited. "Then something like nuclear radiation, or chemicals, or . . . or flower mutant disease made it into a mutant! God doesn't make mutants."

Annie and Shannon exchanged looks that could easily have been accompanied by protruding tongues.

I wasn't prepared to get into the details of Darwin's theory of evolution at the breakfast table.
"But, Annie," I said. "Maybe God wanted to make this flower special, and He used the chemicals in insecticides or fertilizer to help Him do the job."

Annie looked doubtful.

"We could go back and forth on this for hours," Jen said. "You girls are done eating. Put your dishes in the dishwasher, please. Then go find something fun to do outside. It's too beautiful a day to be inside arguing."

Both girls complied.

When the dishes were in the washer, Shannon grasped her special flower by the stem, skipped out of the room and headed up the stairs, sing-song taunting as she went – "God made me a flower. God made me a flower."

Annie followed close behind. "You're both mutants!"

The girls were gone. Jen smiled at me. We finished our coffee in peace.

CHAPTER 3
THE VOLLEYBALL TOURNAMENT

Exactly one week after the ‘mutant flower incident,' as Jen and I had come to refer to it, another Saturday morning rolled around –  just as the calendar had predicted. But today was not a day for thoughts of genetic anomalies, or pondering Grandpa's death. This day promised excitement and heightened emotions for the entire Kensey family . . . and for St. Paul's Academy as well.

Perhaps it's an overstatement to say that all of St. Paul's would be excited about today. But certainly its volleyball players were wound up.

Today was the day of our athletic conference's pre-season tournament. All sixteen of the conference schools would be there, vying for the early honor of "Conference Tournament Champion."

Particularly on edge would be a B-Squad outside hitter named Annie Kensey, and her father, the team's Coach. I'm sure other players and parents shared in the excitement. I know we felt it acutely at our house.

To understand the context of this tournament, and its import to the teams involved, one needs to know a few things about our school and the East Minnie Conference.

St. Paul's is a 250 student, grade nine through twelve, non-denominational Christian school where we had enrolled Annie, not for its religious roots, but for the quality of education it offered. St. Paul's had a long-standing reputation for turning out top college academic candidates. Not so much for grooming college athletes or ministers.

Most schools in the East Minnie had roughly the same enrollment as St. Paul's. In other words, the conference name reflected not only its presence in Minnesota, but also the tiny size of its constituent institutions. The thought of playing a volleyball team from the East Minnie didn't exactly put the fear of God into most opponents.

Annie and I had been involved in volleyball since she joined a club team at age ten. I wasn't much of a volleyball guru at the time. But I volunteered to assist the team's coach, who frankly, knew little more about volleyball than I.

In those early years, I  memorized the volleyball rule book, and got my hands on every youth coaching text I could find. I began networking with more advanced and knowledgeable coaches – picking their brains for valuable insights. I even earned an advanced volleyball coaching certificate from USA Volleyball . . . the Olympic volleyball folks.

In short – and in keeping with my compulsive reluctance to perform any task ‘half-way' – over the course of Annie's five years of playing the sport, I had become a highly over-qualified youth volleyball coach.
When I asked St. Paul's if they would consider allowing me to coach Annie's teams in school ball, they were happy to have my assistance for the unpaid, and predominantly revolving-door, position.
All of which leads us to this Saturday's Tournament.

Although not meaningful in the scheme of state competitions, regional titles, or even ‘official' conference records, the tournament had taken on an outsized importance to its participants. It was a battle to be the big frog in the little puddle – at least for one day. And for the B Squad teams . . . a less big frog in an even tinier puddle.

But it was our puddle, nevertheless.

The B Squad Tournament was to be held in the Scottfield High gym. Our team arrived early, as I had requested. And by the time of our first contest, we were ready to play

.
Being avid volleyball fans, Jen and Shannon were always present in the bleachers, cheering their heads off for St. Paul's.

Our first victory came easily. The opposition struggled to even return our serves. This caliber of play was not uncommon in the East Minnie. Sometimes the team that was able to put its serves in play was able to win the day on the basis of that skill alone. (That's partly why, at St. Paul's, we focused a good deal on serving in practice.)

The Tournament proceeded throughout the day. The cream puffs had been eliminated in the first round. Subsequent matches required every bit of playing and coaching skills our team could bring to bear.

Partly because of team effort and execution, and partly owing to fortuity, St. Paul's advanced through the tournament to the semi-final round. Just four teams left out of a field of sixteen.
It was at the beginning of the semi-final match that I couldn't avoid noticing the arrival on site of a late-coming parent of one of my players. John Lester was a surly fellow, known more for his candor than his socially appropriate delivery of the same.

Early in the first set I could hear his grumblings from the bleachers. He wanted more playing time for his daughter, Kaitlen.

From the bench, using face and hand gestures, Kait tried to shush him. But he refused to be shushed. With the passing of each set, his presence in the stands became more and more pronounced.

Toward the end of the last set, he was yelling at me to "For God's sake, coach. Let ‘er play."
He was correct that his daughter was not getting a lot of playing time during this tournament. But Kait understood why and was okay with it.

One of the skills I had acquired early in my coaching career was clear communication with players and parents. Each season, I went out of my way to explain my coaching philosophy – both orally at a player-parent meeting, and then again in a writing sent home with each player. Mr. Lester did not attend the meeting.

These communications reinforced my philosophy that life lessons are more important than volleyball skills.
We had five team rules. Every year they were the same.

Show Respect.

Communicate Positively.

Try.

Make Mistakes.

No walking in the practice gym.

Players would receive court time in matches based on their adherence to the above five rules, and their ‘readiness to play.'

Unless a player had committed a serious violation (e.g. repeatedly missing practice; using drugs or alcohol; fighting; disrupting practices, etc.), every player would receive appropriate playing time in every match.

All the players knew these rules well, since I reinforced them – by complimenting appropriate behaviors – at every practice.

Unlike nearly all of the other players on our team, who were serious about improving their volleyball skills, Kaitlen's involvement in the program was mainly social. At our team's level of volleyball expertise – and given the players' young ages – Kaitlen's motivations were, in my mind, entirely appropriate.

But since she did little to comply with the team rules at practice . . . especially the ‘Try' rule . . . I had told her only two days ago about the limited role she would play in today's matches. She indicated her understanding and assured me that she would pass this information along to her parents – which may or may not have happened.

Back at the tournament, St. Paul's managed to win our semi-final match, despite Mr. Lester's distracting behavior. The team was ecstatic.

Now we had an hour-long break while the other semi-final contestants battled it out. I congratulated the girls on their stellar performances on the volleyball court. Then instructed them to relax, drink something and have a light snack, whether they were thirsty or hungry or not.
We broke from our game-end huddle. The players went their ways, and I found a table where I could plan out lineups and strategies for our next match.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Lester sought me out.

I saw his hulking frame approaching and stood to greet him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Lester. Good to see you.  I'm glad you were able to make it for our final two matches."

I extended my hand to shake.

He scowled, brushing my hand aside brusquely.

"Who the Hell do you think you are?" he said in a hushed tone.

"I beg your pardon?" I responded, calmly. "I'm your daughter's coach."

 "Don't be a smart-ass with me, Boy. Kaitlen hardly played at all in that last match. This is kid's volleyball for God's sake. They should all get to play."

It was apparent that logic was not going to help me deal with Mr. Lester. I took a step closer to Mr. Lester, just to let him know I wasn't intimidated.

Not wishing to create a scene, my voice was also quiet.

"Kaitlen plays. And her playing time is exactly what I promised it would be at the beginning of the season. I'm sorry if you're unhappy with the situation. But grousing to me isn't going to change anything."

It appeared that Mr. Lester's negotiation arsenal was limited to intimidation tactics. This was understandable given his considerable size.

"Don't give me that shit! I expect to see Kaitlen on that court at least as much as any other player this next match, or I'll have you thrown out as coach. You got it?"

Mr. Lester didn't appreciate that, since I was an unpaid volunteer, his having me removed as coach, if he could do it, would not be a grave inconvenience to me.

"I understand your position, Mr. Lester." My voice was still quiet. And I kept my temper under control. "Now please, allow me to plan my rotations and prepare for our next match."

Mr. Lester wasn't sure if he'd accomplished his goal or not. But parents and players were beginning to look our way. And he decided to break off the confrontation.

He turned abruptly and took a seat at the table where Kaitlen's mother sat red-faced with embarrassment.

Jen came over to check on me.

"Problems?" she asked.

"Nothing to be concerned about. Just a parent wanting more playing time for his kid. It'll be okay."

Jen returned to a table where the other volleyball mothers were laughing and snacking. I continued my pre-match preparations.

When it was time for us to return to the court for the championship match, we went through our warmups as usual. I noticed Mr. Lester in the front row of the bleachers, arms crossed and defiant.

I waved at Jen and Shannon and gave them a thumbs-up.

As the players continued their warmups, the referees conducted the coin toss and I returned to our team bench to fill out the pre-match paperwork.

My initial lineup took the floor. It did not include Kaitlen, who remained, for now, on the bench with me, as she had at the beginning of every prior set. Shannon happened to be on the bench as well.

Just when I was hoping that we would survive the day without further interference from Mr. Lester, he hefted his bulk off the bleachers and strode across the court, coming to a dead stop right in front of me . . . and his daughter.

I glanced at Kait. Her head was hanging.

I stood.

"Mr. Lester. You need to leave the playing area so we can start the set."

Again his voice was hushed. "I'm not moving one foot ‘til I see my daughter out there on that court."

"Then we've got a problem, sir. Because the referee is not going to start the match with you standing on the court."

"Then you'd better fix it! Put her on the damn court!"

Mr. Lester's level of belligerence is exceedingly rare in the genteel sport of volleyball. And I had never before had a parent who was uncooperative to this extent. But I had an idea.
"I am asking you politely, Mr. Lester. Please leave the court and sit down."

He crossed his arms and gave me an angry stare.

I plucked my rule book from my coach's bag and left Mr. Lester standing by the team bench.
Since our confrontation had already garnered the attention of the opposing coach, she also stood and joined me at the referee's stand. The three of us discussed the situation in muted tones.

"My apologies to both of you," I said. "I have an obstinate and irate parent on my hands. And he won't leave the court."

I went on to explain the whole situation.

At first the referee was flustered. He had never encountered these circumstances either.
"Well, what am I supposed to do about it?" he said. "I don't have authority to throw out a spectator."

"Please," I said. "I think I have a solution."

I handed the referee my rule book with it opened to the appropriate page.

"According to the rules, you can throw out a coach who fails to control his team's fans," I said. "Give me a warning and then we'll see if you need to throw me out."

The opposing coach had been listening with her head bowed. She looked up at my suggestion.
"But Coach," the referee said, "if I toss you, your team won't have a coach and will have to forfeit this match."

"I recognize that."

The referee turned to the opposing coach.

"How do you feel about this, Coach? It's a pretty bizarre situation and I want us all to be on the same page here," the referee said.

"My team would much rather play than win by forfeit. We'd cream you anyway." She smiled at me. "But I respect Mr. Kensey's willingness to stand by his principles. I'm okay whichever way this goes."

She turned to me. "Good luck."

"Okay," I said. "Ref, please give me a yellow card for unsportsmanlike conduct on my parent's behalf. Then I'll do what I can to resolve this stalemate. If my plan doesn't work . . . well . . . you'll have one less match to officiate today."

The referee nodded. The coaches returned to their benches. Mr. Lester stayed put.

The referee pulled a yellow plastic card from his back pocket and held it up for the teams and audience to see.

"Unsportsmanlike conduct, St. Paul's Coach." He made a ‘C' with his other hand as he held both arms aloft.

"One point will be awarded to Scottfield."

A ‘1' appeared in the ‘Home' column on the scoreboard.

I could see Jen and Shannon looking concerned in the bleachers.

"What's goin' on?" Mr. Lester demanded. "What's the deal with giving the other team a point before the game's even started?"

"That's the least of our problems," I said, looking the big man in the eye.

"If you don't vacate not only this court, but the entire building immediately, I will be ejected from the game."

Mr. Lester grinned. "That'd be fine with me."

"And our team would forfeit this match."

The grin disappeared.

"According to the rules, a team can't play without a certified coach on its bench. There's not another certified coach here to replace me. So if I get tossed, we lose."

Mr. Lester turned toward the referee, who now held both a yellow and a red card in his hand, and was looking questioningly my way.

Poor Kait, who had been sitting on the bench right in front of the entire confrontation, began bawling uncontrollably. Shannon put an arm around Kait's shoulders.

Mr. Lester looked at his daughter . . . then at the referee, who was wiggling the cards impatiently . . . then back at me.

"Okay. You win."

"Make sure to leave the building," I said, before Mr. Lester departed. "If you're seen anywhere inside the venue, we forfeit the match."

He growled at me. But he left.

The teams were ready, and the referee blew the whistle to begin the match.

Shannon and I did our best to comfort Kait as she sat next to us on the bench during the first few points of that set.

"Breathe. In . . . and . . . out. I need you to collect yourself so you can play when your turn comes around," I said.

She looked up at me.

"You're still going to play me after all that with my dad?" Her red eyes were incredulous.
"Sure. Not your fault. You should meet my dad some day." I smiled. "He would really scare you."
I laughed to myself at the thought of Kait meeting Dad's ghost. There was a fleeting twinge in my gut. And then it was gone.

Both teams played their hearts out in that Championship Match. The lead changed hands frequently. Each team had won two sets when the fifth, and final, set began.
First team to fifteen wins.

After struggling during the opening rallies, we found ourselves trailing Scottfield 13 - 9 when we finally regained the serve. We needed to score six points before they scored two. It was a formidable challenge.

To make my choices more difficult, our next server was none other than Kaitlen. She was an average server at best. Strictly playing the odds, with Kaitlen's service record, I could reasonably have conceded the game to Scottfield right then and there.

I had my best server on the bench. My daughter, Annie. I could have subbed her in for Kaitlen. And believe me, I wanted to do just that. I was sure the rest of my team – and probably a lot of parents as well – would have approved of the substitution.

But I remembered the team rules and my coaching philosophy. Life is more important than volleyball. I had to repeat it to myself.

I thought about how Kaitlen might feel being pulled from the game at this juncture. Maybe she would be relieved. Or more likely, disheartened.

No. I would not deprive Kait of her chance to serve – whatever the results might be on the court.
Kait looked at me tentatively as she rotated to the server's spot. Would I pull her?
I gave her a thumbs up and a big smile.

She smiled back.

I could relay the details of that match's ending. But suffice it to say that St. Paul's won the Championship by a score of 15 - 13. And Kait?

She never missed a serve.