

COMMENCEMENT 2019

Members of the Board of Trustees, faculty and staff, students, parents, family and friends – I am so pleased to be with you all today to celebrate the Choate Rosemary Hall Class of 2019 at this, our School's 129th Commencement ceremony.

Let me just begin by taking a moment to recognize how fortunate we are to be sitting in such a unique place, flanked by I.M. Pei buildings on either side of us. As I stand here and look out at our student body, I see a vibrant, diverse community of students who represent 38 states and 42 countries. I am particularly struck that when these buildings were being planned, our school was far less international and certainly far less diverse; yet, our School chose an architect who in so many ways reflects our School today. Pei was born in China, educated at U.S. universities, and would ultimately go on to create famous buildings across the world. The Louvre Pyramid in Paris; Hancock Tower in Boston; the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC; the Bank of China Tower in Hong Kong...to name a few. And then there are the arts and science centers at Choate Rosemary Hall in Wallingford, Connecticut – located opposite one another, separated by this majestic Great Lawn. We are, of course, saddened by his passing less than two weeks ago, but forever blessed to be surrounded by his genius.

Each year, I have the delightful challenge of writing a graduation speech. Some years that is easier than others. And I thought this year was going to be the easiest. For a few months now, it has been clear to me that my beloved Leeds United soccer team was going to help me to write this very speech.

Professional sports teams – those of you that have “your” team or teams know...you pick a team, or they pick you, for any number of reasons. Geography; a favorite player; the first game you attended; the mascot; family rules; defiance of family rules.

My team, Leeds United, was picked for me...by my brother when I was no more than two or three years old when he told me they were the best team in England. That was all I needed to know; I was set. And now, close to half of a century later, I’m still set.

If you know your English soccer history – and if you don’t, don’t worry, I’ll help you out – although largely eclipsed today by the giants of today’s Premier League, Leeds was arguably the finest team of the 1960s and early 70s. And equally arguably, they’ve been trying to recapture that past glory ever since.

As our Leeds anthem, *Marching On Together*, says “we’ve had our ups and downs.” Boy, have we ever. Following those glory days in the 60s and much of the 70s, we had an abysmal 80s until the very end of the decade when we won the last English first division before the creation of the Premier League. We had a remarkable team at the turn of the century that resulted in a Champions League semi-final in 2001. As fans, we all hoped that that achievement would provide crucial momentum on a continued path to redemption. Our owner at the time, said we were going to “live the dream.” It ended up being a nightmare. Everything was being done the wrong way. They over-spent, over-dreamed, and didn’t live responsibly. Eventually, everything came crashing down in 2004. First, we were relegated from the Premier League, then we went bankrupt, and then relegated again into the third league of English soccer. Leeds was an embarrassment.

Yet, despite this embarrassment and having to endure appalling management over the last two decades, Leeds’ fanbase has stayed

loyal and true. Even as the team reached remarkable depths of disaster on and off the field, attendance at Elland Road, our home stadium, remained high, and hope remained eternal.

And this year, with the arrival of a genius manager from Argentina, Marcelo Bielsa, Leeds was...well, Leeds was writing this speech.

Since Bielsa arrived, not even a year ago, he has taken on the grand challenge of restoring an English giant to glory. Amazingly, he has taken a team – essentially, the same group of players who had finished 13th, mired in mediocrity, last year – and inspired them to believe in themselves, to work hard, and to play exciting, attacking, forward-thinking, tactically beautiful soccer. They were now playing awe-inspiring soccer because they believed in each other and because they were doing things the right way.

Where did that belief and commitment start? For one, it started with the most intense ever pre-season of 3-a-day practices after which many professional athletes – some of whom played at the World Cup – said they had never worked so hard. And it also started with hard work off of the pitch. Bielsa wanted his players to appreciate how hard fans had to work in order to afford to buy tickets to their matches. He worked out that the cost of a ticket is equivalent to about three hours of manual labor. So, he made his players go out and pick up trash in the community for three hours so that they could have a deeper understanding of their supporters' commitment. Said one of Bielsa's players after this humbling experience, "He wants good players, but he wants us to be good people as well."

That is not to say they are perfect or that they haven't made mistakes, but they handled those mistakes in the right way...and they learned from them.

As I said, Bielsa is from Argentina, and there, team managers and personnel are allowed to watch other teams' practices. He continued to do so when he arrived in England – where it is most definitely not allowed...although in brilliantly English fashion, it's actually an *unwritten* rule; it's just not "the done thing". When questioned about it, he didn't deny it – he quickly admitted he had sent personnel to watch every team they had played; he was unaware that it was against the rules. The team was rightly fined, heavily. And Bielsa paid the sanction with his own money because it was his mistake, his fault for not knowing the rules and therefore violating them. He was wrong, but he admitted to it, paid the consequence, and learned from the experience.

And then there was the Aston Villa match last month. Villa's players had stopped playing as one of their players was lying injured on the pitch, but the ref hadn't stopped the game and at least one of our players didn't realize there was an injury, and he scored a goal. When Bielsa realized what had happened, he allowed Villa to walk in an equalizer unopposed. And as a result, this very meaningful and important match ended in a tie.

Throughout the season, Leeds was playing beautifully and acting responsibly. Redemption was all but achieved...and this speech was all but written. As of just a few weeks ago, we were leading our league and I was planning to share with you all a story of patience and persistence; of playing the right way; of positive risk taking – all resulting in a glorious return to the Premier League and restoration to glory for my beloved Leeds United.

But they blew it.

At the very last hurdle, when they just needed to win three of their last four games, they lost three of them. And then just last week,

they crashed out in heartbreaking fashion from the playoffs and their second opportunity to win promotion.

They blew it. And they ruined my speech.

Or did they?

As disappointed as we Leeds fans are, we can look back on a season that produced great happiness. I watched some of the most fun soccer that I can ever remember watching. They did things the right way. They made us proud – even when they made mistakes. They decided they were going to play the game beautifully...and that it wasn't just going to be about the end result, it was going to be about the journey.

Sometimes the journey doesn't end exactly as you think, plan, or want. But it's all about the experience. Was it enjoyable? Was it meaningful? Is it something you can be proud of? Will you be better for it?

We may not have returned to the Premier League but the answer to each of those questions is in an emphatic "yes".

For me, the season will be judged in a different way than I had thought this speech was going to judge it. But I think that it has actually written a better speech with more important take-aways. In the end, it's not about wins and losses, promotions and relegations – it's about creating joy, feeling pride, and overcoming adversity.

Was Leeds successful in being promoted? No.

But was Leeds successful? Very.

So, I ask you, what is success?

-Is it where you'll be or what you'll be doing next year? I don't think so.

-Is it only seen on days like this one with all the ceremonial pomp and circumstance? Again, I don't think so.

As you sit here, think about what measures you will use to judge your success in the next 10, 20, 30 years... Will it be measured financially? With your job title? How quickly you achieve your expectations of yourself? Of others expectations of you?

I encourage you to look for less traditional and expected measures of success. Look beyond the win/loss columns. Look beyond the trophies. Look at the journeys to them, even when you fall short – *especially* when you fall short. Look at the struggles and setbacks, the achievements and accomplishments, and the people cheering for you throughout. I believe it is in that thoughtful reflection that you will determine your success.

My hope for you, the Class of 2019, is that you will live life beautifully and in ways that make you proud – and make all of us proud.

I hope that you will take Choate's Statement of Expectations with you and continue to live in accordance with it – exemplifying it.

I hope that you will make use of your Choate education in effective and constructive ways for the benefit of others, not just yourselves.

I hope that you don't think your Choate experience ends today, but that you continue to reflect upon and draw lessons from it for many years to come.

I hope you remember that one of my favorite Leeds' seasons is this one – the one where they didn't win the championship or get promoted, but where they reminded me why I love the game and my team.

I hope you know how proud of you we already are.

I hope you know our expectations of you are high – and that we are confident you will be successful...in whatever way you choose to define it.

Congratulations, Choate Rosemary Hall Class of 2019!