



Pingry

Remarks from Head of School Tim Lear Convocation — September 6, 2024

The newest member of ESPN’s Saturday morning “College GameDay” program is Nick Saban, who retired this year as one of the greatest coaches in the history of college football. During twenty-two seasons as head coach at LSU and Alabama, his teams won eleven SEC titles and seven national championships.

His combined record at LSU and Alabama? 249 wins against just 45 losses.

With success like that, it would be easy to assume Nick Saban’s coaching philosophy was laser-focused on results and winning. Turns out, it wasn’t. Instead, Nick Saban’s approach was simply called “The Process” — rather than fixating on outcomes, “the process” emphasized consistent hard work, a team-first approach, and attention to detail.

In moving the focus away from results, Coach Saban got his players to focus on the behaviors within their control — on the variables that would ultimately determine the outcome of each play, each game, and each season.

Disappointments and mistakes became learning opportunities. And players and coaches focused on the actions they needed to take and the habits they needed to develop in order to get the results they wanted — both for themselves and for the team.

As a result of Nick Saban’s focus on “The Process” and his success on the field, the coaches who’ve worked with him over the years are a legendary fraternity of their own — including dozens who’ve moved on to some of the top coaching jobs in football, from Georgia and Texas to Ole Miss and the New York Football Giants.

Just as importantly, he has also helped to resurrect the careers of a number of top coaches from other big-name programs. By bringing them to Alabama — and creating the space they needed for a fresh start — Saban was intentionally setting those coaches up for future success. The result? A coaching legacy and impact that stretches far beyond the sidelines of the University of Alabama.

One of my hopes for this year is that we'll borrow a few pages from Coach Saban's playbook. That we'll remember to offer a helping hand to someone in need of a fresh start or a second chance. That we'll be mindful of how we can mentor and inspire others. That we'll allow ourselves to fully **engage in the process** rather than focusing exclusively on the outcome.

Your Pingry education is an experience. Your time here matters. These are BIG years, and we want them to matter to you in BIG ways. Please don't overlook your time on this campus. Your future will get here soon enough.

An article in *The New York Times* several weeks ago put a spotlight on the connection between "the process" and the pursuit of excellence — and it also spoke to some of the values outlined in our Mission and Honor Code.

Under the headline "[What the Olympics Can Teach Us About Excellence](#)," Brad Stulberg writes that we can broaden our definition of success by remembering excellence is a daily process — one that has as much to do with pursuing ambitious goals as it does with achieving ambitious goals.

He argues that excellence means working hard to be your best while also finding fulfillment in the process. It means learning how to graciously accept both winning and losing. And it means maintaining respect, compassion, and empathy for others — regardless of the outcome.

Stulberg writes that excellence is "...not perfection or winning at all costs. It is a deeply satisfying process of becoming the best performer — and person — you can be. You pursue goals that challenge you, put forth an honest effort, endure highs, lows, and everything in between, and gain respect for yourself and for others [...] The real reward for excellence is not the medal or the promotion, but the person you become and the relationships you forge along the way."

Interestingly, after a decade's worth of research and interviews, Stulberg found that no idea has resonated more with Olympic medalists than the belief that you can be a good person while also reaching great heights.

We saw a perfect example of that this summer with our very own Olympic medalist — Nic Fink from the Class of 2011. His teachers, coaches, and advisors would agree that Nic represents Pingry on our best day. He embodies humility and groundedness; the values of patience and gratitude; and the possibility of balancing extreme focus with a genuine respect for others.

Nic is now a two-time Olympian. In Paris — at the age of thirty-one — he was the oldest member of the US Swim Team. And in bringing home one gold medal and two silver medals, Nic became the oldest first-time US Olympic swimming medalist in modern history.

Perhaps what's even MORE impressive is that Nic was chosen by his Olympic teammates to serve as one of four co-captains for the US swim team before he earned an Olympic medal. In fact, Nic was the only one of the four co-captains for USA Swimming who had never previously stood on an Olympic podium.

Nic has also built a very full life for himself on dry land. He has two degrees in Electrical and Electronics Engineering, and in addition to training as a world-class swimmer, he also has a 9:00-5:00 job as an engineer. Better yet, Nic and his wife — who also has an Olympic gold medal of her own — are soon expecting their first child.

In an interview with NBC News, Nic admitted thinking there was a chance that “as I dedicated more time into engineering, perhaps my swimming career would begin to sunset. But finding that balance has actually helped me in both, and my swimming has been just as good or better than ever.”

Nic found that same balance at Pingry by resisting the temptation to sacrifice everything for swimming. He ran JV cross country and played JV tennis for most of high school. He wasn't afraid to try new things or put himself in situations where he wasn't going to be the best performer.

In the words of novelist Amor Towles, “...what matters in life is not whether we receive a round of applause; what matters is whether we have the courage to venture forth despite the uncertainty of acclaim.”

Nic has never defined himself by his accomplishments in the pool. The fact that he's now an Olympic gold-and-silver medalist is still just part of who he is — it's not the only part, and it doesn't define him.

Interestingly, Nic actually drew some Pingry students onto the swimming team simply because they wanted to be in the pool with him. Those students recognized the value of being in the presence of excellence — of observing greatness in areas other than the ones they were best at.

David Sukhin from the Class of 2012 was one of those students. Despite having immense talents as a coder and computer science student, but only modest talents as a swimmer, David still wanted to be in the pool with Nic Fink every day so he could watch excellence in action up close.

David's time in the pool didn't interfere with pursuing his other passions. He went on to create our favorite app — the legendary SnowDay Calculator; earned two degrees from MIT; and now works on the cutting edge of AI as a Quantitative Researcher and Data Scientist at Citadel.

Nic and David are great reminders that at Pingry we don't have to choose between being happy and successful ... between being a serious student and a committed athlete ... between being hyper-focused and highly engaged members of the community.

As Head of School, I also want Pingry to be a place where we don't have to choose between kindness and excellence. A school where we can be good people while also reaching great heights both in and out of the classroom. A school where we can both learn and live with honor.

Pingry's Mission statement calls upon us to do just that — to be good people while also reaching great heights. In challenging us to “strive for academic and personal excellence” our Mission statement makes it clear that we can and must do both.

The ethical framework of our Honor Code carries a similar message about personal excellence — reminding us to place the highest value on the rights of others, on concern for others, and on respect for others.

Excellence involves creating conditions and space for others to succeed and to reach their own potential — just as Nick Saban did while mentoring a generation of coaches. This doesn't mean we neglect our own needs and goals. It simply means that we should also create opportunities for our classmates and colleagues to shine.

Sometimes leadership means stepping up — and sometimes leadership means stepping aside. In both instances, the Honor Code challenges us to be mindful of how we're contributing to the success of others.

We're all going to make mistakes during this new 2024-25 academic year. That's one of the inevitable results of striving for excellence. This winter, for example, one of us might "accidentally" misread the Snow Day Calculator, mistaking a 0% chance of snow for a 100% chance of snow — an error that would unfortunately result in an unnecessary (but glorious) snow day.

Weather-related or otherwise, mistakes are going to happen ... and that's OK. As Teddy Roosevelt said in his famous "Man in the Arena" speech "...there is no effort without error and shortcoming."

As much as the Honor Code guides our behavior — and is intended to prevent mistakes in judgment — it serves us equally well as a guidepost for our behavior after mistakes are made.

We can't all be national championship football coaches. We can't all be Olympic medalists. We can't be great at every possible endeavor inside and outside of the classroom. But we can focus on **the process** — the actions we need to take in order to be successful. The habits we need to develop in order to get the results we want.

And if we continue creating space for connection and creating the conditions necessary **for others** to succeed, then we will achieve true excellence, together.

Let's make it a great year...