

In Praise of the Fundamentals

By

Daniel E. White July 7, 2025

When my brother and I talked by phone recently, as per usual, the topics included baseball. Some of the time, that involved Major League Baseball; how our favorite teams are doing; the diminishing number of players in this era of free agency who play an entire career with the same team; the cost these days of attending a game in person. Fandom sprinkled with grumpiness.

What stuck in my mind when we had finished was none of the above. Instead, I pondered his observations derived from his several years of coaching and watching his grandsons play for various “travel teams,” squads not connected to a school. He bemoaned the fact that so few of the coaches spend much time on the fundamentals of the game. How an outfielder should position himself to catch a fly ball when there is a runner on base (take a few steps back, catch the ball, crow-hop and throw); the importance of hitting the cut-off man; situational scenario practice or the choreographing of the fields in given situations, and so on.

He allowed as how he might once again volunteer to coach just to offer the youngsters guidance about the tried-and-true ways of giving the player the best chance of making a play.

I recalled some Major League Baseball broadcasters complimenting players for demonstrating in their performance a commitment to the fundamentals, producing positive results.

Hokulea is a big deal in Hawaiian history. In 1973, people interested in the resurrection of Hawaiian culture founded the Polynesian Voyaging Society (PVS). One of the founders was Pinky Thompson. His son, Nainoa, traveled to Micronesia to study “wayfinding” with Mau Piailug, one of a diminishing group of navigators who used the ocean and its waves, the wind, and the stars as navigational aids to sail long distances on the open seas.

The PVS raised funds and built the *Hokulea*, a sea-going vessel in the style and tradition of early Polynesian ones. Using the skills he learned from Paailug, Nainoa captained the maiden voyage of *Hokulea* when it first sailed 50 years ago in March 1975, and again on its first successful transit to Tahiti in 1976.

In 2022, *Hokulea* once again sailed to Tahiti. For the first time, its captain and navigator was a woman, Lehua Kamalu. In an interview with Hawaii Public Radio, Kamalu said that “she and the crew meticulously planned and mapped every voyage scenario.” She said that, if you asked the crew, they would call her the “crazy checklist lady.”

Kamalu credited “past navigators, who had to make all the mistakes to teach her and more generations to come.”

For many years, Nainoa enjoyed significant public recognition for his courage and skill and for the wisdom he often shared in speeches around the nation, especially in Hawaii. In some ways, it seemed that his name became almost synonymous with *Hokulea*. But when he greeted the 2022 voyage in Tahiti, he experienced an epiphany.

“It’s not like I’m transcending to become the teacher,” he told Hawaii Public Radio. “I’m frankly descending to become a student because of what I know. I need to understand that my dad’s correct. ‘Your job is to make them better than you...’”

In other words, learn the fundamentals, make all the mistakes, and pass that knowledge along to generations to come.

Hokulea has departed on a second multi-year voyage around the world, demonstrating the efficacy of ancient ways to people in a technologically hyper-equipped world.

In a *Christian Science Monitor* book review, May 19, 2025, Danny Heitman wrote about *Lessons from My Teacher*, by Sarah Ruhl. Ruhl’s book is a series of short essays that Heitman said seemed like a “daily devotional,” small nuggets to be pondered each day.

One such nugget from Ruhl: the path to her becoming a writer started with the development of her love for reading. Ruhl was 8 or 9 when she came under the spell of two women in a local bookstore. Looking back, Ruhl says that she thinks of herself at that stage of her life as caught in what she would later call Plato’s Paradox of Learning: “how can we know what we do not yet know?”

The two women, Ruhl said, somehow anticipated what she might find interesting and guided her toward books on those topics. Whether she would have chosen those kinds of books without their guidance, she doubts. But they observed her, got a sense of who she was and who she might want to be and led her to discover the world—and the joy of reading—through those books.

They engaged her.

There is nothing more fundamental to learning than engagement. Wasn’t that the gift your favorite teacher and mine had and understood intuitively?

When the outfielder steeped in the fundamentals throws out the runner at third after catching a fly ball, when the wayfinders’s ship reached its destination, when the writer who loves to read publishes her first book: these achievements get noticed.

Such feats are seldom merely the results of chance.

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