

Ohio attorney applies life lessons learned from playing and coaching sports



By Brian Cox

"I have a lot of coach in me," admits attorney Thomas Barni with a smile.

As a coach for almost 10 years of his son's travel baseball and basketball teams, Barni discovered a universal truth: Kids play sports for two reasons and neither one has anything to do with winning a trophy.

"They play to have fun and to be with their friends," says the Ohio litigator with a coach's fervor. "If parents would recognize that, the youth sports 'world' would look a little different than it does now."

Barni has actually embraced that same philosophy when it comes to his legal career.

"To be with friends and to have fun at what I do is one of my core values," he says. "I've been very fortunate to have been able to keep that mentality for 30 years of law practice. One of my mottoes is 'Friends become clients and clients become friends.'"

Born and raised on the east side of Cleveland as the third of 10 children, Barni's parents stressed education, insisting it be a top

priority. The siblings were expected to help cover the cost of their tuition at a private school, so Barni began working at age 12 with a paper route to pay his share.

Barni remembers his father advising his kids that "The success to life is finding something you love to do, doing it as best you can and hopefully somebody will pay you enough money that you can make a living doing it."

What Barni loved doing was playing sports. His first passion and talent was for basketball, but his sophomore year he had a falling out with the coach at his high school over promised playing time and quit the team, an impetuous act he now calls "the biggest regret of my life." He turned his attention to other sports including golf, track, wrestling, baseball, and football.

As a tall and skinny junior, Barni asked the football team's offensive coordinator what he had to do to make the team his senior year. The coach laughed. He said he might be looking for a punter and asked if Barni knew how to kick.

But that wasn't good enough for Barni, who wanted real playing time.

So, over the summer he hit the gym at the YMCA and when he returned to St. Joseph's for his senior year, he was 6'-2" and 225 pounds. He made the football team as a tight end – and the punter. His claim to fame is that in a game against the Massillon Tigers he scored a touchdown against their star linebacker, Chris Speilman, who was the first high school athlete to be featured on a Wheaties box and who went on to play at Ohio State and in the NFL for the Detroit Lions.

Barni tells that story with glee.

"I've been an athlete all my life and have a team mentality," he says, adding that sports taught him the importance of hard work, dedication, teamwork, self-respect, and respect for others – all of which he has adopted as a lawyer and applies to his practice.

After high school, Barni earned a degree in social work with a minor in psychology from Cleveland State University. An internship for a county agency that advocated for victims of domestic violence served as his introduction to the legal system.



A lifelong athlete, attorney Tom Barni helped coach his son's travel baseball team, which at one point was ranked No. 2 in the country. His son now plays baseball for Youngstown State.

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A few years later, while working for the Cuyahoga County Jail, Barni concluded he was ready for a career change and thought of law school. He enrolled in the night program at Cleveland Marshall College of Law and quickly realized that he had found his path.

"I like to help people," he says. "That's why I got into law. It pairs with my social work background. It was never about the prestige of being a lawyer or having 'esq' after my name. It has never been about how much money you could make. It was about helping people."

During his 3L, Barni became a law clerk for a small business law firm that focused on litigation, corporate transactional, and estate planning and probate.

He tried his first case a week after passing the bar and remembers being so nervous that he sweat through his dark grey suit. But he loved the work and stayed with that small firm for the next three decades, rising from associate to senior associate and then to partner. He spent the last 10 years as managing partner.

"I had some excellent lawyers that taught me about the practice of law, and I had the personal skills to connect with people," says Barni. "It was a wonderful place for me because I had autonomy to do the things I needed to do to advance cases, and it allowed me the perfect work-life balance."

His last two years at the firm, however, became first different and then difficult for Barni given the growing needs of his clients, and he began considering the daunting idea of making a change.

A lifelong friend with whom Barni used to ride the school bus back in grade school was an attorney at Schneider Bell. Barni had been trying to recruit him to join Barni's prior firm for years, but on their latest call, his friend suggested Barni think about joining Schneider Bell.

The seed was planted.

Before making any decision, Barni turned to another very close friend for advice. The two men had coached travel baseball together for years. They had crisscrossed the country with the team their sons played for and at one point their youth team had been ranked No. 2 in the country. They called each other "Coach." Barni had executed the sale of his friend's business to a private equity firm and had been by his side during some difficult health issues. There were few friends Barni trusted and looked up to more.

His friend put his advice bluntly. "Why are you struggling with this decision, Coach?" he asked. "You're a winner. Go win."

"So, in my little world of community baseball and sleepovers and carpool rides and picking up kids and being on dirt fields and taking trips across half the country with these kids and their families, it comes down to my buddy and coach saying, 'go win,'" says Barni. "That was it."

He joined Schneider Bell in January 2025.

In his new office, Barni has the home run ball his son, Tyler, hit at a 2017 tournament in Cooperstown. Tyler, who is now playing baseball for Youngstown State, signed it, "Thanks Dad for all you do."

His oldest daughter, Gina, is getting married in May and his middle daughter, Adriana, recently graduated from the University of Tampa with plans to obtain a doctorate in organic chemistry.



Tom with his close friend, "Coach," with whom he coached his son's travel baseball team for many years. They also have a professional relationship: Barni executed the sale of his friend's business to a private equity firm.

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Now a seasoned litigator, Barni has extensive experience representing local, regional, national, and international clients in state and federal courts. His practice has taken him all over the country, including Puerto Rico, and he has clients from as far away as China, Australia, and South Korea. He handles complex commercial, business, construction, real estate, and general civil litigation matters from inception through trial.

Beyond the courtroom, he is adept at resolving disputes through alternative dispute resolution methods, including mediation and arbitration, ensuring efficient and effective outcomes for his clients.

"I have a competitive mentality about me, but you learn in litigation that winning is relative," he says. "I love the personal connections with both colleagues and clients. I enjoy educating clients about the legal processes. I take much pride in meeting, and sometimes exceeding, my clients' expectations. If you wake up in the morning and you can enhance one person's day, you've done a pretty good job."

He remains active, getting to the gym six or seven days a week, playing on an over-50 baseball team, golfing, playing pickle ball, and mountain biking.

Barni appreciates the firm culture at Schneider Bell, which promotes active leadership and involvement in the profession and the community. With roots in Cleveland dating back to 1867, the firm is the product of a merger between two of the city's oldest law firms. It has one of the largest trusts and estates practice groups in Ohio.

"One of the beautiful things about being at this firm is that the lawyers and staff are exceptional, from the newest associates to the most seasoned partners," says Barni. "I get a chance to tutor and give a little wisdom. I've got my coach's hat back on."



Tom was encouraged to join Schneider Bell by his lifelong friend, Tom Connick, who is also a partner at the firm.