

The bell rang loudly, signaling the end of class. It was 10 AM, and the intramural soccer cup semi-final match would take place in thirty minutes. As the captain of my class's team, I called out to the boys: "Okay everybody, let's go to the stadium. Doing some warm-ups and preparatory exercises will be helpful for the match." After motivating the team, I went over to the teacher's desk. Our physics teacher, Mr. Ham, was standing there, grabbing his belongings.

"I hope you can come to see our performance today," I invited him cordially. "You guys will certainly have my support today. I must go now, but I'll see you at the field later." With a benevolent smile, he placed a comforting hand on my shoulder and walked out of the classroom. We students really loved Mr. Ham—he was more than a teacher, he was like a father figure to our class. As he disappeared out the door, I returned to my desk to grab my bag. I told myself that today would be a great day, and I dissolved into the crowd. Fifteen minutes later, my teammates and I arrived at the stadium. Soccer is the most popular sport in Vietnam, and all of the seats in the stadium were filled with my classmates. In fact, the school's intramural soccer cup is potentially the most important event during the school year for the more than two thousand students at my school, and I was definitely one of the students that loved it.

The moment for which I had been waiting was finally here. The referee blew his whistle to signal the start of the match. From the first moment, our team members flooded the opponents' field, attacking their net from every side. We took the ball from the sideline to the center, and back again. Yet despite our many opportunities to score, we were unable to transform them into a goal. As the remaining minutes faded away, we played increasingly hastily and haphazardly.

I realized that my behavior quickly changed. I became angry, constantly shouting at my teammates as they made passes to the wrong address or shot the ball out of the net. In that situation, I should have been the most composed member of the team—a captain on whom the team could depend. Instead, I got so emotional that I became ineffective. Time passed quickly, and soon the referee blew his whistle again to end the game. Our offensive attempts had been useless, and the opposing defense had been quite effective; the game would need to be decided on the penalty line.

Our four first shots were outstanding; however, so were theirs. As the fifth turn began, Hai, their defender and captain, brought the ball to the line and slowly put it in place. Suddenly, he shot a very confident look in my direction, took a run-up, and made a powerful shot. Our goalkeeper tried his best, but the shot went into the net easily. The fifth shot for our team was mine. I went to the penalty line, unable to stop the trembling throughout my body. Hai's fierce glance in my direction had given me a rush of nerves and adrenaline. I could not stop considering the possibility of failure; "If I can't make this...If I can't make this..." I mumbled to myself. I closed my eyes, ran toward the ball, and shot it, desperately hoping for a good outcome.

The ball was out. The whistle was blown. The game was over. I felt the world fall down around me. I could not hear or see anything—I broke down, feeling the weight of the responsibility for the loss. Five minutes later, I was completely alone in the locker room. My hands trembled as I stared straight at the floor. I was experiencing my first real failure. Suddenly, as I was reaching my lowest point, the door opened, and Mr. Ham came in. He motioned for me to sit down, looked me in the eye, and

said tenderly, “Accepting failure today does not mean accepting it tomorrow. If you can lift yourself up, failure will be just the previous step of success.”

We stayed there for hours, talking about what had happened and about the future. That summer, Mr. Ham retired. He left before he could see the moment when I won the cup the following year, but his words stayed with me and have helped me through every game I have played since. I am now a better leader and a more confident person, both on the soccer field, and in the rest of my life.