

Ted Lasso is the soccer coach we all need

What if kindness, honesty, and compassion were valued more than winning?

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [December 2, 2020](#) issue



CULTURE CHANGE: Ted Lasso (Jason Sudeikis) is an eager and kindhearted American football coach who knows nothing about soccer, hired to coach a British soccer team. (Apple TV+)

I wouldn't have guessed that the television show I needed right now was about an obsessively nice American football coach who is hired to coach a British soccer team. But 2020 has been a strange, hard year, and *Ted Lasso* (Apple TV) imagines a world where kindness, honesty, and compassion are valued more than winning. I didn't want it to end.

When Rebecca Welton (Hannah Waddingham) wins ownership of a British Premier League soccer team in a divorce settlement, she is determined to burn the team to the ground for the sheer pleasure of tormenting her ex-husband, who loves the team even more than his many mistresses. Her strategy is to fire the sleazy head coach

and replace him with Ted Lasso (Jason Sudeikis), an American football coach who has never played or coached soccer. He exudes a folksy charm and a thick Kansas drawl that make him the butt of endless jokes from his players, the press, and the locals at his neighborhood pub.

Even an experienced coach would struggle to succeed with this team. The star player is self-serving and vain, openly mocking weaker players and encouraging bullying and mean-spirited pranks. The captain is so angry about aging past his prime that he exudes hostility and contempt toward the team he's meant to lead. And at every turn, Rebecca is actively seeking to sabotage Ted's chances of success.

But Ted, it turns out, knows far more about coaching than his innocent bumbling suggests. He overwhelms everyone he meets with a nearly nonstop verbal barrage of positive energy. When greeted by shouts of "wanker!" every time he walks down the street, he returns the greeting with a cheerful, "I appreciate your opinion and hope we'll have your support in the next game."

Underneath his cheerful demeanor, Ted is sizing people up, learning what motivates them, what they love, and what they fear. He recognizes in Nate (Nick Mohammed), the bullied and mocked equipment manager, for example, a wealth of knowledge born from years of watching players at their best and worst. And when Roy (Brett Goldstein), the aging team captain, asks him what he's going to do about the other players bullying Nate, Ted carefully considers his choices. He decides not to do anything, because he knows he will only make things worse—and he knows that Roy is capable of stepping up to solve the problem himself. When he realizes that Sam (Toheeb Jimoh), the new recruit from Nigeria, is under-performing because he is lonely and homesick, he throws him a birthday party and buys him treats from his home country.

For Ted, people are not pawns in a game but fascinating creatures with capacities for goodness they have let atrophy because they are wounded or scared. There is a lot of American sports mythology at work here: the wise coach who helps mold his players to be better men both on and off the field. But those myths usually assume an idea of masculinity that is tough and terse, that hides a heart of gold under a gruff exterior.

There is nothing gruff about Ted. He is openly exuberant, relentlessly kind, and he wears his heart of gold like a badge of honor. In different hands, this could be a

setup for painful or awkward jokes at Ted's expense. But Ted's kindness extends to the show itself. In every moment where we expect the worst—embarrassment or cruelty to befall our hero—something entirely different happens and decency prevails over humiliation.

After years of living in a culture in which cruelty and mockery have been elevated to presidential speech, Ted offers a different vision of American masculinity. Straight talk is married to vulnerability and honesty to kindness. His motto, as he tells a crowd gathered in the local pub, is "Be curious, not judgmental." While judgment walls you off from others, he says, curiosity opens you up to them.

Ted makes this speech when he steps in to save Rebecca from her ex-husband's barbed insults by challenging him to a game of darts. *Ted Lasso* isn't a story of underdogs scraping their way to narrow victory; Ted insists throughout that he doesn't care about winning or losing. His goal is to build a team. The dart game is a rare moment when winning and team building go hand in hand. It is also the moment Rebecca—and by extension all the people in the pub—realize they have not been curious enough about Ted. Ted isn't a wise sage who can mold men or solve their problems, but he wills the best from others by offering it in turn. As Rebecca says, "It feels so good."

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