



Coaching Priorities: More than Wins and Losses

By David Schreiner

As we read, watch and hear about the negative occurrences in athletic events across the country, there is a responsibility among coaches to examine and critique their coaching philosophies. We seem to be in an era where winning, no matter what the cost, is the ultimate goal. Accumulating championships may be more important to some than teaching young people the life-long skills of teamwork, hard work, dedication and the importance of a quality education.

In professional sports, scandals fill the news. Violence and recruiting violations are the talk around college campuses, and on the secondary level some schools may recruit and use ineligible players. Programs at all levels may use every loophole in pursuit of victory. If you look around, some athletic programs seem to be placing more emphasis on the final score than on all the other factors that make a great athletic experience.

Most coaches would agree that winning is an important

part of the growth of an athlete and an athletic program at every level, but is it the most important gauge in measuring the success of coaches, athletes and the institution? For many young people, athletic competition is an opportunity to learn and experience the importance of work ethic, commitment, perseverance, discipline and the team-building skills that they will use the rest of their lives. As the focus for state, national and world championships increases, the true meaning of the competitive edge starts to turn to less-than-desirable conduct and methods to get the job done. If winning titles is our main focus, then what success did the rest of the teams have?

There are so many ways that coaches and athletic programs can help their athletes, and most of them have nothing to do with winning. If all of our focus is on winning in order to get scholarships for our athletes, we may be doing our players a disservice, even in the so-called major sports. Statistics show that only about three percent of all male and female high school athletes will play at the college level and only a small portion of them will receive a partial or full scholarship to help fund their education.

When striving for athletic success, coaches should keep in mind that most of their athletes will need many other skills and resources to fulfill the goal of a quality education. Today, we need to educate our parents and assist them with the resources and knowledge to help ensure that their children have the college opportunities from a source other than an athletic scholarship. In other words, coaches should help athletes focus on obtaining academic scholarships as much as they help athletes achieve athletic scholarships. As a coach, the focus should be on the reality of guiding athletes in the right direction with the abilities necessary to continue their education through obtaining academic excellence during their high school career.

Coaching is our opportunity to make a difference in the young men and women who we have to work with everyday. It is a chance to make an impact, a few precious months to not only focus on the X's and O's, but on the future of our players and the reputation and success of the program. Coaches should work with classroom teachers to monitor the academic progress of their athletes and be proactive on what really should be the main focus.

One way this can be done is by organizing study hall time before practices to ensure that players are not only reading the playbooks but also the schoolbooks. This is an opportunity for the coach to build a relationship outside of the playing field and assist students with the study skills and work-habits they need to succeed in the classroom. To help accomplish this goal, coaches can utilize other players as tutors, while further building team unity and pride.

In addition, weekly academic progress reports can be used to make certain players are meeting the requirements in the classroom. If athletes aren't achieving the academic marks that you expect for the team, excuse those players from practices to obtain additional help from teachers or student mentors. Finally, invite school guidance counselors to meet with your players as a group to discuss college requirements, essay writing and scholarship opportunities.

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Coaches can also teach their players to reach out to the less fortunate. This can be accomplished by organizing team activities that give young men and women a chance to give something back to their communities. Learning to be productive, outstanding citizens is something that student-athletes can take pride in and will make a difference in not only their lives, but in the lives of others who need help and support.

This past season, for example, our varsity girls' basketball team prepared meals at the Ronald McDonald House to feed families whose children were hospitalized due to severe illness. This activity built awareness of the need for community outreach and taught team members that their contributions were greatly appreciated by those who benefited from their efforts.

It is also important to stay on top of the activities of our athletes outside of school. Too often situations arise where athletes tend to make decisions that are detrimental to themselves or to others. Many times our young people engage in behaviors outside of school that ultimately break school or team rules and values.

A good method to help guide your athletes is to create a team contract that addresses inappropriate choices and holds players and parents accountable. Also, select team captains who have integrity and are willing to support what is right, not what is popular. Like any good parent, coaches should

never turn their back on negative situations in which their team members are involved.

Most of all, a coach should be a role model for young people. Try to be someone who players can look to for guidance and support when all they think they have going for them is scoring another basket or running for another touchdown. Demonstrate sportsmanship towards opponents and officials, compassion and understanding for athletes, and mirror a lifestyle for young people that will help them become outstanding individuals.

All coaches want to see their athletes succeed on and off the court, and winning should always be a part of that goal. Coaches should take the time to instill in their players that the real challenge is not winning a basketball or football game, but rather the challenge of becoming a productive citizen, a loving and caring spouse, or a dedicated parent. This effort is the challenge and responsibility that coaches should make their No. 1 priority.

As we all put championships on our list of team goals, don't forget the integrity, well-being and future of our athletes and athletic programs as we set out on another successful season. As another season rolls around, hopefully more coaches and programs will measure their success by preparing their athletes for the most challenging game of all – the game of life – and look at the wins as a bonus from a job well done.

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