

# Seeing and Understanding the Big Picture

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**T**o be successful, most high school coaches are focused, single-minded and hard working. They have a passion for their sport and are driven to excel – and there is nothing wrong with this approach. Athletic directors, parents and athletes value these qualities and obviously want the very best individuals to lead and direct their teams.

Good coaches provide sound instruction in the skills and strategies involved in their sport and are constantly looking for new ideas to enhance their background. A coach on the high school level needs to also see and understand the big picture at his or her school and in the athletic program.

It is imperative that a coach accepts and appreciates several concepts that are integral and involved with high school athletes. The following are a few of the aspects that a coach on the secondary level should understand and incorporate.

## **Educational Value**

While our athletes should definitely be mastering skills and strategies in their sport, they should also be developing a wide range of other traits and qualities that are enhanced or gained by participating. There is a fairly extensive list of valuable outcomes associated with athletics such as teamwork, goal-setting and developing perseverance.

As a matter of fact, a colleague stated it very well: “ If there isn't educational value in our programs, we have no business providing sports in a high school setting.” And he's right. If our team exist only as a platform to win games and championships, there is no basis for our programs to be included in the offerings on the secondary level. We are, after all, in the business of education and that must include athletics.

The NFHS Coach Education Program has long used the concept of *Teachable Moments* and it should be commonly and frequently used by all coaches. Whether explaining the dangers of steroid use or the concept of respecting an opponent, there are unlimited topics that can be used on a daily basis. Try ending practice with one or two of these thoughts every day and your athletes will benefit and learn a great deal. But whatever we do with our teams, it better have educational value.

## **The Right Fit for Winning**

Don't get the wrong impression, preparing and striving to win are vital parts of athletics. However, there are other important outcomes that are equally or perhaps more important. By participating in athletics, young people should enjoy the experience, improve and learn valuable life lessons. Without these components, winning records and championships aren't overly valuable.

The focus of athletics really has to be based upon what is best for kids. Certainly coaches should scout opponents, plan constructive practice sessions and prepare their athletes for the next contest. We want our athletes to give maximum effort and strive to win, but this may not always result in a victory. If they experience a winning season, this is simply an added side-benefit and not the sole purpose. If you are only focusing on winning, you're missing the big picture. There are other valuable outcomes of athletic participation.

## **Academics is Number One**

Quite often, coaches proclaim that academics is the most important aspect for a student-athlete. It is more important than winning on the field. But do our actions always reflect this statement?

If a young person is struggling in class, do you allow him to go for extra help or tutoring, which may mean arriving late for a practice session? If you do follow this approach, you would certainly support this premise that academics is the most important goal. However, it doesn't always happen.

Team rules and procedures often stipulate that an athlete has to attend practice in order to play in a game. The desire by athletes to play and a coach's goal of winning often prevail over improving the academic standing of some athletes.

Since coaches are educators, they truly have to buy into the concept of academics must always come first. A coach has to help your people by encouraging and providing opportunities to improve academic achievement.

## **Sharing Athletes**

While most coaches provide off-season conditioning and skill improvement programs for their players, it is also important that they allow these athletes to do other things. Making demands that young people devote their time to only your sport is unacceptable.

Granted, you want to encourage and motivate your athletes to improve, but exclusivity cannot be permitted.

In the off-season, and particularly during the summer, athletes should be able to explore their interests. This doesn't just mean in athletics, but young people also need time with their family, many have summer jobs and should be encouraged to take part in other educational opportunities. It is also important to remember that athletes don't belong to any coach.

When athletes have the opportunity to participate on other teams and to participate in additional activities, we are allowing them to explore, grow and develop. This is, after all, what education is all about and coaches need to not only understand, but embrace this concept.

## **There are Other Teams**

Naturally, you will put all of your energy and focus into the team that you are coaching. But you also have to understand and have an appreciation that yours is not the only team in the athletic program. There are others, and in most schools, there are many more.

Working hard and promoting your team is great as long as you recognize that there are other very deserving teams and coaches. The facilities, equipment and financial support are not only intended for your team, but for everyone in the athletic program. No coach or program should be considered more important than others – every team is important and should be valued.

When dealing with our athletes, we stress the approach that the team is more important than the individual, effort and hard work is the key, and cooperation is the glue that keeps things together. Along with chemistry, teamwork is the cornerstone of athletic success. We constantly use these concepts with our athletes and this should be the same with colleagues.

Sharing athletes with other coaches is absolutely imperative in most high school programs throughout the country. This should be an easy concept for coaches to understand, since we are part of a larger team – the athletic program and school. The successful coach is one who helps and is supportive of other coaches within the program and school. Just like athletes, coaches who are selfish and self-centered don't understand the overall objectives and can be a real detriment to an athletic program.

A successful athletic program, therefore, needs coaches who not only excel in their individual sport, but also see and understand the big picture. After all, our program deserves the very best and this means a cooperative, energetic, supportive coaching staff that is working together for a common objective – the ultimate, positive environment for our student-athletes. **CQ**