

Philosophy of Coaching

Introduction

“The unexamined life is not worth living” (Vealey, pg. 13). Socrates proposed this notion before many of the sports enjoyed today by millions even existed. Coaches from around the world have taken that statement to heart by examining the many facets that exist in the sport in which they are involved. In order to progress as individuals and a team, analysis of common beliefs and practices are necessary. It is important for a coach to understand that “there is no single right or best way to coach”, different tactics work for different coaches (Sabock, 2011, pg. 75). Every coach needs to discover what works best for him/her in a given situation. The development of a philosophy of coaching is a major step in becoming a successful coach. Every aspect of coaching must be examined in order to respond to questions or problems in a decisive and consistent manner. There are many roles that a coach assumes when he/she takes a job. The importance of these many roles a coach takes on varies depending on the level at which he/she is coaching, and may even vary for different athletes on the same team. Sports have such a large impact on the lives of athletes of all ages and stages of development that a coach should put careful thought into the effect his/her actions and decisions have on the lives of the athletes they coach.

Role of Sport

Before discussing the multiple modes of impact a coach has on an athlete, it is important to discuss why sports are so important to an individual. There are many functions of sport in society. The MHSAA states that “we believe that the nature of a

nation's sports program reflects, to a large degree, the nation's physical well-being and its physical interests." (MHSAA). As society is becoming more technologically advanced, activities that used to be performed by getting out of the house can now be done by using the internet. For an increasingly lazy society, the function of sports as a means to enhance the health of individuals is becoming more important. The prevalence of child obesity is on the rise because more children are playing video or computer games instead of participating in athletics. In order to entice children to join an athletic team, the sport must be fun. If the sport is not fun for the child, he/she will probably lose interest and search for another source of entertainment.

Another important function of sports is educating the individual on sport skills as well as life lessons. Athletes learn to build character by interacting with their peers in such a way that they can achieve a common goal. Life lessons could come from other members of the team or from the coach. Learning to work as a team could help prepare children for their career since most jobs require the individual to be a member of a functional group. In many sports, the team cannot succeed without all members completing their responsibilities in the various roles they occupy.

A major function of sports in society is the entertainment it provides to spectators and athletes. Youth sports offer entertainment mainly for the families of the children participating in the sport. Professional athletics make entertainment into a business. Many athletes act like they are putting on a show for the spectators. So many people watch specific athletic events, such as the Super Bowl, that advertisers pay millions of dollars to have thirty seconds of air time during commercial breaks. While public entertainment is

important for professional athletics, youth sports coaches should be primarily focused on the function of fun and education for each athlete. (Module 1-Part 1)

Ranking Importance of Objectives of Sport

In a study that questioned children ages 10-18 about why they quit playing a sport, “three of the first five reasons were ‘I was not having fun,’ ‘coach was a poor teacher,’ and ‘too much pressure.’” (Frankl). I believe that the most important objective of sport for youth first being introduced to a sport is for it to be fun. If the kid is not having fun, then he/she will not want to continue playing. A youth baseball coach agreed that the most important role for a youth coach is to “teach them [the kids] to love the game, to love to play. The only measure of success for a coach is if the kids come back to play the next year. If they don’t return for a second season, you weren’t a good enough coach, period.” (Doyle). One of the goals of a youth coach should be to instill a life-long passion for the sport in the athletes. “Intrinsic rewards (self knowledge that grows out of self-competition) are more important in creating lifetime athletes than are extrinsic rewards (victory or attention from others).” (Frankl).

John Wooden conveyed the importance of educating individuals participating in sports by stating that an athlete should “be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are” (Frankl). Many sports agencies nationwide have commented on the importance of developing children’s character in addition to sport-related skills. The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) developed the following mission statement “to offer amateur sports programs through a volunteer base for all people to have the physical,

mental, and moral development of amateur athletes and to promote good sportsmanship and good citizenship” (AAU). A coach’s number one goal should not be winning; the child should come first. A little league baseball coach reinforced this belief by stating that “winning is the second priority. Safety, effort and fun are number one” (Milijas). The Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) stated that

“We believe that personal and social values can be attained in sports competition but that these objectives are not automatic and, to a great degree, they depend upon leadership. In addition to those values that are classified as personal and social, there are others which are classified as physical and spiritual. An attitude of sophistication that has developed in the country since World War II is making it more difficult for sports programs to obtain the results which we hope they will. This attitude prevents participants from making sacrifices to accomplish what should be accomplished in sports program. We believe that this attitude of sophistication has contributed to a weakening of moral fiber.” (MHSAA).

This statement by the MHSAA emphasizes the importance of the coach’s role as an educator. The coach is not only responsible for making the sport fun, teaching the skills necessary to improve, but also to strengthen the “moral fiber” of the athletes. This role for a coach is important at all levels of athletics, but more so at the youth and high school levels than at a professional level. As the young athlete is learning who he/she is and developing their character, it is more important to educate players on proper ethics and behavior than when the player is an adult. Part of the challenge for a coach at the youth and high school levels is leading the individual to self-discovery while also teaching him/her to become part of a team. The coach needs to think of the individual player as

well as the team as a whole. A basketball team in California bases their coaching philosophy on the desire to “make our young ladies TEAM basketball players within a successful program which functions as a family and, in doing so, achieve the higher goal of helping them to be better people.” (Sykes et al.). Some coaches think even further removed from the individual and focus on the development of the overall program. A bowling coach from Northern Texas has the mission to “assist in making High School Bowling a varsity sport” (Roy). For programs that have a difficult time encouraging athletes to try out for the team, development of interest in the sport should be a main goal of the coach.

The least important objective of sport at the youth and high school level is public entertainment. Most youth and high school sports do not make a large amount of money for the community or school district. Even when the sport brings money and attention to a district, I believe it is more important to teach the developing athlete the correct character lessons instead of possibly compromising essential morals in order to please the public. At the collegiate and professional levels, public entertainment gains importance. Many colleges and professional sports teams make a great deal of money from athletic performances. Especially as a professional athlete, playing the sport is their career. The more popularity an athlete gains, the more money they make due to increased endorsements from sponsors. Even though I believe that public entertainment becomes more important as the athlete progresses to a professional career in sports, I believe that the coach’s main goal should still be education.

At the collegiate and professional levels, I believe it is of the utmost importance to educate the athletes. The tennis coach from University of California Berkeley calls

himself a “humanistic educator” who “aim(s) to provide each student-athlete with a thorough developmental program and the opportunity to fulfill their potential, achieve their goals and experience playing for a championship team at the Division I level.” (Brogan). The increased importance on winning as the athlete ages is shown by Brogan’s statement that “although a winning record is the objective measure of a program’s success, this intention does not override the importance of the greater mission, which is to continually learn, grow and improve in every aspect of life. With this approach, in a supportive environment, NO ONE FAILS and everyone is free to go for their greatness as well as maximize their abilities.” (Brogan). I believe that if the coach makes the sport fun and provides the support needed for players to improve their skills and grow as individuals, success in the win-loss category should follow.

Role of Winning

Winning is always preferable to losing, but winning is not everything. I believe that it is a necessity for an athlete to have the desire to win in order to succeed at a high level. “There is absolutely nothing wrong or evil in teaching young people to play to win and to excel, providing this is always done within the rules and spirit of the game.” (Sabock, 2011, pg. 87). Some athletes and coaches become too focused on winning that they resort to unethical methods in order to achieve their goal of winning. In a sport like tennis, the players have a large amount of control over line calling. Tennis is a sport wrought with many ethical dilemmas due to the lack of line judges at the high school level. One would hope that the honor system would work in most cases, but there are always some individuals that will exploit any opportunity to win. Sometimes the player

has such an intense drive to win that they make a bad line call without malicious intent. The player wants the ball to be out so badly that they delude themselves into thinking that they saw the ball land outside the line. Given instruction from the wrong coach, athletes could learn inappropriate lessons. As a tennis coach, teaching the etiquette and ethical responsibilities to the players is of very high importance.

This need to educate athletes instead of focusing purely on the outcome of the game or match is echoed many times over by coaches and sport agencies across the nation. The Maryland Public Secondary Schools Athletic Association (MPSSAA) believes in safeguarding “the physical, mental, and moral welfare of high school students and to protect them from exploitation.” (MPSSAA). Everyone has different methods as a coach, but the system should never be exploited as means to accomplish the goal of winning. Every coach wants to win, and feels some amount of pressure from administration or team owners and fans to win, but that does not justify breaking or bending rules in order to do so. Just because boundaries can be pushed, it does not mean that it is the right course of action.

Players learn from their coaches about proper reactions to certain situations. If the coach is very angry after a loss and reacts by yelling and screaming at the players, the athletes will think screaming is an appropriate response to losing. It is important for the coach to behave like a good sport so that the athletes learn proper sportsmanship. “Ethical behavior is not inborn.” (Sabock, pg. 6). “The fact remains that it does not matter one bit if you are a coach or an athlete, famous or unknown, rich or poor, there is no excuse for cheating, stealing, lying, or deliberately harming another person.” (Sabock, pg. 6). Winning should not come at the cost of breaking the rules, which could severely impact

the development of the athletes. “There is an old saying that the actions you see are either taught or allowed.” (Sabock, pg. 6). It is up to the coach to foster the creation of a competitive attitude and the desire to win in athletes, but the coach must also monitor the moral development of each individual.

The best coaches turn a loss into a learning experience that could not have had the same impact if the team would have won. The coach must be an expert analyst in order to turn a loss into a good teaching moment. Finding areas of improvement for each player as well as places the whole team could develop is one of the most important skills a quality coach should possess. Seeing improvement in players is more important to me than a win-loss record. I like the way a University of California tennis coach stated this belief; he said “whether it is practice or competition, first round or the championship round, high or low stress environment, I always keep my eyes on the prize... the PROCESS. I will focus on controlling the controllable and hold everyone accountable for what they can control, nothing more, nothing less. The little things are the big things!” (Jensen).

I can appreciate that coaches in more intense climates than as an assistant JV tennis coach for a high school in Michigan could consider the win-loss record with much more importance. Since my program is not in the spotlight, I do not have administrators and the community questioning my every decision if the result of my choices was not a victory. The turnover rate for coaches in more high-profile sports, such as football, basketball or wrestling is much higher because of the emphasis put on winning. Those sports help bring students to the district, so if those teams are not winning, fewer families interested in that sport will decide to move to the area. Coaches at the collegiate and professional levels often receive pressure from the media, fans, and administrators about

the number of wins their team has accrued. I do not think that it is a coincidence that coaches sign contracts that only last a few years at the most. The higher-ups want to make sure they can continually evaluate the success of the program. Exactly how college sports administrators and professional team owners evaluate their coaches, I do not know, but my guess would be that the win-loss record would be a major component of the evaluation. I would not define the success of a coach by their win-loss record. I think it is more important to consider the growth of the athletes. If the players have improved their skills, grown as individuals and as a team, felt supported through all of their endeavors, and have had fun, then the coach has been successful.

Gender Equity

In society today when gender classifications are sometimes difficult to define, many questions arise when considering participation in sports. Many individuals now classify themselves as transgender. The people in this group may be anatomically defined as male, but may consider themselves to be female. If a transgender individual wanted to play in organized sports, the question would arise about whether that person should play on a male or female team. As a scientist, I would answer by saying that however a doctor would define that person's gender based on their anatomy and physiology is what should determine which team is appropriate. There would probably be many issues with determining the exact boundary line between the two anatomies and physiologies, but it seems like a matter that may be discussed more in the near future.

Transgender considerations are not the only issues relating to gender in the sports arena. There is the question of cross-gendered coaching. I believe that same gender

coaches may have a better chance of relating to the players, but that does not mean that a coach of the opposite sex is not capable of connecting with his/her athletes. Having gone through similar experiences in their youth, the coach may be able to draw from prior knowledge in order to help an athlete through a tough situation. Some issues may be sensitive to discuss no matter which gender the coach is, but other issues may be gender-specific. Cross-gender coaches may be more of an issue for middle or high school-aged players who are learning to adjust to changing bodies and minds. A women coach may be more likely to understand the growing pains of a teenage girl, rather than a teenage boy.

Male and female coaches have to deal with the issues that may arise due to the time commitment needed in order to be a coach. If the coach is married and has children, the time spent teaching other youngsters is time that is spent away from their own children. This issue may be why most youth sport coaches seem to be parents of a member of the team. I have known coaches to step down from their position or move to a new position that is not as time-consuming or physically and mentally demanding in order to spend more quality time with their family. Since I am not married and I do not have children, I am not sure how this demand would affect me.

Equity for People of Color

Honestly, this is an issue that I have never even considered. Decisions should be made without taking into consideration the race of the athletes. Determination of positions should be made on merit. There should be some objective measures that can be used to show the decision making process of the coach. For tennis, we have many challenge matches as a part of try-outs that continue into the first week or two of practice

in order to determine a fair line-up for matches. Players understand that the challenge matches help us, the coaches, to determine who should play at first versus fourth singles and doubles. Throughout the season, it is important to allow the players the chance to challenge the person or doubles team in the position higher than them in order to adjust the line-up to reflect improvements in players throughout the season.

Cutting Players

My stance on cutting players varies depending on the level of athletics in consideration. I agree with AYSO's stance on cutting when it comes to youth athletics. AYSO says that "every player on every team must play at least 50% of every game," and "there are no elimination try-outs and nobody gets cut." (AYSO). Youth that want to try many different sports should be able to play without having to worry about getting cut from the team. Fun should be the main goal for youth athletics, and cuts cause stress for the athletes.

I actually talked the head coach of the girls JV tennis team at my school into implementing cuts. There would be 30-40 girls on the JV team with only four courts to practice. I did not like telling girls that were interested in learning how to play tennis that they were not able to be on the team, but I felt it was necessary in order for the program to grow. With 30-40 girls on the four courts, not very many repetitions were possible for each girl. It is of vital important to have ample time to practice the correct techniques in order to improve. Many of the more capable athletes did not improve their skills as much as I believe could have been possible if there were fewer girls on the courts. The first year that I coached at Davison, there were not any cuts. There were 32 girls on the team. The

players improved and had fun, and I think we won a little over half of the matches. After some discussion about the pros and cons of cuts, we decided to implement cuts the next year. That second year I coached, the girls improved drastically, still had fun, and had the best record of any JV men's or women's tennis team in Davison's history. We, as coaches, were able to work with the players to improve areas that needed focus and since there were fewer girls, we made deeper connections to them. I do not think that the decision to cut is appropriate for all situations, but I think we made the right decision for Davison women tennis.

Pay-to-Play

I do not agree with pay-to-play programs. Children that come from economically disadvantaged households would probably benefit the most from involvement in team sports. Having a coach that listens and cares about them could mean so much more to neglected children than kids that have two loving and devoted parents. As a high school teacher, I understand better than most the effect hard economic times are having on the education system. Having athletes pay a fee in order to play a sport could help a school district, but at what cost? How many children would not be able to participate in athletics because they do not have the money needed? Athletics are too important to the development of a child to limit their opportunities to participate based upon economic status. The amount of money a child's parents make is out of the child's control, so it would be unfair to deny them the chances given to children from wealthier families.

Personal Ethics and Sportsmanship

“To deliberately break rules, to cheat, to be unethical is to violate a basic trust that is inherent in fulfilling the role of coach.” (Sabock, pg. 1). A coach needs to be an honest, trustworthy person. When a coach preaches about the importance of following the rules and is then found to have broken the rules, the spirit of the players is crushed. One of their major role models was exposed as a liar and hypocrite. I understand the instinct for self-preservation when confronted with exposure of a mistake, but a coach, or really any decent human being, needs to be able to take responsibility for mistakes. It is okay to slip-up occasionally, as long as there are not lies being told to hide those mistakes. Society would benefit from people showing strength of character by admitting to mistakes and taking responsibility for their actions.

“Some believe that ethics, fair play, and honesty are suffering more abuse in athletics today than at any time in our history.” (Sabock, pg. 2). I believe that the increased accessibility to instantaneous news is the reason for this increased abuse of ethics in athletics. I would bet that with the technology that is available today, just as much dishonesty and rule-breaking would be exposed earlier in the history of sports. The behavior of athletes and coaches is documented and shared at an incredibly high degree of efficiency that coaches need to be very careful about their behavior. “Ethical behavior on the part of a coach involves not only observing the rules of a particular game but also, and more important, behaving according to the true spirit of the game, or according to the unwritten rules that are an integral part of every sport.” (Sabock, pg. 3). I think the degree to which a coach follows those unwritten rules is a true indication of the personal ethics of the coach. If a coach breaks unwritten rules, let alone written rules, it would be

difficult for the players and the community to respect and trust the coach. I like to believe in second chances, but hiring a coach that has been found to engage in unethical practices would be a very difficult decision for an athletic director and school board.

Gamesmanship seems to be a bigger issue in sports today than sportsmanship. Players violate unwritten rules all the time in order to give themselves an edge on their opponent. Sabock describes gamesmanship as “violating the spirit of a game...doing something simply to upset or psych out an opponent in order to win.” (Sabock, pg. 3). An unwritten rule in tennis is to hand the balls to the opponent on change-over. Some players neglect to pass the balls in what seems to be an attempt to get under the opponent’s skin. “Taunting an opponent, having an in-your-face attitude, and trash talking have become commonplace at all levels of competition today.” (Sabock, pg. 3). It is very disappointing to see this type of behavior on television, but especially when a coach sees it happen in person. Sports would be more enjoyable for athletes and coaches if everyone played fairly and treated each other with respect.

Conclusion

As a high school level tennis coach, I believe the major objectives of a coach should be to make the sport fun and to educate the athletes in all aspects of the sport as well as character development. At the collegiate and professional levels, the coach takes on the lesser role of providing entertainment for the public. Every coach should have the desire to win, but winning is not the only important measure of success. I believe that improvement in the players’ skills and the impact life-lessons have on the athletes can be much better indications of success for a coach. My philosophy on cutting varies, but in

my coaching situation, I think cuts will help the program become stronger. I believe that honesty and mutual respect leads to satisfying athletic experiences by all athletes and coaches.

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