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Interscholastic Sports: A Character-Building Privilege

By

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Abstract:

High school coaches should teach, model, and reinforce to their athletes that participation in interscholastic sports is a character-building privilege earned by showing respect, playing fair, and striving to win while keeping winning in perspective.

Interscholastic Sports — A Character-Building Privilege

The goals of interscholastic sports include helping adolescents enhance sport skills, physical fitness, self-discipline, sportsmanship, teamwork, time management skills, self-confidence, and mental toughness while promoting life skills and lessons and enhancing academic performance. The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) (n.d.) reports that the over 7,000,000 interscholastic athletes overall have higher grade point averages, lower drop-out rates, better daily attendance, and fewer discipline problems than non-athletes. The NFHS takes pride in reporting that interscholastic sports support the academic missions of schools, are inherently educational, and foster success in athletes' lives. Based on the premise that interscholastic sports can positively impact the lives of adolescents, the purpose of the following discussion is to emphasize the importance of coaches teaching and modeling character traits and offer specific strategies.

The Role of Interscholastic Sport Coaches in Developing Character

Interscholastic sport coaches should emphasize the character development of their athletes by serving as positive role models for behaving ethically, thus reinforcing the importance of ethical and moral behavior. These coaches can help athletes learn responsibility, respect, teamwork, accountability, time management skills, the difference between right and wrong, how to cope with failure and success, and how to do the right thing despite peer pressure and other situational influences. In addition to teaching sport skills, coaches have the responsibility to teach character and life skills in and through interscholastic sports as they contribute to athletes' growth and development.

Coaches of interscholastic athletes should model fairness, teaching individuals to place the team ahead of the individual, challenge and help athletes grow in all aspects of their lives, such as learning to face challenges on and off the playing field or court, and help develop athletes' self-discipline. Coaches

can model social values, like having a good work ethic and commitment, and moral values, such as being honest, doing the right thing as role models for other students, showing respect, and displaying personal good conduct. Coaches can help athletes understand the meaning of accountability by allowing their athletes to see how their decisions, choices, and actions on and off the court or field have consequences immediately and later in their lives.

To help athletes develop character, including self-respect and respect of others, coaches must model integrity by behaving in morally responsible ways. In fact, the actions of coaches can be more impactful than their words. Individual and team meetings, casual interactions with athletes, practices, and competitions can be used by coaches to reinforce values like teamwork, responsibility, and accountability to the athlete's school, community, friends, and family. Through community involvement, coaches can reinforce the importance of respecting others.

Coaches should consistently send a clear message that academic work supersedes any game by setting performance standards, providing encouragement, and offering assistance to ensure that each student on their teams succeeds first in the classroom. When stressing completing academic work and earning acceptable grades, coaches should withhold practice and playing opportunities when athletes do not fulfill their academic responsibilities as students. This action would encourage them to ask for help from their teachers.

Interscholastic coaches view winning as important; however, many believe that even at the high school level winning is oftentimes over-emphasized. In addition to emphasizing winning through preparation and effort, coaches could use, which optimally should be done consistently and persistently, the specific strategies listed below to reduce the over-emphasis on winning:

- Reinforce continually that participating in interscholastic sports is and should be fun

- Emphasize that the purpose of interscholastic sports is to teach sport skills and life lessons
- Stress academic achievement first and foremost
- Help each athlete develop and achieve his or her all-around potential
- Follow the rules explicitly and reinforce fair play and sportsmanship at all times
- Teach how to learn from failures and successes
- Model doing what is right on and off the court or field
- Focus on building each athlete's character with winning important but secondary

Developing Character through Participation in Interscholastic Sports

According to the National Association of State Boards of Education (2004), playing on a high school sport team is a privilege, not a right. Potentially, participating in interscholastic sports can contribute to each athlete's civic, physical, and social development. Interscholastic athletes will grow and develop physically, mentally, emotionally, and ethically when coaches teach and model social and moral values.

The movie *Coach Carter* (Gale, Schwahn, Gatins, & Carter, 2004) was inspired by a true story. Coach Carter, despite intense resistance and criticism, locked athletes on his undefeated high school basketball team out of the gymnasium until they as a team and individually earned the privilege of playing by accepting responsibility for their personal conduct and academic work. Through his actions, Coach Carter was trying to instill in his athletes the importance of preparing for life by being accountable for attendance, class assignments, and other behaviors. He insisted that his athletes learn to establish appropriate priorities and act based on these.

Interscholastic athletes can learn how to reason morally when they evaluate their personal moral values and develop a consistent and impartial set of moral principles by which to live (Lumpkin, Stoll, & Beller, 2003). This process requires discerning what is right and wrong and acting based on what

is known and valued (Carter, 1996). Athletes can be taught what character is and how to show the moral courage to do what is right. Key steps coaches can use to help interscholastic athletes develop character include identifying core moral values, developing the ability to reason morally, following role models of moral courage, learning from past lapses in moral action, and living in conformity with moral values.

Lumpkin (2009) explains five steps for building character:

- (a) modeling what character is, shaping and continuing to mold moral values, and consistently reinforcing and praising the ethical behaviors of young athletes; (b) teaching what it means to treat opponents, officials, and teammates honorably and respectfully while following the letter and spirit of the rules; (c) modeling how to behave when faced with morally challenging situations; (d) shaping players' thinking so effort, hard work, and doing one's best are more important than winning; and (e) reinforcing how character is displayed in sport, such as through sportsmanship and fair play, and how moral values can be applied in other aspects of life. (p. 23)

The Josephson Institute on Ethics (2009) promotes pursuing honor with victory in sports and strengthening athletes' character through its T.E.A.M. approach. The T.E.A.M. mnemonic stands for the following: (1) **t**eaching and emphasizing the ethical values of trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship; (2) **e**nforcing firmly and consistently character through these six core values; (3) **a**dvocating for the importance of living a valued-based life; and (4) **m**odeling these six core values. The Josephson Institute uses these ethical values for school-aged youth in its character education program.

Coaches can use numerous strategies to help build the character of athletes. Coaches need to teach and model social values, like cooperation and teamwork, and moral values, like integrity and respect, so athletes have concrete examples of ethical actions in sports. Coaches can use teachable

moments, a character-based thought for the day, team rituals, and player-of-the-day selections to help teach, build, and reinforce character (Thompson, 1995). Coaches can teach and model character by keeping winning in perspective, with a consistent and persistent message that interscholastic sports should be enjoyable for all participants. Coaches can emphasize that competing in interscholastic sports is an earned privilege based on how an athlete behaves.

The true story in the sidebar shows how one coach modeled the moral courage to do the right thing for athletes on her team.

Doing the Right Thing

Just prior to the final game of the season, a high school coach learned she unknowingly played an ineligible player in the first game of the season. Even though the coach thought it was unlikely anyone would ever know this player, who quit the team after that game, had been ineligible, the coach immediately reported the violation to the state high school athletic association. At the next practice, she explained to her team a mistake had been made and the only right and principled action was to forfeit the game, even though that game will now be recorded as a loss instead of a victory. This meant their team would not win the conference title as it thought it had. These athletes learned a lesson for life — honesty is the morally right thing to do.

It is likely that the example this coach modeled will have a much more lasting influence on each athlete than the team's win-loss record that season. Another illustration of coaches modeling character occurred in 2007 when Heart of Illinois Conference athletes playing high school sports developed a code of conduct. This student-written code for everyone attending their games included these nine points:

- Respect our game, yourself, and others
- Respect our officials at all times

- Show sportsmanship in victory or defeat
- Be positive in your actions and comments
- Never single out an athlete with criticism
- Set a good example for us and those around you
- Cheer for good play
- Practice self control
- Remember: This is a game, we are here to have fun!

What a really powerful affirmation of the importance of character in sports!

A sportsmanship model for coaches, athletes, and parents, like codes of conduct, emphasizes how each person can make a commitment to integrity and fair play in sports. It is not good enough to just follow the exact language of the rules, because true sportsmanship precludes intentional efforts to exploit the written rules for personal or team advantage. Rather, the act of playing within the spirit of the rules places values-based actions at the center of the game, demonstrating that integrity is always paramount. Each athlete, coach, and spectator is expected to demonstrate respect for others, honesty, responsibility, and sportsmanship, regardless of the circumstances or outcome of the game. Through positive reinforcement for doing the right thing, athletes learn that adhering to ethical principles is more important than winning.

There are numerous examples of sportsmanship handbooks that have been developed by schools, conferences, and state athletic associations. Each group that sponsors interscholastic sports is encouraged to develop a handbook and share it widely to reinforce the importance of building character. A sidebar provides an outline for what could be included in a sportsmanship handbook. Coaches and other sport leaders should not assume that character will be built through sports. This will

only occur through tireless efforts in discussing what sportsmanship is and how it can be learned and demonstrated.

Outline for a Sportsmanship Handbook

Introduction to sportsmanship

--Definition

--Belief statement

--Fundamentals of sportsmanship

--Steps for establishing good sportsmanship

Responsibilities

--Board of Education

--School administrators

--Coaches

--Players

Pre-season meetings

--Coaches with athletes

--Coaches with athletes and parents

--Principal with the entire school

Codes of conduct

[This document contains the author's accepted manuscript. For the publisher's version, see the link in the header of this document.]

--Coaches

--Players

--Cheerleaders and band

--Spectators

Promotional strategies for sportsmanship

--Banners to display

--Pledges to sign

--Press releases

--Public service announcements

--Rewards for good sportsmanship

Crowd control strategies

--Public safety measures

--Warning

--Consequences for displaying poor sportsmanship

Concluding Comments

Interscholastic athletes earn the privilege to play school-sponsored sports by achieving academically, displaying good sportsmanship, respecting opposing players, officials, coaches, and teammates. Through fair play guided by moral values, athletes learn and develop character. High school

coaches have a responsibility to live lives of integrity that potentially will be emulated by their athletes.

The role of coach encompasses a huge obligation to shape the character of athletes by emphasizing respect, responsibility, fair play, and sportsmanship. When coaches help athletes emphasize their academic work, learn interpersonal and social skills, and develop and display their physical abilities with the emphasis on achieving their potential, these athletes will more likely keep winning in perspective and prepare themselves to become productive members of society.

One of the most influential people in the importance of sportsmanship and teaching character through sports was John Wooden. While he probably was most known for coaching his UCLA teams to 10 National Collegiate Athletic Association championships, he began his career as a high school English teacher and coach. He always emphasized that he taught young men about basketball but more importantly he taught life lessons. Wooden stressed values, not winning, yet was named the greatest coach of the 20th century. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian award recognizing exceptional meritorious service for being one of the finest human beings and role models ever. Ten of his books have been included in the references because they are outstanding resources for coaches who want to learn from an outstanding coach of character. In his famous Pyramid of Success, Wooden (1972) stated, "Success is peace of mind which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming" (p. 87).

Bill Bradley (1998), an all-state player in high school, three-time All-American at Princeton University, a gold medalist in the Olympic Games in 1964, a two-time National Basketball Association champion, member of the Basketball Hall of Fame, and three-term United States Senator, personified the principles he learned and developed through playing basketball. In his personal observations and reflections in *Values of the Game*, he advocated that these same values matter in life: passion;

discipline; selflessness; respect; perspective; courage; leadership; responsibility; resilience; and imagination.

Tony Dungy (2007), Super Bowl winning coach of the Indianapolis Colts, demonstrated that you could win in the National Football League without vulgarity and cheating and by living according to your personal values. He led by example for his players, assistant coaches, the young men he mentored outside of football, and as a husband and father. His *New York Times* bestselling autobiography, *Quiet Strength*, provided a personal glimpse into the principles, practices, and priorities of a winning life. Coach Dungy was like former coach Bruce Brown (2003) who stressed that coaches could make a difference in the lives of their players by teaching character through sport. Brown would highly recommend that coaches to follow the model of Coach Young described in the sidebar.

The Coach Who Teaches Life Lessons

Coach Young's baseball team reflected the values by which he lived his life. He cared about each player regardless of his skill level. He mandated treating everyone, including opponents and umpires, with respect. His extensive knowledge of the game and coaching abilities resulted in his teams being praised for their conditioning, fundamental skills, and game strategies. Striving to win was important to Coach Young, but he kept winning in perspective for his athletes. Coach Young modeled sportsmanship in everything he did and ensured that his players followed his lead as good sportsmen on and off the field.

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