

PROMOTION OF MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH COACHING COMPETITIVE SPORTS

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Competitive sports can have a negative or positive impact on an athlete's mental health, and an athlete's coach plays a large role in determining this. The coach's goal should be to help athletes realize that developing human potential is equally as important as winning. This article highlights guidelines to assist coaches in instructing and mentoring athletes. (*J Natl Med Assoc.* 1997;89:517-520.)

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The role of coach carries with it a great responsibility that goes far beyond winning games as it can nurture or destroy an athlete's human potential by virtue of the direction the coach chooses to take. A healthy coach is an instructor-mentor who uses sports as a vehicle to tutor individual competitors or the players on his or her team. One of the qualified coach's ultimate goals is to provide guidance for developing useful skills for life such as leadership ability. In addition to having significant influence over school athletes, the coach and coaching staff are frequently in charge of a "subculture" that has intimate contact with a core of student leaders or school leaders. Therefore, the coach and coaching staff have the potential of having an extended influence on the school and community milieu. This article outlines some of the important lessons that can be learned from being trained by a competent coach.

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VALUES AND ATTITUDES OF THE HEALTHY COACH

The healthy coach understands that as a coach, he or she has a great responsibility for developing the human resources of the team's players. This development includes developing not only physical and mental skills that will allow the athletes to win at competition, but also skills to enhance physical health, intellectual growth, character development, spirituality, and maturation. Hence, the adept coach realizes that one of his or her goals is to foster the appropriate development of aggression. The sensible coach also promotes teamwork and interdependence in the players that participate in team sports, and for competitors in individual sports, the coach is concerned with nourishing a sense of independence and self-reliance. The able coach attempts to instill confidence, inner peace, courage, ethics, initiative, discipline, concentration, and a sound respect for nutrition, training, a drug-free body, and a balanced lifestyle in their athletes—all of which have a profound impact on self-image. Finally, the proficient trainer seeks to promote efforts toward self-fulfillment and self-actualization.

Healthy coaches appreciate that leadership is necessary in groups and families as well as in individual tasks, and while the need to lead is innate, leadership must be learned. Coaches perceive leadership training as a way to learn self-motivation, positive expectancy, the essentials of leadership, problem-

solving skills, decision-making skills, and communication and listening skills while making worthwhile contributions to others. The complete coach understands a goal-less player is dissatisfied and discontented; however, being goal-oriented (ie, with self-leadership producing purposeful behavior), a competitor may be unsatisfied but happy to be struggling. Additionally, the sound coach understands that success is the progressive realization of a person's own worthwhile predetermined goal and is not to be evaluated by comparisons. Such coaches seek to influence their players' goal-setting behavior and encourage their players to be in competition with themselves. They also seek to remove factors that will inhibit the competitors' ability to provide themselves leadership, which will move them toward their goals.

LEADERSHIP INHIBITORS

Fit coaches are aware of leadership inhibitors and how they interfere with reaching aspirations. They understand basic needs are prioritized, with biologic needs (food, drink, and shelter) having the highest priority over higher-level basic needs of safety and security, love and social connection, esteem, and self-fulfillment. This implies that if basic biologic needs are not satisfied, leadership is stifled because the higher needs, which drive leadership, are not given attention. Thus, quality trainers are concerned with ensuring that their players' basic biologic needs are satisfied.

Sound coaches realize that the need for social acceptance also can block leadership. Being conditioned to derive acceptance from others versus gaining approbation from self-esteem can block the motivation to change. One of the major sources of cultivating a need for social acceptance comes from family influence, which seeks to pressure individuals in positive or negative directions; fortunately, however, behavior is learned and what is learned can be unlearned. Thus, competent coaches teach their athletes that sports participants should never give their individuality completely to the group nor should participants accept mediocrity as being the norm. Ergo, proper training of athletes involves having them place their personal missions over the goal of social acceptance. Such guidance helps the athlete bypass weekend parties to study so they can maintain the grade point average necessary to stay on the team.

Outstanding coaches understand that petty emotions that lead to bitterness—jealousy, hatred, mal-

ice, fear, and doubt—need to be discouraged as they divert individuals from setting constructive goals for themselves. The same holds true for procrastination. Similarly, people can relive past failures and develop an unwholesome attitude to failure. We pay a heavy price for our fear of failure—it is a powerful obstacle to growth as it assures the progressive narrowing of the personality and prevents exploration and further experimentation. Failures can become so entrenched in memory that it creates a motivational block because of the association with embarrassment, fear, and doubt. These petty emotions threaten the total personality because the embarrassment is so acute that an athlete would rather not try again. Sound coaches instruct that growth is a painful process, and it is better to have tried and failed than to not have tried at all. Thus, coaches teach that a player should react to failure with curiosity, not with fear or pain—it's the difference between seeing a lesson in life or feeling punished.

The instructor/mentor coach aspires to remove these leadership impediments from the athlete's life as such efforts can have positive, far-reaching consequences. Because people will act like they think they are, self-concepts also can form a restrictive barrier to success. Sports persons cannot achieve more than they think they can as anything beyond the self-concept is not tried. This causes them to become their own worse enemy. Hence, capable coaches seek to alter their player's ideas about themselves, and they try to teach athletes that "An individual who thinks he or she can and a human being who thinks he or she can't are both correct."

LESSONS TO BE TAUGHT AND LEARNED FROM HEALTHY COACHES

Self-Motivation

Self-motivation is one of the skills athletes can cultivate from being involved with competitive sports under the tutelage of a healthy coach. Such coaches know that desires coming from belief and expectation are strong motivating forces that propel one toward his or her goals. They also comprehend that the world stands aside for the person who makes his or her own choices and steps on the person who lets others choose for them.

Self-motivation can be developed by using visualization to crystallize expectation and belief, but first an athlete must know his or her needs and desires, and how to convert those desires into action. To properly motivate, one must appeal to

the strongest desire. Fear motivation from punishment, restriction of privileges, or social disapproval is disadvantageous. Sometimes fear loses the effect when the form of punishment is known or commonplace. Further, fear motivation repels voluntary followship. If a player is fearful, his or her effectiveness will be decreased because of all the energy expended by fear. There are also limitations of leading through incentives (the opposite of fear motivation) that promise rewards as an exchange for performance. Once the appetite is filled, the prizes are no longer motivating. Leading through attitudes and values is the only type of motivation truly useful for personal and group leadership. Such leadership is based on an understanding of human nature—people love to learn and master rather than be lazy.

Successful leaders practice self-motivation and then use that knowledge to motivate and lead others. They see their motivational blocks, recognize how they block, and then remove them; their self-insight then can be used to help others remove their impediments. Proficient coaches supply their players with opportunities to rehearse their self-motivation capacity.

Positive Expectancy

Exemplary coaches are able to fathom that competitors cannot have positive expectations about themselves until they are conversant with themselves. The relationship that an individual has with him- or herself is a strong factor in his or her personal expectations. Clearly, a self-awareness deficit will cause players to search for themselves, resulting in a waste of energy. Another important aspect of the affiliation athletes have with themselves is self-reliance. Self-reliance is developed by visualizing a problem, solving it, and benefiting from the solution. Needing self-confidence causes a loss of energy due to doubt and causes a contender to be irresponsible and fearful. Self-confidence is power and comes from “know how,” which comes from experience, which comes from willingness to subject oneself to fearful experiences. Self-respect occurs when people choose high values and live by them rather than up to them. Self-acceptance occurs by being aware of and acknowledging one’s own strengths and weakness. This skill is crucial as a person must know his or her weaknesses to strive to change them; thus, self-acceptance implies self-improvement.

Leadership Essentials

Sound coaches understand that there are several leadership essentials. First, their athletes must know themselves to know what they want and where they stand. Such knowledge helps to crystallize thinking around short-range and long-range goal setting. Short-range goals are good confidence builders that help form success habits and broaden vision while long-range goals take foresight and need intermediate steps. Clearly, to choose a goal, one must indulge in self-analysis. Second, written plans and deadlines are crucial to leadership. A realistic plan of action that puts theory into action is necessary as visualized plans lead to crystallized thoughts and consciousness creates memory. Written plans keep things clear and prevent goals from being lost; further, writing stimulates visualization. It is a reference and reminder, conserving time and energy and giving an overall view of goals to decrease conflict. It keeps track of plans, eliminates distractions, overcomes procrastination, and keeps a sense of progress and expectancy.

Another integral component is the desire for leadership. A leader must have a need for action and plans must have emotion. Supreme self-confidence also is needed as competitors must be assured of being able to change their attitude and then their behavior. Finally, good leaders need unshakable determination as they can’t afford to live in the shadow of public opinion, dogmatism, or blind stubbornness. Worthy coaches teach these essentials of leadership by displaying these talents to their protégés and giving them an opportunity to rehearse this expertise.

Problem Solving

Suitable coaches realize that attitudes about problem solving make or break a player. To engage in effective problem solving, competitors must have awareness of the problem so that they can objectively define the problem. If a person tries to define a problem subjectively (ie, with his or her emotions involved), then he or she becomes a part of the problem instead of the solution. Competent problem solving involves being time conscious, which often requires setting a deadline and deciding on available information. Vision is another key component to adept problem solving as a contender must be able to envision a goal to reach it. Being inquisitive—the feeling of needing knowledge, knowing how to get data, and knowing what to look for—is also indis-

pensable in working out impediments. Finally, the ability to be creative and brainstorm about the predicament are imperative in problem solving.

Competitive sports provide fertile training grounds for all of these aspects of problem solving. In addition, truculent sports furnish an opportunity to develop creative leadership. Such leadership demands trying the untried and relating the unrelated. It demands that conceptual skills be honed along with a willingness to innovate and see the usual in unusual ways, permitting an open-mindedness and preventing jumping to the obvious. This state of mind is uninhibited with culture and convention, allowing the creative athlete to face the future and change without stress. In fact, for the creative leader, stress heightens interest and causes self-competitiveness. Being calm while under stress is due to self-confidence that this too shall be overcome, and with improvisation, things will go well. Finally, sports afford the prospect of testing a person's ability for critically analyzing the steps to settle the quandary, objectively choose a course, and implement the decision.

Decision Making

An integral part of problem solving is becoming a decision maker. Making decisions is an outward manifestation of internal leadership abilities. The best decision is made by common sense, intellect, confidence, and dedication; making a half-hearted endorsement leads to failure. Advance preparation and knowing oneself leads to good decisions; the compulsive over-think decisions, the impulsive make decisions too quickly, and the fearful don't make decisions. Good decision makers refuse to be pressured, consider one decision at a time, and decide based on evidence not inspirations (this does not rule out intuition).

Deciding involves accepting the risk of a bad outcome and should always include an alternative. (Wishy-washy decisions don't work, but this is dif-

ferent from the decided way to a goal). The decision should be matched with action, and if the decision is wrong, a person who is skillful at problem solving will change it. Competition in sports renders myriad circumstances to practice making arduous decisions, and competent coaching can amplify a player's facility at constructing conclusions.

Communications

Finally, a person must be able convey ideas to lead; communication is the sum and substance of leadership. Instructor/mentor coaches know how to be heard and how to hear, as they understand good communication is also an exchange of feelings and attitudes. Competent coaches realize that the art of listening entails understanding—if you want another person's attention, then give him or her yours. These are skills that coaches model for their athletes. They understand that ideas can be powerful things.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has outlined some of the themes that can be gleaned from having sports training governed by coaches who are enlightened and seek to pass their sagacity on as they realize to do less is to abandon the greatest responsibility of their profession. Such educators search for the purpose and meaning in life and find within themselves the spring of motivation to contribute unique things. They attract others with understanding and empathy, which motivates others to search for their own potential for success. Successful coaches find vitality in the opportunities around them, see challenges where others see threats and problems, look to the fruits instead of the toils of their labors, and look to the future rather than the present. They have no fear of the future and are dedicated to the philosophy of change, growth, and development as they acknowledge that only by setting progressively higher goals can one maintain the momentum to keep on the course of leadership.