

From the Athletic Director's Desk

The importance of effective communication in high school sports

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The “old school” coaching style of “my way or the highway” has been dismissed as ineffective in the modern coaching world. The well-known methods of coaches like Herb Brooks of the 1980 USA Olympic Hockey team simply don’t work in today’s world. The “us vs. him” (players vs. coach) attitude results in a diminished sense of working together to achieve a goal. Effective coaching now requires a more inclusive climate where many opinions are welcomed by the coach and feedback is not only accepted, but is sought out. The two groups from which feedback can be most effective are players and parents. In “old school” coaching, this was a taboo.

The art of modern coaching is how the coach processes and utilizes feedback from both parents and players. A coach wouldn’t be doing her job if she simply listened to feedback but never really reflected upon it. Conversely, any coach who would agree with all feedback from parents and players isn’t doing her job either. A successful modern-day coach is able to sift through the data provided by a multitude of feedback and act upon it in a productive way. That is what separates the coach from the players and parents providing the feedback – the coach makes the final decisions.

Feedback from Players-

Teams with healthy, productive climates all have one thing in common: players know and understand what their roles are on the team. That is not to say that all players agree or are happy about their roles, but positive environments are much easier to develop if all team members are clear on how they fit into the team dynamic.

As a coach, I like to use a classroom method known as “dip-sticking” to check up on where each of my players is emotionally and mentally. Sometimes “dip-sticking” is informal – it happens in the parking lot after a practice, or on the sidelines after a game as the player is taking his cleats off. I’ll just ask how things are going on the team and if he is happy or has any questions about playing-time or other things that are important to players. It is amazing what a coach can find out from such a simple conversation.

Sometimes “dip-sticking” is more formal – we hold scheduled, one-on-one meetings with each player several times a season to see how they are doing. Without exception, I am always surprised by at least one player’s lack of satisfaction or clarity of role. As a coach, I thought that kid was doing fine and clearly understood why he was on the bench so much. Coaches need to remember that just because it is clear to *us*, it may not be clear

to the player. “Dip-sticking” can help us find out this important information about our players and work to help rectify the situation.

The problem is that it is not realistic to think that coaches are going to be perfect at monitoring each of their players’ emotional and mental states. That is why the player **MUST** step forward and speak with his coach about how he is feeling. If a player is not feeling involved or is feeling like he isn’t getting the playing time he deserves, he needs to discuss it with his coach. Staying silent and in the dark only makes the problem grow, and it decreases the chance of a player’s experience being a positive and growing one.

Feedback from Parents-

It has always been my opinion that high school students are old enough to advocate for themselves with their coaches, but there are certainly times when the situation gets beyond that. We would be fooling ourselves as coaches if we did not acknowledge that how a parent feels about a child’s role on a team, doesn’t impact that child’s experience on the team. That is why I think it is critical to be open to feedback and concerns of parents- even playing time issues. If we ignore or discourage parent feedback for fear of it being negative, we are creating the potential for a poisonous situation to establish itself at home- one that will make it very difficult for the coach to help the athlete succeed. If parents have negative feelings about their child’s experience on a team, they need to speak to the coach and the coach needs to invite that discussion. Keeping it silent only hurts that child in the long run.

Traditionally, one of the biggest non-discussibles in the world of high school sports is the playing time discussion between coaches and parents. I would argue that if it is a major concern at home for the parents, then the child is feeling that way as well, and a coach needs to know that. If the discussion at the family dinner table about lack of playing time is turning into a prosecution of the coach, it’s time to stop the dinner table talk and schedule a meeting with the coach. That meeting can be an eye-opening event for all three parties. As a coach, I want to know when things are negative at home so that we can work on clearing up differences or at least acknowledge the different sides to the playing time issue. To me, it is far more dangerous as a non-discussible than as a topic of conversation.

Many of our coaches at CHS have annual preseason meetings for parents. This is something I have not done with my team but will begin to do next fall. I will invite feedback at that time and explain to parents how they can contact me with concerns throughout the season.

Parents need to do their part as well. Don’t stay silent. Don’t fear retribution against your child if you speak up. If you are concerned with something that is adversely impacting your child, talk with the coach about it. Believe me, the coach wants what you want, which is for your child to have the best experience possible. That can only happen if we all work together.