

From the Athletic Director's Desk

Playing Time

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Originally published- Winter 2010-11

In my 20 years of coaching high school sports, I have found that the experiences of most high school athletes are overwhelmingly positive. However, to say that it's all smiles all of the time, would be far from the truth. When we look at those times on our teams that fall into the "not-so-great" category I have found one common thread connecting them- a lack of playing time.

My two decades of high school sports have led me to the following conclusion- 90% of the perceived negative experiences of high school athletes and parents are connected to a feeling by parent or student, that they are not being treated fairly by the coach with regards to the amount of playing time they receive.

Any chance I get, I talk with groups and individuals about what is important about high school sports- and I always talk about the fact that, "it's not all about the wins." If that is truly the case, one could (and should) counter with, "If it's not all about the wins, then why can't every kid play equal minutes or at least get every kid into every contest?" It's a great question that I will attempt to tackle below.

The goal of every high school coach should be to help prepare each of his athletes for their years beyond high school- as people, not just as athletes. It should be to expose young men and women to the many twists and turns that life will throw at them. High school sports can provide a great landscape for dealing with many of these challenges. It can present many life lessons including the various roles within a team and how to best contribute given your role in that group. It can also provide a great picture of recognizing that more can be accomplished when we put team ahead of individual rewards. Those lessons are vastly weakened or even lost when playing time is evenly distributed.

I can think of countless examples of former players who did not receive much playing time, yet took a great deal out of the experiences on the team. I'm not suggesting that all of those student-athletes were always happy, but in sacrificing that short term happiness, they walked away with other valuable experiences of team sports. I believe that many of those kids would have had a far less rewarding experience had they been given more playing time.

Beyond the areas of how teams function most effectively, there are other important elements to understanding why coaches don't base playing time simply on the short term happiness of the player and her family. Coaches want to put kids in a position to succeed and not repeatedly fail or embarrass themselves. It is true that reacting to failure is an

important part of the high school athletics learning experience, but putting students in a position that they are not physically, emotionally, or mentally prepared for goes beyond failing- it is unfair to the athlete and would be irresponsible on the coach's part.

Another key lesson of high school sports is that hard work can lead to high achievement. If we as coaches were to hand out playing time to student-athletes simply for being on the team, we would be taking away that valuable lesson. "Giving" athletes playing time even when, in the coach's opinion, they have not exhibited the necessary characteristics to be a value to the team on the field, would vastly diminish the power of accomplishment. The inevitable result would be a decrease in the amount of work and commitment put into the activity, and therefore a decrease in the educational value of that experience.

Another key point is that coaches are certainly fallible and, from time to time, make decisions that don't reward the athlete fairly. The beauty is that it even works when the coaches are "wrong." Student-athletes can benefit even when a coach does not reward them with playing time that they truly deserve. Every coach tries to be fair but in such a subjective role, that does not always appear to be the case. The benefit is that "unfairly treated" student-athlete will have gone through an experience that will certainly make them better prepared to deal with like situations in his future.

So, back to the original question of winning and its connection to playing time and lessons of high school sports. Winning IS important to high school sports. It's just not, and never should be, our ultimate goal. Winning and the striving to win is what separates high school sports from other extra-curricular activities. It's our carrot. It gives us all something to point to for our athletes to push themselves to achieve more. Student-athletes and teams striving to win together help to provide all of the other lessons learned along the way. It is the journey towards winning that really provides the life lessons- not the winning itself.

Finally, unequal playing time is just one of the many residual lessons of high school sports and striving to win. If coaches were to play all kids equally, we would have cheated the entire team out of so many valuable lessons.

In an attempt to gain a better universal understanding of the playing time issue, a major athletic department initiative for the 2010-2011 school year is to create a document to address the philosophy of playing time at CHS. I will be working with our coaching staff and seeking out both students and parents to provide insight into this important goal. If you are interested in helping us examine this issue, let me know- ericksond@cantonma.org. We will be tackling this early in 2011.