

From the Athletic Director's Desk

Why do kids play sports? And what we can learn from that

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Originally published Spring 2008*

With the value of Canton High School athletics a focus of recent town discussions about a possible override, I think it is important and timely to take a look at why we offer athletics as part of the educational experience here at Canton High School.

In order to try to answer this question, I thought that I would look at it from the point of view of the student-athlete. So I decided to do a survey and ask the student-athletes at CHS the following simple question: “*Why do you play sports at CHS?*” Students-athletes were asked to rank the four reasons for playing sports listed below, from most influential to least influential. This is how they responded:

46% said that “I enjoy being on a team” was the number one reason.

35% said that “It’s fun” was the number one reason.

17% said that “I like to compete to win” was the number one reason.

3% said that “It will help me get a college scholarship” was the number one reason.

CHS students are playing sports for two main reasons- They enjoy being on a team and it is fun. These results are not a surprise to me nor to the CHS coaching staff. It is how we all use this valuable information that really can make a difference. This data should help us all – from myself to coaches to parents alike - focus on how we approach the CHS athletic experience. Here are some of my thoughts on how coaches and parents might use this information to continue to improve the CHS athletic experience.

As CHS Coaches:

First off, it is incredibly important to acknowledge that it is a major vote of confidence in the CHS coaching staff that 80% of the respondents said that they participate because they enjoy being on a team or they are having fun. Without quality coaches who understand their student-athletes, the team experience would not be fulfilling or fun.

Having said that, the survey would also indicate that we as coaches should be spending a fair amount of time on the very difficult task of team building. In fact, this data would suggest that team building may be a more important component of quality coaching, than an understanding of the techniques and tactics of the sport. We can all agree that a coach must have a solid foundation of the important elements of the sport he/she coaches. That is a prerequisite. I would argue however, that the skillful coach goes well beyond having an expertise in the X’s and O’s. The skillful coach understands and prioritizes team building.

What is team building?---

It's about making every member of the team feel that they are valuable to the team. It's about building a "family." It's about creating an environment of shared achievement. It's about helping each member of the team find how they can best help the team. It is about common bonds, goals and memories. It's about supporting each other and fighting for each other. It's about the process and not only the product, BUT it is also about the team being greater than the sum of its parts.

A skillful coach's team building tool box is a mix of art and science. The well-timed pat on the back or word of encouragement to a struggling player after a practice or the well placed joke at the end of a half-time speech may be examples of the unplanned, artful part of team building, but for each of those examples, there are ones that are planned, measurable and significant as well.

I could share dozens of examples of such skillful team building coaching at CHS, but in the interest of brevity, I will only share a few.

After just about every game this past season, I observed our Boys Varsity Hockey coach, Brian Shuman, wait outside the locker room and make a point of saying something positive or instructive to every single player as they exited- win or lose. That's team building.

Our Girls Varsity Basketball coach, Erin Kirrane, who is an elementary school art teacher, brought some of her day job with her this season in an attempt to team build. On more than one occasion, she used her own art as well as having the team create works of art to express their team and their role on the team. These exercises clearly brought the team together (and led to some "interesting" works of "art!")

Coach Tom Bartosek has done a skillful job in expanding his team building to the parents of team members. Just attend one wrestling meet and you'll find an army of parents selling food, taking photos and supporting everyone. This family atmosphere has certainly led to a positive climate for high achievement.

Again, these are just some examples of coaches prioritizing team building. Each season, I witness more and more coaches putting a greater value on team building. This is certainly moving towards a more modern method of coaching- one that most benefits students.

As Parents:

Parents can play an important, albeit different role in team building. It is very difficult for a parent to look at his/her child's high school athletic team through any other eyes than those of a parent that wants the best for his/her daughter. I don't see anything wrong with looking through that lens. However, sometimes the immediate satisfaction of a single member of a team runs contrary to the long term good of both that individual and the team. This possible contradiction is why team building is so challenging and so rewarding.

Often times a parent may feel frustrated with a situation facing his/her child's role on a team. Quite often this comes from a lack of understanding on the part of his/her child as to his/her role on the team. I would suggest to any parent whose child shares a concern with them over a team or coach, to encourage the child to talk with his/her coach about his feelings and role on the team. In my 17 years of high school coaching, I have seen this improve the situation for the student-athlete 90% of the time.

The conversation between player and coach may or may not clear things up between the player and coach, and sometimes the parent still harbors some concern. If the parent is feeling concerned, it is very important that the parent set up a time to share his/her concerns with the coach. This usually leads to improvement in the situation.

Wrapping up:

Our student-athletes have spoken loudly and clearly as to what is important to them in their athletic experience here. I look forward to being a part of continuing to improve the team building within this program, and thus the learning experiences that our students will take from it. If you have any ideas on team building, feel free to email me, call me, or contact your son/daughter's coach.

See you in the stands.