

The Power of Positive Coaching

by Dr. David Hoch, CMAA

Perhaps starting with the first football and basketball games in the United States, the accepted approach of dealing with athletes was the tough, disciplinarian, in-your-face coach. Considering that the early history of sport in America had its roots in physical training and the effort to prepare young men for the military, this shouldn't be too difficult to understand.

While there is nothing wrong with instilling discipline and maintaining high standards, it is time to leave the old-school approach of coaching behind. There is no place in education-based athletics for using abusive language, grabbing a player and screaming in his face to make a point.

It's hard to imagine that someone believes that yelling at and berating a young person will improve his play. But that's part of the approach that some coaches still use. It is the idea that being tough and harassing will provide the motivation to play harder. Are you kidding?

Coaches are, after all, educators. Can you imagine an algebra teacher getting in a student's face and yelling, "What are you doing? We covered that yesterday in class." Pounding on the desk, the instructor continues, "You've got to focus and work harder!"

Sure, this is a facetious example. But coaches are teachers and accomplished instructors are not loud, negative and abusive. Successful instruction is the result of being patient, reviewing basics and positively encouraging the student.

A well-placed, "You can do it. Remember what we worked on in practice," will usually work much better than an emotional tirade. Very seldom does anyone respond well to being singled out, chastised and embarrassed in public.

How would you react to being criticized publically by your supervisor – the athletic director or principal? Chances are that you wouldn't like it very much. As a matter of fact, it would probably agitate you greatly and create a major problem with your working relationship.

And yet, the coach-athlete relationship is very similar. Just because a coach is in charge and determines who plays and how much, very few athletes will perform better by an abusive, negative approach. Interestingly, old-school coaches may also express platitudes such as, "You have to want it more" as if kids don't want to play well.

The following suggestions should be helpful in moving from the old-school, macho approach of coaching to a more nurturing and encouraging one.

Try balancing constructive criticism during practice sessions. For every correction that an athlete may construe as negative, try offering two words of praise. A few well-placed, when deserved, "Good job" can temper the effects of criticism.

Save major corrections of technique or execution for practice sessions. During games, small, minor suggestions can be helpful if they can be done quietly in a one-on-one setting on the sideline. But rarely will yelling at players or the team in front of fans or the entire team get desired results. The maxim of criticize in private and praise in public will serve you well.

Consider that all players, with individual personalities, will react differently to criticism and the perception of being berated. A pat on the back and, "You can do it" will work better with most young athletes. Remember that the athlete already knows that he made a mistake. Unless you can provide a quick, positive suggestion, pointing out the negative won't help the situation.

Understand that athletes don't want to make mistakes. Seriously, they don't! The mistakes usually occur because the athlete hasn't mastered the skill and this means that more repetitions are necessary in practice. Mistakes could also crop up due to fatigue or simply playing against a superior opponent. **Determining why the mistakes were made can go a long way toward correcting and improving the skill or execution.**

Don't make the assumption that in order to maintain control and discipline that you have to be loud, negative and possibly abusive. Back in 1900, President Theodore Roosevelt stated that one should speak softly, but carry a big stick. Don't interpret this adage as it is OK to hit an athlete, but as a coach, your big stick is playing time and starting. **You can be firm and in charge without raising your voice five octaves or constantly tormenting your athletes.**

Create a climate in which student-athletes can't wait to get to practice sessions. Let them know that you want to help them improve their skills and for them to enjoy competition and the sport. After all, winning is not the most important outcome for most athletes. In numerous national studies, it has been determined that athletes participate because it is fun and they want to enjoy the camaraderie with their friends.

In education-based athletics, everything that is taught and involved in your program has to have an educational value and provide an opportunity for student-athletes to grow and develop. It is time to move beyond old-school, outdated approaches and to meet the needs of the athletes.

One of Ben Franklin's prophetic maxims was, "You can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar." How can you argue with Ben Franklin? **Coaches who are positive, nurturing and encouraging will best serve our athletes and programs.**

About the Author: Dr. David Hoch recently retired as the athletic director at Loch Raven High School in Towson, Maryland (Baltimore County). He assumed this position in 2003 after nine years as director of athletics at Eastern Technological High School in Baltimore County. He has 24 years experience coaching basketball, including 14 years on the collegiate level. Hoch, who has a doctorate in sports management from Temple University, is past president of the Maryland State Athletic Directors Association, and he formerly was president of the Maryland State Coaches Association. He has had more than 350 articles published in professional magazines and journals, as well as two textbook chapters. Hoch is a member of the NFHS High School Today Publications Committee.