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**coaching academy**

# Developing an Athlete Centered Coaching Philosophy

There are several different coaching philosophies that have produced positive on the field results. Fans of professional and college sports teams often think that a coach who is constantly yelling is constantly coaching. Listen to a local sports talk radio station of a struggling team and you will hear several callers declare that the current coach should be fired and someone needs to “light a fire” under the players. What does that phrase really mean? Several coaches have had successful careers by “lighting fires” under their players and getting them to do what is expected of them by being forceful, threatening and frightening. The all time wins leader in NCAA basketball history, Bobby Knight, made a living out of “lighting fires” under his players. His methods were considered very old school, and many fans romanticize about coaches like Bobby Knight and feel that his methods are the best way to get the most out of kids and professional athletes alike.

I would like to respectfully disagree with those people who feel that this method of coaching is the most effective in youth and high school athletics. Again, this “coach as a tyrant model” can get results on the field, but what are we teaching these athletes about decision making, about having confidence in themselves, and about being leaders? One of the major objectives of youth sports should be to develop character in our players. If we simply give orders, and make demands on them, all they will learn how to do is to take orders and follow directions. These abilities are valuable and will serve the athlete well later in life, but can only take them so far. Their future employers may looking for someone who can be a leader, think critically, and make decisions. These are the qualities I believe we should be bringing out and developing in our athletes.

It is my belief that the best method to get results both on the field and in an athlete’s life is by adopting an athlete centered coaching style. Without doubt the toughest thing about adopting an athlete centered coaching philosophy is the coach’s feeling of a loss of control. As a coach we believe we should be the leader of the team. Even though this thought process is correct, think about how a well run business is organized. The CEO (coach) has a board of trustees and managers below them (assistant coaches and/or captains) who lead innovative, creative, and independent employees (remainder of your players). If a multimillion dollar corporation can succeed by giving power to people who work for the CEO, surely a youth, high school or college sports team can run in a similar fashion.

One thing that will calm the coach's fear about giving up some control of his team is to understand how much control should be given to his players and assistant coaches. The first item of action a head coach should do is to make an honest assessment of how much his assistants and players are capable of doing on their own. Assistant coaches who are very knowledgeable can be given a lot of control. If your assistants are new, or not very knowledgeable, it is the head coach's job to help them grow as coaches, and to give them one or two areas of the game learn and be in control of at practices and during games. Start them small and as their confidence and knowledge grows, so can their responsibilities.

The same can be said for your players. If you have a veteran group of players, you can give them a lot of control in practices, and have some input on in-game decisions. However, if you have a young, inexperienced team, you (and hopefully your assistants) are going to have to do a lot of the instruction yourself. Remember the ultimate goal should be to give ownership of any aspect of practice and the day-to-day operations of the team as possible. Look for ways you can have athletes run drills. Continue to give them more and more control as they get more and more comfortable. If you have a few players who stand out as leaders, look for ways to give those players more responsibility.

The transition from a coach centered team to an athlete centered team is a difficult one for a coach to make, and it must be made at the right pace. If it is made too quickly, you will see your team's on field performance slip due to a lack of direction and instruction. If you make the move too slowly, you will be stifling your assistant coaches and players development as problem solvers and leaders.

I know that there are many different styles, and many people have success with all kinds of different methods. I don't even know if an athlete centered style is the best way to get the most out of an individual team in a given year. It is very possible that a much more demanding "motivate through fear" style may very well work better than an athlete centered coaching style in terms of wins and losses. So why, if I am not sure that this method gets the most out of players, and if it may be possible I could have more successful teams in other methods, do I believe that this coaching style is best for me and my teams? It is the best method for me because it is the best way to teach young athletes how to be problem solvers, how to think on their feet, how to play under pressure, and how to develop as people.

Athlete Centered Coaching Success Stories

Before I get to some of my tips for how you can foster this on your team, I want to give you a few examples from a few seasons ago that will give you an idea of the reasons I chose this type of style. At the beginning of the season, our coaching staff had several discussions about the lack of heart we were seeing, the lack of leadership among the players, and about some of the off field decisions that were being made by some of our players.

A prime example of this took place at the end of our Spring trip. We were to leave at 7am the next morning and we had a 5 hour bus ride ahead of us before playing a game against a very talented team. On the bus ride up, it came to our attention that several of our players had stayed up well into the early morning hours in their rooms the night before. We came out very sluggish, and played very sloppy baseball in large part due to these poor decisions. We did actually win that game, but keep in mind that this coaching style is not about wins and losses, it is about how do you play on a given day, and what can you do to make yourselves better.

After this game, several others like it, a few disciplinary issues, and a few of those sloppy games that turned into ugly losses, we were at a crossroads in our season. It seemed as though this group was not capable of developing leadership, and was not developing the internal motivation that is necessary to be successful under an athlete centered leadership style. As a staff we discussed abandoning the athlete centered coaching style and taking more control of the team. The players on the team were very talented and we would have been able to be successful from a wins and losses perspective had we returned to a coach centered style. We did take a few steps to correct some of the minor disciplinary issues we were seeing, but we ultimately ended up going in the opposite direction. At our next practice I publicly challenged each individual player and coach, including myself, spelling out exactly what that individual needed to do to make us a successful team. After doing this, we stepped back further and let the players make or break their season. To our surprise, the players that we challenged to become leaders, did. They began holding others accountable for their effort, their off field actions, and their contributions to the team. The effort in practice was elevated, the level of play on the field was elevated, and we focused on our play on the field, not the results or what others thought of us. In the end, it turned out to be arguably the most successful team

in our school's history, and certainly the best success story of a team coming together that I have seen as a coach.

The second example of how an athlete centered coaching method worked for us that year was on display in one of our biggest plays of the season. In the Sectional semifinal, with a runner on third and one out in a one run ballgame, our opponents attempted a suicide squeeze. Our pitcher threw a pitch high and inside forcing the batter to abandon his squeeze attempt, and leading to their runner being out in a rundown between home and third. This was the absolute correct play by him, but he had never once practiced that in practice and had never done it before in a game.

Why was he able to make a play that he had never practiced before in the highest leverage situation of our season? I believe it is because he was not afraid to make a mistake. We had discussed that situation, and every time we were simulating suicide squeezes, I jokingly told our pitchers that if they buzzed the tower on me (I simulate the hitter some of our bunt defense practices) it would be the last last thing they did. This obviously stuck in his head, and combined with the fact that he knew that if he took a chance, and it didn't work, I would not be breathing down his neck dwelling on his mistake, and he would not be blamed for a loss, led to him making our play of the year.

As you transition to an athlete centered coaching style, here are a few tips to help the transition occur smoothly:

- 1.) Clearly define roles for each player (and coach) at several points during the season.
- 2.) Give each player a path to success for them to maximize their potential, then put the ball in their court to follow through on it.
- 3.) Have athletes (not just captains) lead as many activities as possible in practice.
- 4.) Create a competitive atmosphere in practice where players have to make decisions, and make plays, not just follow the coach's instruction.
- 5.) Put pressure on players in practice, make it as game like as possible.
- 6.) Treat mistakes as learning opportunities, not as punishable offenses.
- 7.) Allow athletes to make choices whenever possible, listen to their input, and take what they have to say seriously.
- 8.) If you raise your voice, make sure you do so at a meaningful time. If you constantly yell, it will lose its effect, and your messages will be lost.

- 9.) Discern between mistakes that are made because of a lack of knowledge, a lack of skill, or a lack of effort. If a mistake is made because of a lack of knowledge, teach. If a mistake is made because of a lack of skill, practice. If a mistake is made because of a lack of effort, motivate.
- 10.) End practices and/or games on a light note. We end ours with a joke because no matter what happened in that practice or game, there are more important things in the world than baseball. It should be kept in perspective. I believe this also helps with players not being afraid to make mistakes.

### Disciplining in an Athlete Centered Model

When I began coaching the answer to any issue we were having on the team had two components, yelling and running. This was a very effective short term motivator and many times the behavior was corrected almost immediately. At the time, this was the only means I knew and I thought it was very effective because I was seeing results. What I noticed was, while I was changing the short term behavior, we were having the same issues every year. We were not making any long term change in our program's behavior. That is when I knew I needed a new approach. The teams were becoming "my" teams, not the athlete's team. I needed to make a change and take the team from my team to our team, then to the kid's team. Our teams were performing well on the field, but I doubt I taught them anything other than how to play baseball and how to take orders. My coaching probably did very little to develop leaders or improve their lives off the field.

Transitioning to an athlete centered team will not happen overnight. In fact, if you try to make the transition extremely quickly, it will probably fail. The players my first few years were so used to me running everything and telling them exactly how to behave in every situation that they would have fallen flat on their face had I suddenly turned it over to them. A large transition needs to happen slowly. Smaller changes can happen almost immediately. Simply begin allowing players to take responsibility for anything they can handle. No matter how small the task, players will benefit from taking ownership of small tasks. The most difficult question for me to answer as I was making this transition was "how do I discipline my athletes without yelling and conditioning?"

Below is a quick list of actions that can be taken to discipline athletes without conditioning

1.) Develop a culture of respect- If the athlete doesn't feel as though you respect them, they will not respect you. In today's society the position of "coach" does not automatically earn you respect. Unfortunately, some parents create an environment at home where the coach is the enemy. Respecting athletes as more than just players and showing that you care about their well being in all aspects of their life can help overcome this.

2.) Communicate- If there is a problem, simply talking to athlete, listening to their side, and expressing your concern over a behavior goes a long way. If the athlete knows you have their best interest in mind, a simple conversation will take care of 90% or more of the problems on a team and you will be surprised what you can learn by listening. I cannot tell you how many times there has been a problem, I talk to the athlete about it instead of flying off the handle, and I learn some insight into their life that helps me manage them later on down the road. If it is a problem between two athletes, talk with them separately first, then bring them together to discuss the issue.

3.) Take a breather before making a decision - Many times discipline is dished out during an emotional time and this is when mistakes can easily be made. Do not let the problem sit too long, but make sure you are calm and collected and you have carefully thought through your actions prior to taking them.

4.) Take away a privilege - The obvious one in this realm is playing time in games, but I know coaches who take away practice time as well. We used to make kids run and do extra field work if they were late to practice, now we simply have kids sit out a portion or all of practice. Our tardies have decreased significantly (even at our before school practices in the early spring) since we switched away from conditioning as a punishment.

5.) Lean on your athletes - If there is a discipline matter that can be discussed with the entire team or with your captains, listen to them and get their take on the situation. We often think of peer pressure as a negative influence, but it can be surprisingly positive as well. If you create a feeling of family on your team, athletes will not want to let their fellow teammates down.

6.) Keep in mind the ultimate goal of discipline - The real goal of discipline should not be to punish for past offenses, it should be to discourage future offenses and to encourage living up to the standards that have been set. Yelling, screaming,

and making players condition for mistakes or discipline problems may not accomplish this goal in the long term. Another negative side effect of making players condition for punishment is they begin to resent conditioning. Their view of conditioning becomes negative, and they begin to associate conditioning with punishment. I want my players to view conditioning as an opportunity for improvement.

There are many other ways you can deal with discipline other than the traditional yelling and conditioning. I challenge you to be creative. The traditional means of discipline are easy because we are familiar with them and they do change behavior in the short term. Instead of short term behavior change, try to change the culture in your program to where certain behaviors are unacceptable because they will let the team down, not because they face the threat of conditioning or verbal reprimand.

For more details on Athlete Centered Coaching, enroll in our Silver Certification Program [www.cornerstonecoachingacademy.com/silver-certification](http://www.cornerstonecoachingacademy.com/silver-certification).

Contact [Kyle@cornerstonecoachingacademy.com](mailto:Kyle@cornerstonecoachingacademy.com) to inquire about great discounts for groups of 3 or more!