

I'm Sorry I Yelled at You on the Bus



By NIAAA Publications Committee

I made a lot of mistakes as a high school head coach. Now that I've been an athletic director for a while, I recognize that many of the mistakes I made are common among brand new, young, former-athlete-turned-head coaches. But, that doesn't change the fact that I made a lot of mistakes as a high school coach.

Poor play calling at times? Of course. In fact, there are two calls in my final game as a head coach that still eat me up. But those aren't the mistakes I'm talking about. Poor practice planning at times? Of course. Too many kids standing in lines, too many conditioning drills for no purpose other than conditioning, lengthy practices, etc. But those aren't the mistakes I'm talking about. Poor scheme or strategy? Of course. I still feel badly for the first teams I coached. They had an idiot coach trying to get them to run an offensive scheme for which they simply weren't fit. But that isn't the mistake I'm talking about.

The mistakes I feel the worst about are the ones I made because my perspective was WAY out of whack. Like too many young coaches, I tried to apply what I personally valued as a former college athlete (winning) and what I had learned was important while playing college sports (winning) to the group of high school kids who knew better than I did. Because I thought that everyone should care about winning - and only winning - to the extent that I did as an athlete, far too many times I acted in a way that didn't meet most of my players' needs. Of all those poor decisions I made, the ones that continually pop up in my mind are getting on the bus after a tough loss.

By the time the kids were done showering and had hopped on the bus, more than enough time had elapsed for them to process the loss and move on to the more important issues that face teenage boys. Because of that, there were times that they entered the bus joking around, laughing, and generally having fun - like teenage boys should be doing after they get done playing a game. Unfortunately, my adult filter and competitive adult mentality had not had enough time to process the tough loss, so I was often still upset. Since I was still upset, I was of the belief that everyone around me should be taking that loss as hard as I was, and I was certain that one of my roles as the head coach was to get them to understand how upset they should be about losing that game. So, as often as I can when I run into my former players, I tell them this: *"I'm sorry I yelled at you on the bus."*

Here's what I understand now. The kids tried to win the game because that's what they do; kids don't ever go into a game trying to lose. I had failed to realize why they were playing in the first place. My job as a coach was to teach them how to prepare and how to compete while ensuring a safe place for them to learn all the wonderful characteristics that can be taught through sport. If I, as an athletic administrator, saw the actions of me as a coach, I would ask myself the same question I use with coaches and parents now: *What characteristic or personal quality would the kids have learned had they won that they didn't learn because they lost?* Because if I had been coaching the right way, they would have learned all the good stuff regardless of the outcome of the game.

Adults still get far too hung up on the result of games with-

out realizing just how many aspects of winning are out of our control. I like this comparison that I've seen in a couple places between athletic levels. At the professional level, winning is essential. At the collegiate level, winning is expected. At the youth level (including high school), winning is a wonderful by-product that occurs when everything falls into place at just the right times. John O' Sullivan, author of *Changing the Game: The Parent's Guide to Raising Happy, High-Performing Athletes and Giving Youth Sports Back to Our Kids*, has even created a performance equation: Talent + State of Mind + Coaching + Deliberate Practice + Luck = Performance.

For adults to buy into that philosophy, it's important that we define "success" correctly. Knowing that the other team is sometimes just bigger/faster/stronger/smarter than ours; knowing that sometimes the ball bounces the wrong way; and knowing that sometimes our players' thoughts are on more important things than a game; we can't define success to mean winning. ***If winning becomes our ultimate goal, what positive takeaway comes from a loss?*** We must treat winning like a by-product of everything going right for us, which means we need to define success differently within our programs.

John Wooden offered his thoughts about success several times. "Success is peace of mind that is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best you are capable of becoming. What is so important to recognize is that you are totally in control of your success - not your opponent, not the judge, critic, media, or anyone else."

As a highly competitive adult, I was going to be upset and frustrated after a loss. As normal kids, they were going to be focused on the fun of the game and hanging out with their friends. As the adult, I needed to recognize that I wasn't going to be able to teach them correctly until I could process the game through my competitive adult filter. To make the game a safe environment for learning what's important, I should have allowed the kids to enjoy the time with their friends in a setting that's centered on a game and addressed the learning opportunities after the emotional attachments (both mine and theirs) to the game had faded.

Then, to match Wooden's definition of success, my questions shouldn't have anything to do with asking why we lost.

Better questions for the kids would sound more like this:

- Did you give your best effort in preparing for that game?
- Did you give your best effort in executing your job during that game?
- Did you execute your job to the best of your ability during that game?

Those are the transferable skills to our adult world. That's what all of us, as adults, should strive for when heading off to and coming home from our jobs every day. Am I prepared for my job today to the best of my ability? Did I perform my job to the best of my ability today? We all know that our adult work days are often disrupted by things that are out of our control; we need to provide the same understanding for our kids who are playing games. But in the end, don't yell at them on the bus. **IAA**

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