

What I Wish I Knew...

Before my First Year of Coaching



By Tracy Mabe

As a first-year teacher, fresh out of college, sports fanatic, the opportunity to coach was one that could not have made me happier. Sure, I had no time to eat, sleep or sometimes breathe during my first-year of teaching, but the idea of guiding young athletes to love and love to play the same sports as I do, seemed too good to be true. Surprisingly enough, the knowledge I had of coaching was minimal, and the information I lacked was plentiful. Now, after completing two successful seasons of coaching junior varsity volleyball and junior varsity lacrosse, I can look back and reflect on what I wish I knew back then when it all began.

The Difficulties of Transitioning from Player to Coach

It's not enough to know your sport; you must know how to coach it, too. The transition from playing sports from elementary school through college and the transition into coaching junior varsity was very difficult. There was no longer a common knowledge or assumed vocabulary – you could not just say, “Go run 3v2s,” or, “Do 10 approaches to the net.” I was truly starting from scratch.

So with a deep breath, I found myself back in the stages of fundamentals and basic skill building. The idea of “show, don't tell” really comes into play. And the urge to run out onto the field/court and actually play yourself is overwhelming.

The trials were recognizing the level of players before getting ahead of myself with starting points, expectations and practice plans in general. The tribulations were true enjoyment that came from our successes later on in the season, because the knowledge that I taught the athletes from scratch was truly rewarding.

The Consistent Battle of Time Management

The amount of time that goes into being a good teacher really does make the summers off a necessity. There have been times, more times than not actually, where I have worked 18 hours in one day. Coaching is a very large responsibility, coupled with lesson plans and grading, so the social life takes the back-burner, as does much else, like sleep for instance.

It is very important during sports seasons to get as much done as humanly possible, but avoid stress and allowing any outside concerns to be brought onto the field/court. Athletes notice when the coach has other things on his/her mind, and then they begin to feel as though they are not top priority.

Also, it is extremely important to love your time coaching, regardless of whatever else awaits you when practice is over. As time goes on, this gets easier and easier. You get better at your job, and you begin to see your time coaching as vacation time from work.

The Must Haves: Preparations and Expectations

Always be prepared, but also be prepared to wing it if you must. Coaches must always come to practice with a plan – a list of what needs to be accomplished within that practice. Of course, even the prepared get thrown off course every once in awhile. You may have an athlete go home sick that day, or come to practice not feeling well and need to sit out.

Always have a back-up plan in mind and never just a time-filler. Each and every moment of practice must be beneficial to the athletes, or else they know you have not put in the time planning their practice, so why would they then want to put in the time practicing for you?

Set clear, reasonable expectations from the very first day of practice, not only establishing what you want from the athletes, but also what the athletes can expect from you. Yes, everyone has bad days, but they must know that they can come to you and tell you that they are having an off day and expect you to be understanding. Both coaches and athletes are humans after all. All expectations should communicate consistency and high standards.

Communication is the Key to Success

Coaches should be approachable, likeable individuals. Parents, athletes and opponents should feel it easy to discuss any relevant matters with a coach without any fear of confrontation. It is very important to reach out to your players and their parents from the very beginning and establish a positive relationship before problems may begin.

Then, if an issue does arise with a member of your team, making a parent contact is much less stressful. This is also a great way to establish your credibility. Parents want to know everything about their children's lives; and as we know, for the most part, high school children want their parents to know very little. It is commendable when a parent feels he/she can approach a coach and ask how his/her daughter/son is doing, without watching over practice.

Of course, the same goes for an athlete. If a member of your team has a question, comment or issue, he/she should feel comfortable enough to speak to you. Our job as coaches is to guide, inspire and educate athletes on the sport, as well as life skills.

A "Good Coach"

A "good coach" is a term that is given, used and described loosely. A "good coach" has the ability to motivate, communicate and educate any and all who step onto the playing surface. A "good coach" knows how to reach all types of players; how to teach to their level, but also be on their level, and how to have a special blend of organization and spontaneity. But overall, a "good coach" knows how to truly love what he/she is doing and teach all of the athletes to do the same. A "good coach's" No. 1 goal should be to learn while having fun.

As a new coach, you have little to no grasp on how much you will impact the athletes on your team. If you are a teacher, and are fortunate enough to coach many of the students you have taught or currently teach, the impact you have on these children on the court/field is so much different than what you have on them in the classroom. Seeing the students in a different light truly makes you appreciate them more, and value how hard they work all around. It is really beneficial to be able to work with the kids in various settings, because not only do you appreciate them more, they too, value you and what you do for them more.

It is truly important to recognize the difference your role as a coach can make on your athletes. You must become aware of all that you say and do when coaching a team. They look up to you and watch the way you handle mistakes, celebrate wins, deal with defeats, encourage positive behaviors, reprimand negative behaviors, and display teamwork and sportsmanship. Coaches play a hand in molding an athlete's character. You are a role model; when you make the commitment to be a coach, strive to be a good coach – strive to be a role model.

I have come a long way since it all began, but I also know that I have a long way to go. A year from now, my list of "What I Wish I Knew..." will be shorter, and my coaching knowledge will be more abundant. If you are new to coaching, make sure you do not ever hesitate to ask your colleagues, fellow coaches and/or your athletic director for any advice, assistance or even occasional pep talks. Transitioning into the role of a coach is hard, because you are not just a coach of a sport; you are a mentor of a developing young person. CQ

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