

'Winning Isn't Everything, It's the Only Thing'



By Jim Krauel

Vince Lombardi once uttered the famous words, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." The legendary football coach was right on the money except for the fact that his definition of winning was a little narrower than it should have been.

As a high school coach in America, you would do well to adopt Lombardi's words provided that you're willing to broaden the definition of the word "winning."

Obviously, Lombardi was only referring to the scoreboard when he uttered his famous declaration, but you can make it your own mantra by expanding on his meaning.

Are you winning on the field or court?

One very important component of being labeled as a winning coach is the game-day result you produce in your sport. Do you win more than you lose? Are you always competitive, and do opposing coaches always know that they are in for a tussle when they match up against one of your teams? Do you ever beat teams that have more talent than you? Likewise, do you ever lose to teams that have less talent? These are questions that all coaches need to ask themselves.

As a coach who wishes to produce positive results, you need to learn to always put your kids in the best possible position to win. This means finding and honing the skills of each individual and then melding those individual skills into the team dynamic. If you're a soccer coach for instance, and your best forward is also your best defenseman you must take careful stock of the rest of your team to make the right decision as to where that player needs to be in order to give your team the greatest chance to win.

You also need to have such broad knowledge of your sport that your players will never doubt or question the way you do things. One hidden secret that all successful coaches share is that young people who trust that you know what you're doing are much more likely to pay close attention to the details of what you are showing them. In other words, they are much more likely to buy what you're selling if they sense that you truly know what you're talking about. Winning coaches almost always have a confidence that their players

feed off of, and this confidence comes from knowledge of the game. In short, the better you are at teaching concepts, the better your athletes become at learning them.

Are you winning in the classroom?

Vince Lombardi didn't care about classroom results, but if you sincerely want to be a "winning" coach then you better care deeply about the academic performance of your players. There are some prep coaches who talk a good game, and pretend to really care about how their players are getting along in school but, in actuality, they are mostly concerned with keeping their best players eligible. To truly be a winner you need to train yourself to really care about every aspect of all of your players' academic progress – each and every one of them.

Are they getting the proper prodding at home? If not, what can you do to help? Are they putting athletics ahead of school? If so, how can you intervene to explain that excellence can be achieved in both simultaneously? Are they making plans for college and getting excited about it? If not, are you willing to talk to their parents about taking them to visit a college campus? Are they getting C's when they could easily be earning B's? If so, what can you do to make them realize that a little extra effort goes a long way in the minds of their teachers? These are just a few of the many questions that you should be asking yourself if you're intent on being a winning coach.

Are you winning as a mentor?

Do you realize that your players are constantly taking stock of you and evaluating you on many different fronts? They do this individually and they do it collectively. Are you curious about what they really think? If not, you should be. They are looking at you during practice, during games and during meetings and are always forming opinions, whether they are subconscious or conscious ones. Some of the questions they will ponder are: Does Coach really know what he's talking about? Does Coach really care about me as much as he does our top player? Is Coach pure in his/her thoughts



and deeds? Is Coach spending time coaching because he loves competition for himself or is he/she really in this to help people like me? Why would Coach spend so much time doing this even though he's being paid so little?

Don't kid yourself, every player on every team wonders about these things. Hopefully, you strive to set such a positive example that the answers to their questions become self-evident as they get to know you. Make no mistake though, the young people you're coaching are not foolish. If you're a phony they will figure you out. It may or may not impact your status as a coach, but if you have a real desire to truly be a winning coach you'll make adjustments in your behavior so that your players will always know that you are sincerely dedicated to helping them become better players and better people. You are in an awesome position with awesome responsibility and you need to make sure that you embrace the opportunity that's been afforded to you.

Remember, as a coach you're always setting an example whether it be a in a preseason meeting, the middle of a game or postseason banquet. Establish yourself as a positive role model when you meet your athletes as freshmen, and then continue to reinforce your own standards of personal integrity throughout their entire high school careers. Your example will always be noticed and sometimes emulated by your players. Even the ones who you have the most trouble with will respect you if the person that you reveal to them is a strong, kind and congruent one.

Are you winning as a friend?

Some coaches have tried to insist that you should never form friendships with your players. This attitude is very old-school and, frankly, ridiculous. If you spend a great deal of time around people you truly care about, and they feel the same way about you, how can you not become friends? This doesn't mean that you should coddle your athletes or exempt them to disciplinary action when necessary, but you should never purposely avoid creating friendships with them. Some of the most rewarding memories that come from coaching are provided by staying close to former players and watching them successfully advance through life.

As a winning coach you should welcome the chance to

develop friendships with your players. You should strive to stay connected with them after they have moved on so that you can continue to share pearls of wisdom with them whenever the opportunity arises. Other than having your own children call you up asking for parental advice, there are very few things that are more rewarding than having an ex-player call you out of the blue to seek counsel. When this happens to you, you'll know that you've really touched someone and that you've made a valuable friend for life.

There will even be times when your former players become coaches themselves and will want to pick your brain about how, why and when to do certain things. Whether you've retired or are still coaching, this will be a great thrill for you – a beautiful opportunity to share knowledge about the sport you love with a friend of yours who also happens to be someone that you once coached.

The men who played for **Coach Lombardi** thought they hated him while they wore the uniform of the Green Bay Packers, but as their playing days wound down they all realized that they loved and cherished him as a friend. In their eyes, Coach Lombardi had made the progression from coach to mentor to friend.

Lombardi was hell-bent on winning, but he was also a master motivator who had a keen understanding of human nature. One of his other, less famous, quotes was, "The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor." This is a quote that needs no refining or alteration, and it's a quote that we should all keep in mind as we pursue our quest of becoming known as a true winning coach. **CQ**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jim Krauel has been coaching tennis at Sherwood (Oregon) High School since 2000. He has been recognized three times by the United States Tennis Association for his no-cut policy. He has also coached youth sports and in Special Olympics for many years. Krauel is a free-lance writer as well. He is a member of the NFHS Coaches' Quarterly Publications Committee.

