



Coaches' Quarterly

The Magazine for High School Coaches

Winter 2010

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Role Modeling for Student-Athletes

High School Athletics – Have the Values Changed?

Developing Speed in the High School Athlete



The official publication of
the NFHS Coaches Association
and the NFHS Spirit Association





ROLE MODELING and LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

for Today's Student-Athletes

By Chris Stankovich, Ph.D.

In the early 1990s, Charles Barkley starred in the now famous “I am not a role model” Nike commercial, emphasizing that athletes like himself got paid to dunk basketballs, not “raise your kids.” The point of the ad was to remind people that parents – not athletes – are the true role models, and that too many people had it reversed, erroneously ascribing the “role model” status to athletes who never asked to be in such a position.

The Barkley ad created quite a stir at the time, and even 20 years later the issue of athletes being role models is still hotly debated. While everyone will agree that parents are role models to their children, the question around athletes as role models still remains disputed by many people.

The good news is that while Barkley took the position of role modeling as a burden and unwanted responsibility (at least in the Nike ad), there are countless athletes of all ages today who want to be role models to others, and see the opportunity as a blessing rather than a curse.

Unfortunately, today's young athletes are more challenged than ever in finding positive role models to follow. The media focuses the bulk of its reporting on stories of athletes getting into trouble compared to athletes engaging in positive, pro-social endeavors in local schools, recreation leagues and communities.

In addition to the challenges student-athletes have in finding positive athletic role models, the issue is further compounded in that young athletes are rarely ever formally taught the skills needed to become effective role models and leaders themselves – even though they are automatically ascribed this status as student-athletes in their respective schools. The result of the current paradigm we are witnessing is a growing number of student-athletes who are regularly fed negative stories about athletes in the news, while never being taught the skills pertaining to how to become successful role models.

School and community culture and climate impact

When you think about it, student-athletes may be the single most influential agents of change when it comes to school climate and culture. In addition to the obvious attention

school sports receive, student-athletes are regularly noticed in school as the ambassadors for the community at-large. Student-athletes regularly wear school gear and colors, and also receive local media attention pertaining to the success of their teams. In fact, there is not another student prototype in schools today that garners this kind of recognition and attention, providing a terrific opportunity for student-athletes to use the opportunity of being a role model in many terrific ways.

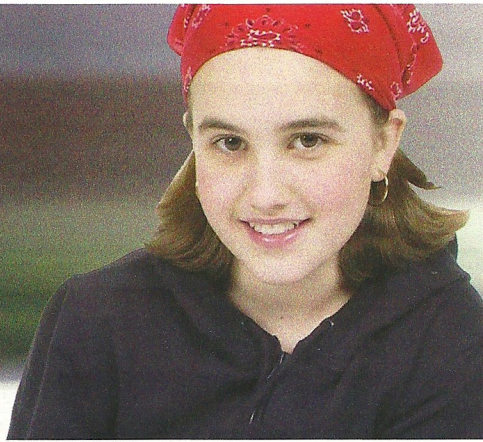
Social scientists have studied the impact of sports teams on their respective communities, and as it might be expected, the connection is often very strong. Communities with successful school programs take pride in their accomplishments, and often the coaches and student-athletes are given special attention and privileges for their on-field success. When the local teams win, the community refers to them as “we,” and when the team loses, fans distance themselves by using the word “they” in describing the loss.

Student-athletes are very visible and decorated, often wearing team gear and lettermen's jackets. Non-athletes know who they are, even if they are not sports fans themselves. As a result of this recognition, the climate and culture of schools are dramatically impacted by what student-athletes do off the field. Outside of school, communities are also impacted, as the beat of the town often stays in synchrony with the level of success of their local sports teams – they are happy when teams are winning and somber when they are losing.

Captains Leadership Summit Series

In an attempt to address the current chasm that exists between what is commonly expected from student-athletes pertaining to role modeling – and the dearth of training that exists in helping student-athletes actually learn how to become an effective role model – a new leadership model has been created.

The Captains Leadership Summit Series (CLSS) was developed as a model to work from when developing role-modeling programs for student-athletes. The CLSS was built from the “My Game My Life” (www.mygamemylife.com) educational curriculum that relies heavily on life skills, with a special emphasis on athletic transferable skills.



The basic tenants of “My Game My Life” include “Focus, Believe, Commit, Achieve” – a philosophy that helps student-athletes on and off the field by reminding them of the importance of setting specific goals, believing in them, committing to reaching the goals, and using the achievement as a way to role model pro-social skills to others. Components of CLSS that have been found to be effective in helping student-athletes learn about and embrace their status of role models include the following:

- ◆ **Select strong potential leaders from school teams.** Since it is nearly impossible for most schools to offer leadership programming to all student-athletes due to logistics and time conflicts, identifying a smaller, more manageable core group of kids that have been pre-selected by their coaches as visible leaders to their peers and teammates appears to be the most effective approach. The goal is to teach and empower this select group about the importance of leadership, and, in turn, to positively impact their fellow student-athletes in school.
- ◆ **Year-long program.** Offering student-athletes a leadership program that goes throughout the year has been found to be more effective than simply conducting a one-time meeting. As the cohort works together throughout the school year, a unique pride and identity will likely develop, helping kids develop self-confidence in their abilities to serve as responsible ambassadors for their teams, the school and the community at-large.
- ◆ **Leadership theory and applications.** Long gone are the days where social scientists thought leadership was a trait-based construct (meaning you were either born to be an effective leader or you weren't). Instead, experts now agree leadership skills can be learned, and the body of scientific literature in the field of leadership studies continues to grow as a result. Kids can benefit by learning about leadership theory, as well as commonly accepted leadership applications, like learning the importance of communication skills and conflict resolution strategies.

- ◆ **Applied case studies and focus group problem-solving.** Creating real-life scenarios that kids will likely experience in their roles as student-athletes can serve as a future inoculation for when the events really occur. Specifically, helping student-athletes work through issues pertaining to parties and drinking, academic ineligibility concerns, and bouncing back from other team concerns will help prepare them for these challenges when they eventually happen in the future.
- ◆ **Networking with each other.** Student-athletes also benefit from working together in small teams in that they become more familiar and comfortable with one another, leading to better interpersonal relationships and likelihood of working together in the future when problems arise. Not all student-athletes know one another very well, so the concept of networking together is an important component needed when working to improve school culture and climate.
- ◆ **Focus on helping the next generation of student-athletes.** An emphasis on teaching student-athletes to reach out and help make younger student-athletes feel welcome can dramatically improve the athletic program and entire school at-large. More experienced student-athletes can teach younger student-athletes about school traditions and expectations, as well and give them the confidence that they will one day successfully lead the school when their time comes.
- ◆ **Homework.** After each leadership meeting, it is important to assign student-athletes homework so that they will continue to think about the importance of leadership in the time between meetings. The homework does not need to be difficult, but it should be specific. Prompting kids to do targeted things like offering rides to younger teammates, or create school/community fundraisers, are examples of assignments that can be measured and evaluated.

Schools that regularly display excellence (on and off the field) almost always establish this type of culture through dedicated efforts, not by chance. Empowering student-athletes to embrace their status as “role models” can greatly contribute to school success, and this can be achieved by teaching the importance of effective leadership through responsible actions, communication skills, integrity, discipline, and the willingness to work toward resolving conflicts when they arise. **CQ**

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