

A Matter of Coaching Ethics and Good Decision Making

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(c) look in the mirror and ask yourself how you would feel about yourself if you took action as you intended. In all three situations, if the answer to your question was that you would be proud of yourself and that people would respect you then your solution may indeed be the best course of action.

Summary

As a coach, you have the opportunity to influence the lives of the boys and girls, and the men and

women who choose to play for you. These relationships are built on the athletes' trust in you and your character as a person and coach. In many ways, your code of ethics underlies your character. If your code is well-established and based on solid principles and standards, your character as a coach will be solid as well.

References

Janssen, J., & Dale, G. (2002). *The seven secrets of successful coaches: How to unlock and unleash your team's full potential*. Cary, NC: Winning the Mental Game.

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Developing a Winning Program: An Interview with Ken Purcell, Denton Independent School Districts Athletic Director

By Glenn Pfenninger, B.S.

Coaching high school athletes is about much more than wins and losses or X's and O's or about running drills and preparing for competition. "Coaches should be educators," says Ken Purcell, Athletic Director for Denton Independent School District, coaching is "teaching them pride, poise, class, accountability, [and] decision-making skills." According to Purcell, he does not hire coaches because they want to coach football or volleyball; he hires them because they want "to coach our student-athletes." Clearly many coaches can learn a lot from Purcell, who has helped develop the Denton ISD athletic program into a perennial champion (Denton Ryan Baseball, Denton High soccer, Denton Ryan football, etc.). Purcell's coaching philosophy, which emphasizes developing winning programs through respect, support and being positive, is the focus of this article.

"You get one chance to make a first impression."

When hiring coaches, Purcell wants someone "who looks me in the eye, someone who gives a firm handshake, [and] someone who shows me leadership skills in just how they present themselves." That person has to show a commitment to coach student-athletes instead of coaching sport. Another point Purcell reminds his coaches of is that "kids don't love the sport like we do!" and a coach must be cognizant of this point when working with student-athletes. There are many reasons why adolescents play sports such as a desire for social interaction, love of the game,

and because their parents want them to have opportunities that were unavailable in years past. Whatever the reason, coaches must remember that they are still kids, not professional athletes, and thus should be nurtured as such.

"Coaches must be role models."

Many student-athletes admire, respect, and emulate their coaches; coaches can have an enormous influence on their lives. Thus, coaches should be "campus leaders" and model appropriate behaviors at all times. He expects his coaches to be visible on campus, "sitting in the front row of faculty meetings, not the back row." Purcell wants the student-athletes, parents, and administrators to see that coaches do more than draw up plays. By taking on leadership roles, demonstrating professional behavior, and being a role model, Purcell believes that coaches can diminish the "dumb jock" stereotype that has been pervasive in high school settings. Purcell knows that the way coaches behave at school, on the field, and in the community will go a long way toward creating a more positive view of athletics.

"Athletics is a microcosm of real life."

Sports provide student-athletes with opportunities to learn life lessons and develop life skills. Sports require athletes to think on their feet, to anticipate and react to difficult situations, to work with a team or to be successful on their own, and for these reasons Purcell will not accept the "extra-curricular" tag given to

athletics. Purcell believes athletics is a co-curricular activity, just as important as math or science. Success on the field seems to translate to success in the classroom as well for Purcell's student-athletes. "The GPAs of our student-athletes at Denton Ryan and Denton High are higher than the GPAs of the non-athletes," says Purcell, and he believes that is probably true around most of the country. That being the case, student-athletes are successful in a wide range of educational activities.

Purcell understands that coaches need support and role models too, so he works with them in the same positive way he wants his coaches to nurture their players. He takes every opportunity to help coaches be more successful. In interviews, applicants have told him that they have never had a losing season and in response he says, "Well, that's too bad, because I will scrutinize coaches more after a loss than after a win, because I want to see how you handle your kids, how you handle your opponent, how you handle your program after a loss much more than after a win, because winning's easy." There is much to learn after a loss. Many athletes have heard that phrase from coaches, but Purcell believes that he can help coaches after losses as well.

The athlete is not the only person who is developing in Purcell's model - coaches can develop as much as athletes. Winning with poise and class is much easier than losing with poise and class, but as "athletics is a microcosm of real life" student-athletes may lose things in

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An Interview with Ken Purcell *Continued*

life and athletics can help them handle those situations much better than classroom work. To further nurture his coaches, Purcell often sends weekly motivational letters reminding them of some of the points in his philosophy and congratulating them on a competition or hard work during the week. About this Purcell says, "I believe communication and positive support, after a win or a loss, is key."

"Respond Don't React"

Occasionally parents of student-athletes are difficult to work with. That is, "sometimes parents get things out of focus," says Purcell. Parents may think they are experts on the sports their student-athletes play and will question coaches on play calls, playing time, or how the team is being prepared. "High school coaches are under such pressure these days because we're a society about

winning," says Purcell and many times parents add to that stress. Purcell tries to teach his coaches how to work effectively with parents so strain is reduced and the parents still feel they have been heard. Purcell emphasizes that people should not be able to "tell any difference in our actions or approaches to our players, parents, or community by the fact that our teams are winning or losing." This point can be the most difficult for a coach to learn, but Purcell uses positive communication and support to foster growth of this area of a coach's personal repertoire.

After being a coach for twenty-six years, Purcell seems to relish the opportunity to share his beliefs and knowledge with developing coaches and student-athletes. In his seven years at Denton he believes he has "raised the bar for coaches with [his] philosophy and expectations." According to Purcell,

many of the state's top coaches now want to work with him because of his tactful and successful approach. He believes Denton is now "the Field of Dreams where we have built it and now they want to come here." The success of the athletic program is not just seen in the win column or the number of state championships won, but also in the life success stories of the coaches and student-athletes outside of sports.

Special thank you to Ken Purcell, Denton ISD Athletic Director for sharing his thoughts and philosophy on the topics discussed.



A Matter of Coaching Ethics and Good Decision Making

By Trent A. Petrie, Ph.D. & Scott Martin, Ph.D.

As a coach, how would you handle the following situations?

- The cross-country runner who could lead your team to a state championship has an eating disorder and really should not be competing.
- You become aware that three of your star offensive players on the football team are using steroids and other performance enhancing drugs, a clear violation of school and team policies.
- You learn that the major booster of your team, whose financial support is critical to

your team and the entire athletic department, is physically and verbally abusive toward his family.

Although you may not have faced these exact scenarios, you have likely experienced situations in which your ethical principles and goals were in conflict, such as: winning a major competition vs. protecting an athlete's health by having him/her not compete OR enforcing team rules and benching key players vs. being lax about the violation and letting them start anyway. This is what we mean by an ethical dilemma. Throughout life you are going to face such dilemmas –

they cannot be avoided – the key is how you handle the situations that arise and ultimately, the decisions you make. In this article, we provide some suggestions for developing a set of principles that guide your coaching behaviors (your code of ethics) and for making decisions that reflect those principles.

Developing Your Code of Ethics

In most professions, representative organizations develop "codes of ethics" for their members. These "codes" represent the general principles (values) and standards of conduct (behaviors) that individuals in

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the profession are expected to follow. Thus, when establishing the set of principles that will guide your decision-making, you should look to your own field's code of ethics as the foundation. Doing so is important for several reasons. First, ethics codes are the principles and standards of behaviors to which we all should aspire – thus they represent how we should ideally behave. Second, ethics codes are designed to protect the consumer of the services – thus, following them ensures that we will not do harm to the people with whom we work. Third, ethics codes often form the foundation for state laws governing the practice of the profession – thus, following them ensures that we will not be in violation of the law.

Coaching, like other professions, has its' own set of ethics. The United States Olympic Committee (USOC) established its Coaching Code of Ethics (see <http://www.olympic-usa.org/education/ethics.pdf>), which were based on principles from other organizations, such as: the Coaching Association of Canada, The British Institute of Sport Coaches, and the National College Athletic Association. Within the code, there are six major principles – Competence, Integrity, Professional Responsibility, Respect for Participants and Dignity, Concern for Other's Welfare, and Responsible Coaching – as well as a set of standards of conduct. Although we will not discuss the code in depth in this article, we do encourage you to obtain a copy of it and use the principles and standards of conduct as the foundation for your ethical decision-making.

Recognizing Ethical Dilemmas and Making Good Ethical Decisions

To handle ethical dilemmas you must be able to recognize them. So, your first steps are knowing your profession's code of ethics and, with that as the foundation, establishing the principles and standards you are going to follow in your work and life. By having this structure in place you will be better able to evaluate the situations that arise in your work and, ultimately, determine an ethical course of action that protects and respects both you and your athletes. So, if you have not already, take the time to establish your ethical foundation. If this task seems daunting, involve trusted colleagues and mentors to help you think through and understand what you are developing for yourself.

Having an ethical foundation puts you in the best position to behave ethically and to recognize and handle the dilemmas that arise. Even with that, though, making ethical decisions can be challenging. To help you make decisions and behave in ways that are consistent with your ethical foundation, we offer the following suggestions:

1. Define your areas of competence, and then practice within them. Sometimes this will mean saying "no" or "I don't know" to an athlete and/or seeking outside help (medical doctor, athletic trainer, sport psychologist, etc.) to help handle situations in which you really do not have expertise.

2. Annually participate in continuing education workshops. Coaches, in reality, are educators and great coaches know that to improve

they must continue to learn themselves. So, take advantage of opportunities to learn from other coaches through workshops and professional meetings. Don't limit yourself to X's and O's...also be willing to learn more about issues like coaching ethics, or improving communication, or being a positive coach.

3. Establish a trusted support network of other coaches with whom you can consult when faced with challenging ethical decisions. In ethically challenging situations, there is often more than one acceptable course of action. Finding the course that works best for you, your athletes, your team, and your department is key. Talking with trusted colleagues and mentors can help you define the problem, generate possible solutions, talk through the consequences of each course of action, and implement your final solution.

4. After making a decision, but before taking action, it is sometimes important to do a final check, particularly if you have made your decision without consulting with colleagues or friends. Janssen and Dale (2002) suggest that this final check include considering how other people will feel about this decision. To help you consider this perspective, do the following: (a) ask yourself what your family or your coaching mentor would think of you if implemented your solution, (b) ask yourself how you would feel if your solution became a headline in the sports section of your newspaper, and

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