

It's All About The Wins! Or Is It?

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As coaches, we often worry about wins and losses. Unfortunately, sometimes our focus is on player performance rather than concentrating on being effective in what we do. I have found that using an *affective* approach when coaching can be most effective. It is true, efficiency is a huge part of a successful program, but efficiency coupled with a valuable plan that concentrates on each athlete as a person, brings consistent wins. Let me explain...

Three years ago, I was given the opportunity to develop and implement a baseball program at Boulder Creek High School in Anthem, Arizona. Since BCHS was a new school, initially, I couldn't worry about wins and losses. I knew if I wanted to incorporate my philosophy as a coach and build the foundation of the program, I would have to go about it methodically and with purpose. To begin with, a win for us was merely seeing daily improvements and achieving the realistic goals we set individually and as a team. Three years later, I am proud to say that our overall team success is flourishing. I attribute this to focusing on the individual player's success in life first, and then using that success to further develop their skills as a member of the team. Among our many accomplishments, since the onset of the program, is our combined team GPA of 3.48. In addition, all nine senior baseball players in our first graduating class went onto college to further their education and some to play college baseball. Again, these are just a few examples of what can be attained when the focus is on the player's mental and physical approach to the game as opposed to wins and losses.

Now, don't get me wrong, there is some satisfactions in a big win against a more talented, higher ranked team, but if that is the only time you feel competent, then rethink your approach. To build a team of winners, try and set game goals that don't necessarily mean you win every game. At Boulder Creek, we preach "*Four Runs or Less Equals Success!*" Our game goal is to hold the opponent to four runs or less through efficient defense, purposeful pitching and playing with real emotion. This goal provides direction for our defense during the course of a game and at practice. So you ask, why four runs or less? Over our first two years at the varsity level, the first year being only Frosh and JV teams, statistics show we won 83% of our games when we held our opponent to four runs or less. I believe the mark of four runs or less works in the JAGS Baseball program because it is emphasized and incorporated during practices and/or within game situations on a daily basis. The ten keys to holding an opponent to *Four Runs or Less* are:

1. Keep the double play in order.
2. Outfielders must hit the cutoff man and take good angles.
3. Avoid the "big inning." Allow opponents only three outs per inning.
4. Minimize walks by challenging hitters, especially with two outs.
5. Evaluate pitch calling with the catcher and pitcher every inning.
6. Utilize hitting charts and scout the opponents.
7. Position fielders according to the score, number of outs, hitter's strength, etc.
8. Shut down the running game. Force opponents to play station-to-station.
9. Get the leadoff hitter out in every inning.
10. First Pitch Strikes is above 50%. (62% over two years in 71 games!)

Recently, I had the honor of talking with my high school coach Marty Hunter from Bend High School in Bend, Oregon. It was exciting to have the opportunity to congratulate him on his success as being named the head coach at George Fox University. Over the years, Coach Hunter and I have never lost touch; we communicate often. I have an enormous amount of respect for him and in many ways coach the way he does. In my opinion, he is an effective coach because he uses an *affective* approach as well. From him, I've learned that a coach can impact a player, for the rest of his life, either positively or negatively; the way it is done is solely up to the coach. It is for this reason I try to accentuate the positives daily when interacting with each of my players. In this day and age, taking into account dual income families and the fast pace we tend to live our lives, it is safe to say our players may not get enough affection and/or support they need at home. And, let's face it; teenagers and young adults need a lot of affection, guidance and supervision to begin with. When discipline problems arise on and off the field, I try to discipline with logic but, at the same time, remain

sentimental to the feelings and emotional needs of each player. This may be a little touchy feely for some, but using this approach has proven to be invaluable; it takes the meaning of a “coach” to another level.

If you want to know what your players are thinking, ask them. I have found that one of the best ways to get your team to buy-in and have ownership is through peer evaluations. At Boulder Creek we use peer evaluation forms every 2-3 weeks throughout a given season. Tom House and the National Pitching Association introduced this idea three years ago and after witnessing its effectiveness, I continue to use it today when coaching. Like I said, taking care of the mental, emotional well being of a ball player can take your team to higher levels. So I figured no better way to find out what is going on with the players than from the players themselves. To ensure valuable, honest feedback, do not allow the players to write their names on the evaluation forms is most advantageous. Here are examples of the questions and feedback I require my players to reflect upon during the peer evaluation process:

1. Are you playing and performing in your best position?
2. Are your teammates playing and performing in their best position?
3. Write out your best defensive line-up, starting pitcher, reliever.
4. Write out your best offensive line-up.
5. Who is the best prepared hitter, pitcher, player on the team?
6. Who is the worst prepared hitter, pitcher, athlete on the team?
7. What can the coaches do to help the team improve?
8. Who is not taking care of business off the field?

As I reflect on my years as a player and 14 years of coaching from the college level to the middle school level, I have developed and learned many different styles of running an effective practice. Through an effective practice you can develop more opportunities for success, which can be significant to the impact of a team and its players. At Boulder Creek, I try and incorporate the *Five Essential T's* to attain a meaningful practice. They are as follows:

1. Team – We all understand the Team concept and playing as a team, but how do you incorporate this daily? The Team concept doesn't just happen on game day. We conduct team meetings once a week at our on campus study hall. We dress the same for every practice and take pride in wearing a JAGS Baseball uniform.

2. Toughness – By toughness I do not just mean physically tough; each player has to be both physically and mentally tough. An off day from either type of toughness will keep a team from progressing forward and reaching their goals. Our players know that conditioning is a part of practice and not a punishment. We condition in the middle of practice. This helps to better prepare the players by simulating their body's fatigue level thus increasing performance. We create game situations in our drills to get our minds used to being in pressure situations.

3. Tenacity – How determined are you and your players towards having a good practice? Being organized as a coach and persistent with every aspect of the game can bring strength to the teams' confidence level. There are no surprises; all practice plans are posted with the purpose of each drill. This helps the players and coaches understand what is expected for the day.

4. Trust – This is an important characteristic to possess, not only as a teammate, but in general, as a person. Developing trustworthy young adults is no easy feat. Championship-caliber teams will believe in and trust its coaches and each other. They respect the purpose and responsibilities of each and every representative. Trust, dedication to the team and a valued work ethic will develop as a result. Trust is a topic that needs to be talked about and addressed when a player is open and admits to being wrong or violating team policy, and when a player breaks the trust of the team.

5. Teach – When I teach, I try to get a functioning response from my players instead of a reaction. A response may not always be in a positive manner, but it takes more courage to respond than it does to react. Reactions tend to be defensive and excuse oriented; they also tend to be counter-productive. Whereas, responses tend to be a true indication of what the player is feeling, thinking, needing, etc.

Success is often determined by the final score at the end of a game, a teams overall record or who is ranked in the top ten. We all want that monumental ring on our finger and banner on the outfield fence, but how you achieve that is more important than getting it. The win-at-all-cost-mentality is not the way to true success. Be *affective* towards your players and incorporate a winning team philosophy within your own coaching style.

Make sure each and every practice is organized, effective and purposeful. Implement the importance of not only physical toughness but also, mental toughness along with quality character-rich behaviors. This will develop the kind of adults we would like even our own children to become some day and ultimately, bring in the wins. Now that is success!