

COACHES COACHING COACHES

teaching, training, learning

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Editors Message

Every year, newly graduated college students enter the coaching profession. In most cases, these newly minted coaches have completed at least one coaching course with some earning a coaching minor. But, as every experienced coach knows, no amount of book learning or required college courses can truly prepare one to be an effective coach. There is truly no better way of learning than through experience.

An adage I learned many years ago truly explains how one learns and how one helps the next generation learn.

I do, you watch, we talk.

I do, you help, we talk.

You do, I help, we talk.

You do, I watch, we talk.

And then we each go help the next person

Coaches Coaching Coaches (CCC) is a supplement to Dakota Coach. The purpose of CCC is to provide an outlet for coaches to share coaching knowledge that helps other coaches become better coaches. CCC is interested in all topics related to coaching, for example, skill techniques, game tactics, coaching strategies, practice planning, team and individual psychology, nutrition, culture, first aid, training and conditioning, motivation, parent relationships, practice planning, mental health, leadership, mentoring, and relationships.

To submit an article to Coaches Coaching Coaches, send your article in word format to bradford.strand@ndsu.edu

Brad Strand

What A Basketball Coach Learned About Practice Planning From a Football Practice

Terry Porter
Concordia College

Practice planning is one of the most important facets of your program, no matter what sport you are coaching. Recently, I had the opportunity to attend an Indianapolis Colts pre-season practice last summer while in Indianapolis. While most people in attendance were trying to get close to the players, get autographs, or just enjoy the beautiful August day. It is always an opportunity for me to learn a little more about practice planning. It was like a well-oiled machine moving from one drill to the next with very little down time between drills. I was amazed at the efficiency between drills and the pointed instruction and exact movements. What I learned from all of this was that as a basketball coach we can learn to break down the drills that we have in our plan, become more efficient moving from drill to drill, and execute situations daily.

Pre-season

I am a firm believer that you need to map out your season starting with your state, conference, or national tournament backwards. You do not want your team to peak too early, but you also want to challenge your team consistently throughout the season. Continue to add plays, situations, and different line ups to challenge your players.

With that said, I believe that the season is long and your pre-season workouts, whether they are strength training or on court, need to be short (60-90 minutes), focused, and intense. Have 1 or 2 goals for each training session and have the players reflect (journal/note either digitally or paper) whether they achieved their daily goal or not. You can have them share on a daily, weekly, or bi-weekly basis. Make sure to give them

some feedback so they don't feel it's a waste of time.

In-season

I like to break the in-season planning into three parts.

Part one - Before our first game, what do we need in to be successful? Basic offense, basic defense, press breaker both full and half, BLOB, SLOB, and a game winner. Again, work backwards from your review day the day before your first game. Map out the drills that will teach the players what you want to accomplish these first few weeks. Each time that you work on a skill (ex. basic offense) make the drill tougher (either less time, less possessions, more efficient, or faster). Set short term goals (daily or weekly) and make sure that you review these goals each week. Similar to players, coaches and coaching staffs need feedback, both positive and negative to continue to improve.

Part two – What do we need to put in before we play a conference game? Additional offense, special plays, full court and half court presses, additional BLOB and SLOB plays, and another half court and full court game winner.

Part three – What do we need to put in to win a conference championship? Usually, you play everyone in the conference twice. Once you have gone through the first half you know what it will take for you to win the conference championship (or finish in an advantages position, second vs third, etc.). Once again, map out backwards from your conference tournament to the start of the second half of the regular season. Add the offenses, defenses, out of bounds plays,

presses, traps, and specials that will give your team a chance to win a championship or finish in a favorable position for the conference tournament. The calendar gets very busy this time of the year with games, scouting, practices, and more so make sure to allow enough time for your team.

Post-season

The post-season is a completely different animal than the regular season. It seems that coaches, players, and officials all perform differently than during the regular season. Make a realistic estimate of how far your team can make it during the post-season tournaments. Continue to challenge your players with additional drills to improve/tweak the offenses, defenses, out of bounds plays, that will make you successful during the post-season. Some of my favorite suggestions are: cut 5 seconds off your shot clock, trap the ball on the first pass and execute 5 additional passes before you can score, put 6 defenders on full court press until offense crosses half court. Anything that you can do to make it harder on your team or makes them more efficient will make you successful during the post-season.

Off-season

In my opinion the off-season should be treated like the pre-season. Workout length should be 60-90 minutes, but it should be intense, focused workouts. Strength workouts focus more on building additional strength, basketball workouts should focus on specific areas of the game such as ballhandling, shooting, rebounding, etc. Depending on the amount of time available to the athlete you can do a strength workout in the morning and a skills workout in the afternoon. Have the players keep a journal that they can share with you occasionally.

Review

In summary, be as efficient as you can be. Utilize the number of baskets, players, assistant coaches, and training aids as you have available to you. Trust your staff to prepare the players as you have discussed during your coaching staff meetings. Make sure to hold the players accountable for their

journals, work ethic, and preparation for the season. As always, enjoy the journey, time is short, so we better enjoy the time spent.

My Favorite Competition Drill

Offensive/Defensive Transition –

- start with 2 teams on the endlines,
- send one player to the other end to shoot a free-throw vs. 2 rebounders,
- the rebounders transition (made or miss) 2 on 1 vs. the FT shooter,
- at each end you add 2 players, 2 v 1, 3 v 2, 4 v 3, 5 v 4, then 5 v 5 at the end so you can work on fast break and half court offense.
- You can extend the 5 v 5 time to 2, 3, 4, 5 ends for additional 5 v 5 offensive or defensive time.

Indianapolis Colts practice August 10, 2021

- Warm up
- Dynamic (moving) stretch
- 10 plays offense
- 10 plays punt return
- 1 v 1 at various positions
- 10 plays offense
- 10 plays kick return
- 10 plays 7 v 7
- 10 plays offense

Notes: very efficient, loved the energy moving from one drill to the next, everything was timed, scored, or stated

What a basketball practice looks like with this format

- Warm up
- Dynamic stretch
- 10 plays to start the game – can do off the jump – or just possession
- 10 plays defense – can be half court, traps, full court, traps, etc.
- 1 v 1 – point guards off dribble, wings off passes from coaches/managers, posts off passes from coaches/managers – all within the context of your offense

- 10 plays at end of quarter/half – mix a variety of full court, half court, BLOB, SLOB plays during the season
- 10 end of the game stops – you have the lead and need to make a stop to win the game
- 10 plays 3 v 3 (or whatever you want) – break down a portion of your offense and play 3 v 3 till score or stop
- 10 plays end of the game – use a variety of offenses/defenses/up 3/down 3 to keep the players engaged in the learning process.

Note: utilize your assistant coaches/managers/and resources to keep practice as efficient as possible. Directions

should be short sweet and to the point to take advantage of the minimal time we get to spend in the gym.

About the Author

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Fun Runs: High-Interest Activities for Distance Running Practices

Ken Gardner
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Abstract

Keeping distance runners interested in running is a challenge for most high school coaches. Distance running is difficult and it takes effort to give one's all during every workout. This article provides ideas for distance coaches that engage athletes in high-interest run activities.

"Our sport is your sport's punishment." Across two decades of coaching, I (Ken) have heard/read this statement many times in reference to distance running. One debate this statement might spark is whether conditioning should be used as a punishment or consequence. The focus of this article is the challenge that coaches of younger distance runners may face in motivating their athletes to enjoy, become passionate about, and commit to distance running.

The topic of dwindling participation numbers and a high dropout rate in youth sports is real (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). As noted in the opening paragraph, almost the entire focus of distance running is conditioning. Almost every athlete arrives at the first day of practice already knowing how to run. Admittedly, some will need some tweaks in their running form and some instruction on the rules of racing will need to take place. But overall, conditioning is going to be the key. However, racing every day would lead to exhaustion and overuse injuries. In addition, over time, one's athletes would likely become bored by constantly racing.

Therefore, it is important for the distance running coach to find ways to include activities at practice that go beyond racing each day, that go beyond the core workouts of intervals, tempo runs, and long runs. Not

only should these activities aid in the conditioning process (making time for both challenging the body and also time for recovery), but they should also be of high interest to the athletes.

What follows in the remainder of this article are a list of suggested activities for distance coaches to include in practice that will do just that: improve conditioning while keeping their athletes motivated. The activities are divided into three categories: practice activities for the track, for trails/parks, and for within the community.

Track

The following activities are meant to take place on a track. However, if you do not have a track available to you, a park with a closed loop will work just as well...maybe even better if you are training for cross country.

Last Person Out

The first of the track-based activities is called Last Person Out. In this activity, you have the entire team run around the track as a group. The coach then blows a whistle, and whoever is the last person in the pack is out. That person then continues running laps in the outside lane in the opposite direction while the main group continues. The whistle is blown periodically until there is only one runner left. Often, the pace of the main group will continue to get faster as the activity progresses. In order to help keep this in check, we have established a rule that no one can be more than 5 meters ahead of or behind the pack.

Even Pace Contest

A second track-based activity is called the Even Pace Contest. In this activity, a specific distance is chosen by the coaches (ex: 800 meters). Then a goal time is selected (ex: 4 minutes). The distance and time are shared with the athletes. Their goal is to be the one who is closest to the goal time after running the selected distance. A break is given before the next round starts with a new distance and new goal time. There are multiple possible goals in this activity. The original goal, as found in the name, is to have athletes work on accurate pacing. In order to do this, basic, well-known distances will be chosen (ex: 400 meters, 800 meters, 1000 meters). This will help athletes learn what a 90 second 400 feels like. In order to lighten things up, we have started including random distances that are more difficult for the athletes to pace. Whether it is 650 meters in 3 minutes, 100 meters in 58 seconds, or running to that tree and back, this evens the playing field for athletes of all abilities and lightens the mood. The other aspect I like about this activity is that it can be used as either a hard workout or a recovery workout depending on the distances/goal times chosen by the coach.

Glow Stick Relay

The third track-based activity is called the Glow Stick Relay. This is an activity that is fun for the athletes to run at night. We use it at our summer running camp. Three person teams are formed and those three athletes take turns running 400 meters around the track relay-style. We break out glow sticks, use flashlights for batons, and even crank up the music for one hour of running!

Beat Your Mark

The final track-based activity is called Beat Your Mark. In this activity, each runner gets some sort of marker they can run with (ex: a t-shirt, small rock, pine cone, etc....). All runners get on the start line and on the whistle, start running around the track. After 30 seconds, the coach blows the whistle. The runners stop where they are, place their markers on the inside of the track

marking how far they have run, and then jog back to the start line. (I have made the rule that all runners must make it at least 100 meters on their first attempt, otherwise, the activity could take all day!) This process continues with the runners having to beat their previous mark each time and moving their marker ahead to that point. Once a runner fails to beat their mark two times, they are out of the game and then continue running laps in the outside lane in the opposite direction while the main group continues. The activity concludes when there is only one person remaining.

Park

The following activities are meant to take place in a city park.

Ultimate Frisbee

The first park-based activity is called Ultimate Frisbee. Wikipedia provides a quick summary of Ultimate Frisbee: "Points are scored by passing the disc to a teammate in the opposing end zone." Other basic rules are that players must not take steps while holding the disc, and interceptions, incomplete passes, and passes out of bounds are turnovers." We also play a version of this game with a football (we call it cross country football). As with many games, I find that athletes are having so much fun while playing that they do not realize how hard they are working.

Speed Frolf

The second park-based activity is called Speed Frolf. Frisbee golf (frolf) is an activity that is growing in popularity. Many city parks are now adding frisbee golf courses. If you have one available, this activity might be a good option for your runners. Rather than use heavier frisbee golf discs, we use regular lighter frisbees. Athletes find a partner and alternate throws as they work their way around the course. This can be used as a continuous run as a slower pace, but we usually break it up and have them complete a handful of holes at a time. They then have some recovery time before attacking the next handful of holes.

Ride & Stride

The third park-based activity is called Ride & Stride. In this activity, athletes alternate running and riding bike with a partner of similar ability. With each pair, one starts on the bike and one starts on foot. The biker rides a designated distance (ex: one mile) and then parks the bike. That athlete then continues on foot to the next mile marker. In the meantime, the athlete who started out on foot runs to the 1-mile mark and gets on the bike left by their partner. They then ride the bike to the 2-mile mark, park the bike, and begin running again. This can be done for varying even-numbered legs. In the above example, if eight total miles are covered, each athlete would have run four miles and biked four miles. If you have access to a pool or swimming area, a triathlon would also be an option.

Green Run

The fourth park-based activity is called the Green Run. For this activity, athletes partner up and run around a park or on a trail picking up trash, placing it in trash bags provided by the coach, and returning the filled trash bags to a trash can in the park. Over time, I have added instructions to avoid picking up any questionable trash and have also started providing rubber gloves. This is an activity we use at the end of the season to help clean up the park/trail we have used through the season. It serves as a means of service to the community and a way to say thank you for the use of the facility.

Handicap Run

The final park-based activity is called the Handicap Run. The term "handicap" here is used as it is in the golf world...as a means of leveling the playing field. In this activity, we use the results of a two-mile time trial to line up the athletes from slowest to fastest. We then have them go on a two-mile run, allowing the runner with the slowest time to start first. The next runner will be the second-slowest...starting after the first runner by however many seconds they finished ahead of him/her in the time trial. This continues until the winner of the

previous time trial has started. In theory, all runners should be finishing at about the same time.

Example:

Time trial results: Runner X – 16:15, Runner Y: 16:30, Runner Z: 17:00

In the Handicap Run, Runner Z would start first, Runner Y would start 30 seconds later, and Runner X would start 15 seconds after Runner Y.

Community

The following activities are meant to take place within a community. While running a practice on city streets comes with its own challenge (safety being the top one!), there are also some benefits to it as well. It is great for your team to be visible out in the community with working hard and having fun.

Scavenger Hunt

The first community-based activity is a Scavenger Hunt. The coach breaks the team up into smaller groups (4-6 runners). Each group is provided with a list of things they need to find. As a running activity, I have found that it works best for the groups to gather information rather than objects. For example, they need to find out how many steps there are on the slide in a certain playground or what business is located at a certain street address. All groups have to return in a certain amount of time to avoid disqualification. The list the coach provides has more things to find than they could likely find in the allotted amount of time. Also, to avoid groups working together, the items on each list vary, but only slightly. For example, one list might ask for the 3rd word on a sign at a certain address, the next list might ask for the 5th word.

#selfierun

The second community-based activity is an off-shoot of the scavenger hunt called #selfierun. The difference between this activity and a scavenger hunt is that one person in each group carries a mobile phone with them. The list they have to complete is of things their group has to take a selfie in

front of. For example, a bridge, a swing set, a fire station, or a speed limit sign. Personal disclaimer: This is the only activity included in this article that I (Ken) take credit for developing. The rest were part of our program when I started as an assistant coach or were added as I came across them at coaches' clinics or in articles such as this.

Rummage Sale Run

The final community-based activity is called the Rummage Sale Run. This is an activity for a Saturday morning, usually as a recovery run after a Friday meet. Each athlete must bring \$1. (I (Ken) usually have a few spare dollars for those who forget.) The athletes then break into smaller groups and run around town for 45 minutes stopping at various rummage sales. The goal is to make the best purchase they can with their \$1. Following the run, we have a contest to see who got the best deal, the most creative item, and the best costume. Other rules include, 1) athletes are never by themselves...always with at least one other team member, 2) athletes cannot pool their money, 3) whatever is purchased must be carried with

them, and 4) they must bring their item home (they can't just leave it at practice).

Conclusion

Hopefully, coaches can adapt, adopt, or tweak these activities and incorporate them into their individual practice plans. In the end, the goal is to make distance running enjoyable for your athletes while still getting them to work hard.

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About the Author

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Benefits and Concerns with Golf: Perspectives for High School Golfers and Coaches

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Abstract

High school athletics is an environment that enriches the mind and builds character in children and youth (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2021). In no sport does this statement reign truer than golf. In fact, in the Rules of Golf (USGA, 2019), Rule 1.3b states that players are responsible for applying the Rules to themselves. Further, “players are expected to recognize when they have breached a Rule and to be honest in applying their own penalties” (p. 20). In no other competitive sport are participants asked to apply their own penalties for rule violations.

Few activities can make the claim of not only testing the physical capacity of an athlete, but also the mental toughness, along with a person’s integrity. Coleman (2013) stated, “There are a number of other qualities inherent in the game of golf. It offers unusual opportunities to practice self-control, fair play, and sportsmanship” (p.32). In the wake of this game grow the strong willed, the mentally fit, and the well-rounded individuals. Coleman went on to question that if golf can teach these qualities to adults, why would it not do the same for high school athletes?

One aspect of golf that separates it from other sports is the role that ‘being in the moment’ presents. In most sports, gameplay is fast-paced and highly intense. Because of this, athletes rarely have an opportunity to interact with one another. In the sport of golf; however, there is plenty of down time

between shots, a time when golfers can talk with, and pick the brains of their playing partners. In addition, a golfer typically can be considered to be playing against the course or against themselves, so the cutthroat attitude often experienced in competitive sport becomes moot, and athletes are able to form bonds with each other.

Golf has not always been a sport option in high school athletics. In comparison to other activities such as basketball and baseball, in many interscholastic settings golf is still trailblazing the competitive field of athletics. Social emotional learning has become an important component of education, (Weissberg, et al., 2015) physical education (Ciotto, 2018), and athletics (Randolph, 2021). As previously stated, golf is one of the few sports that allows players to form social ties with competitors, to develop as a student of the sport, and to become an overall well-rounded person.

The remainder of this paper will discuss the health benefits and concerns of golf and conclude with implications for coaches.

Health Benefits

In the past year, the issue of mental health has become a major concern in athletics (Stull, 2021). From record setting rates of depression (Fox, 2018) to the extreme rates of prescribed anti-anxiety medications (Garrison, 2018). It would be remiss to not study the impact that participation in extra-curricular activities can have on the overtraining, burnout,

stress, mental stability, and development of adolescent athletes (Strand et al., 2021).

One can think of a person's mental state in two categories, the first is the mental capacity of a person to succeed academically. Research suggests that a correlation can be drawn between one's ability to succeed academically and their physical fitness (Rasberry et al. 2011). Ayers (2013) reported that of students who passed an average of 3.6 fitness tests, 72 percent of them passed the math MCAS, and 89 percent passed the English MCAS. There may be multiple reasons this trend occurs, with the most common thought being that athletes are typically highly motivated individuals and are willing to put forth the extra effort required to succeed academically (Van Yperen, 2019).

If these results are considered causation, not correlation, then it raises the question, why shouldn't all students be encouraged to participate in athletics outside of the required physical education courses? The typical answer is that people may not enjoy competition (Scantling et al, 1995) and they have the personal autonomy to decide if they want to put forth the effort required to make the strides in physical and academic performance.

The second category is the mental health of an individual. Mental health is an interesting topic as the traits and effects of a mental state have so much variation from person to person (Choudhry, 2016). However, time and time again, an individual's mental health can be directly tied to a few factors. The first of these factors is the number of close interpersonal relationships a person has formed in his or her life (Umberson, 2010). Humans are social creatures who need to have close bonds in order to feel a sense of purpose in their lives and help prevent falling into situational depression.

In addition to close personal relationships, one needs to look at the root cause of depression, which is a lack of dopamine and serotonin in the brain (Vandergrindt, 2020). Generally speaking, serotonin stabilizes one's mood, feelings of well-being and happiness while dopamine is a neurotransmitter that plays a role in how one feels pleasure. A deficient of serotonin and dopamine are often combated through

using Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRI's), which can have adverse side effects (Mayo Clinic, 2019). To avoid putting people on these medications, many seek natural solutions (Taber, 2015).

One way to practice natural solutions is through the use of physical activity. From an evolutionary perspective, being physically active had many benefits. Berg (2010) stated, "The hunter needed perseverance and determination to continue for long periods, which required serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine" (p. 25). When people are active their body produces the happy chemicals, serotonin and dopamine, which flood their system. Blackmore (2003) suggested that the release of these chemicals reduces depression by as much as 50 percent while

In addition to physical activity, another way to produce serotonin and increase dopamine levels is to spend time in natural sunlight (Nall, 2019). Tsai, et al. (2011) found that those individuals who received the most sunlight exposure in the previous month had the greatest density of dopamine in the reward region of their brains. Vitamin D can be obtained from certain foods, vitamins, and sunlight and is a daily requirement for all individuals (National Institutes of Health, 2021).

Considering these natural methods, it can be argued that by playing golf, a person is partaking in natural methods of maintaining happiness. It could be theorized that this is one of the main reasons that as people age, they pick up golf as a hobby. Golf is not only an activity that keeps the body and mind sharp, but based on current research, also has some key components to the sport that aid in keeping a healthy mind (WebMD, 2020).

It is recommended that adults get 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity aerobic or 75 minutes per week to vigorous activity while children aged 6-17 should get at least 60 minutes per day of moderate-to vigorous-intensity physical activity (CDC, 2020, 2021). Moderate-intensity activities are defined as activities ranging between 3 - <6 METs and include brisk walking, dancing, gardening, biking slowly, shooting a basketball. Murray et al., (2017) reported that golf using a golf cart expended approximately 3.5 METs, walking carrying

clubs expended approximately 4.3 METs, and walking using a pull cart expended approximately 5.3 METs. In general, golf expends 4.8 METs. Given that an average golf round lasts 2-5 hours, depending on playing 9 or 18 holes, it is safe to say that golf is an excellent support for a person's heart health.

Health Concerns

Compared to sports like football, skiing, or ice hockey, golf is a relatively safe activity (Parkkari et al., 2004). In a comparison of 31 sports, Parkkari et al. reported that in their sample of 3657 Finnish people, golf had the lowest number of injuries per 1000 hours of participation.

However, medical professionals have recognized that the mechanics of the golf swing tend to cause injuries (Hosea et al., 1996). The primary risk seen with golfers, both amateur and professional alike, is injuries to their lower back. Given the innate nature of golf to be a relatively low impact sport, it may be surprising to learn there is a common injury.

What most people fail to recognize is that golfers spend hours bending over the ball, hitting and putting, which creates excessive strain in the lumbar area. During a club swing, the lumbar area continues to be strained because of the forward flexion of the spine. This motion may cause wear-and-tear injuries in the various regions of the lower back (Mullane et al. 2000).

With this in mind, a young athlete must be considerate of their future health. Though it is uncommon for young golfers to experience serious injury while playing golf, that does not mean there are not injuries in the making. Lindsay et al. (2014) suggested that the majority of novice golfers are in poor physical condition, and they usually play without a proper warm-up, which increases their chance of injury. With these risk factors in mind, a person must weigh the benefits and potential pitfalls associated with playing golf.

Another health concern for golfers is extreme exposure to sunlight. It is well established that too much sun exposure can cause skin damage and may increase the risk of skin cancer (Leiter et al., (2008). It is recommended the everyone limit sun exposure during peak hours when

ultraviolet radiation is the strongest (between 10 am and 2 pm) and to apply sunscreen whenever the UV index is above 3 (Hansen, et al., 2016).

Implications for Coaches

To limit the liability a high school golf coach may face, there are certain steps that should be taken. The first step is to have every student receive a physical exam completed by a medical professional to determine whether they will be able to handle the physical strain of practice and competition. The second step is to have every student get their parent or guardian to complete and sign a participation verification form. These forms are valuable to a coach as it alleviates their liability to an extent as the parents are recognizing the potential risks of playing golf. It is important to note however, that a coach still needs to take reasonable precautions when designing practice plans and to avoid putting athletes in any potentially dangerous environments. Another valuable step is submitting practice plans to the school's athletic director each day before practice occurs. This ensures that if any incidents were to occur during practice, one would be able to make the claim that safety measures were considered before practice began, and athletes were not left to their own volitions.

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Baseball: A Mental Game

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Abstract

At a basic level, baseball can be broken down into hitting, catching, and pitching. At a more complex level, each of these aspects requires a large amount of mental toughness and focus to play at a high level and achieve success.

Yogi Berra once said, “Baseball is 90 percent mental. The other half is physical.” America’s pastime, baseball, is a sport thought of as a game for physically gifted athletes who excel based on their natural ability. Many do not realize that baseball requires an extreme amount of mental toughness as well. Whether it be a pitcher staring down an opposing batter, a batter hitting a walk off homerun in extra innings, or a ballplayer who plays over two thousand consecutive games, “mental toughness is a determining factor that can separate the average from the good and the good from the great” (Coleman, 2019, para 3).

Physical Traits

Baseball can be broken down into three main skills when thinking about the physics of the sport: hitting, catching, and pitching. Each of these aspects require large amounts of mental toughness and focus in order to perform at a high level and achieve success. Start with hitting, Ted Williams famously said, ‘Hitting a baseball – I’ve said it a thousand times – is the single most difficult thing to do in a sport’ (Dalmass, 2018).

Hitting

A pitched baseball travels so fast that a batter must start his swing before the pitcher releases the ball to have any chance of contacting the ball (Quinton, 2017). In

addition, the batter loses sight of the ball during a short part of its flight to home plate due to blind spots. A batter must make multiple decisions before and during his swing. He has to decide whether to swing at the ball, he has to predict what type of pitch is thrown, where it is thrown, and how fast it is thrown, etc. The average batter must make these decisions in less than a half second, which is the time it takes for a 90mph fastball to make it to the plate (Dalmass, 2018). A hitter must be able to make decisions at a rapid rate while trusting his eyes, physical abilities, and brain to make the correct decision.

Fielding

The second main physical aspect of baseball is fielding, i.e., catching. There are two main theories when it comes to fielding. The first, the Optical Acceleration Cancellation (OAC) model, in which fielders move to meet the ball where it is going to be. The second is the Linear Optical Trajectory (LOT) model, which states that fielders run so that the ball stays in a straight line in their vision. If the ball strays away from that straight line, the fielder adjusts the way he is running in order to make sure the ball stays straight. The LOT model says that the player will meet the ball at the right spot at the right time (Dalmass, 2018). Both of these strategies are highly psychological, since they put together information from the eyes and the muscle system. The ballplayers’ subconscious actions, which are highly psychological, are constantly working as long as the player is not overthinking. These actions will help the baseball player see where the ball is going and meet it in that space.

Pitching

The third physical aspect of baseball that involves psychology and mental toughness is pitching. Pitchers must have a high sense of spatial relations to throw a ball into the catcher's mitt. Pitchers must see the distance from the mound to the plate, understand the proper trajectory to throw the ball, and know where in the box to throw the pitch (Dalmass, 2018). Pitchers tend to fall into one of two ways of overthinking during a ballgame. The first is when they start thinking too much about "don't". They start thinking about pitches that they should not throw or mistakes they do not want to make. This actually creates a higher tendency to make a mistake rather than prevent it from happening. The other form of overthinking pitchers fall into is when they start to question their own ability to perform. They will start to evaluate everything they are doing; trying to make sure every aspect is perfect. Errors are more likely to occur when this overthinking takes place.

Baseball players tend to have extremely high optic, stereo, and motor acuity (Dalmass, 2018). A study conducted on Babe Ruth in the 1920s put him through multiple psychological and motor tests. The researchers found that his eyes, ears, brain, and nerves all performed at a much faster level than that of an average person (Dalmass). They also found that he had a much higher coordination ability than an average human. Both of these results are very common in baseball players who have success.

Psychological Traits

Athletics require physical demands that can be challenging, but the mental demands are just as challenging and can sometimes be more of an obstacle for athletes to overcome. Baseball players face so many psychological decisions and challenges each time they take the field or step into the batter's box. Coaches and teams need to develop players who are mentally tough to find success on the field.

Personality

A large psychological, non-physical trait of successful baseball players that is a key to high performance and achievement is personality. Many professional baseball organizations put players through personality tests to determine if a player's personality will help lead them to success in the sport.

A common personality test used for baseball players is called the Athletic Success Inventory (Dalmass, 2018). This test evaluates eleven characteristics and traits while also accounting for accuracy and objectivity. The eleven characteristics include: drive; coachable; leadership; trust; aggression; responsibility; emotional control; mental toughness; self-confidence; determination; and conscientiousness (Dalmass). The three characteristics that were found to predict the most success were self-confidence, emotional control, and mental toughness.

An example of these traits predicting success involves two players who were drafted out of high school to the New York Mets, Darryl Strawberry and Billy Beane. Both showed great ability and were sure to have success at the professional baseball level. Strawberry excelled at this new level, but Beane did not. The results of the personality showed that Strawberry had very high self-confidence scores, while Beane scored very low. There are many psychological factors that go into a baseball player's performance on the field and that is why it is so important to work on the mental game just as much as the physical one.

Coaches and athletes must realize they should be giving the inner game the same level of training and preparation that they do for the outer game (O'Sullivan, 2019). Mental training should be an everyday part of the game and it starts at the beginning of the season. Baseball at the professional level has put more emphasis on the inner game in recent years. The beginning of the 2018 season saw 27 baseball clubs with mental skills coaches (Nightengale, 2018). "It's no different than your hitting coach, your pitching coach, and your infield coach. A mental skills coach is going to help you think better, think more clearly in the moment, and control your emotions", says Joe

Maddon, Chicago Cubs manager in 2018 (Nightengale). The job of mental skills coaches is to help the players mentally and emotionally; exercising the brain to help it become mentally tough in certain situations that require that toughness. Baseball is a team sport, but it really is an individual sport within a team.

Mental Toughness

Mental toughness has been defined as, “the ability to consistently perform toward the upper range of your talent and skill regardless of competitive circumstances” (Coleman, 2019, para 4). Athletes need to acquire a positive mindset in order to become mentally tough. One way to help establish this mindset is to understand that an individual with a positive or growth-mindset will see their abilities as capable of being used for success (O’Sullivan, 2019). Athletes with a growth mindset are defined as coachable. They are willing to do whatever it takes to reach their full athletic potential. The characteristics that describe mentally tough athletes are clarity of mind and firmness of purpose. They desire to be great, and settling for good is never an option (Coleman). These athletes will know how to win and will stand firm when challenged with obstacles. They will possess a work ethic, winning mentality, and self-confidence. The mentally tough athletes will hate to lose, but will not dwell on defeat. Although mentally tough athletes are ideal for any team, it is important to keep in mind that this toughness is developed over time and with many opportunities to succeed, fail, adjust, learn, and move on.

Implications for Coaches

There are approaches an athlete, specifically baseball players, can take to become mentally tough or tougher. One of the first steps is to realize they need to “control what you can control”. The only thing that you can control is how you prepare for the game (Coleman, 2019), that is, how much sleep you get, quality of meals, emotions, body language, mental state, work ethic, and response to success or failure. If athletes control these factors and prepare themselves in a way that will put them on a

path to success it will lead to being mentally tough.

The next basic step towards being mentally tough is having a positive attitude. One’s attitude and emotions affect how a player and his or her teammates perform both on and off the field (Coleman). Desirable teammates and athletes can control their emotions and attitude even when the circumstances may be difficult.

The last basic step towards becoming a mentally tough competitor is to “do the hard things first”. This means evaluating yourself and determining the weakest part of your skillset then working on it first both at home and during practice (Coleman). Athletes are only as strong as their weakest link, so working on that weakness will allow for improvement and the self-confidence will grow. “If we compete in a wicked world but practice in a kind one, athletes will struggle to transfer what they have done in training to the game environment” (O’Sullivan, 2019).

Conclusion

Competition drives many people to work hard, prepare, and do whatever it takes to find success and perform at a high level. Athletes want to achieve their peak performance in their sport, to do that, they must take the necessary steps towards mental toughness.

Baseball players need to trust and believe in this process to reach peak performance. Peak performance does not mean hitting a homerun every at bat, fielding every ball that is hit to you, or throwing a perfect pitch every time. In fact, it does not necessarily mean winning; it just means performing at the best level one can achieve (Dalmass, 2018). Most of the time it is up to the individuals to believe in themselves so they can achieve peak performance. Whether on a baseball diamond, soccer field, or basketball court, to fully compete, one must realize that it all starts when looking in the mirror. Athletes must spend time on the mental part of the game to have success in the physical game.

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How To Manage Your Team: MBWA

Mike Hendrickson
Fargo South High Schools

This idea comes from Dawn Redd-Kelly, head volleyball coach at Beloit College from when I was trying to find better ways to connect with my team during the season. I used to “stop and chat” with each player; she said there was an actual name for this, Management By Walking Around, or MBWA.

How I do it:

- I make it a point to talk to each player face to face each day.
- I find out how things not basketball related are going for them.
- I listen to them.

Why is it successful?

When I did my master’s program with a group of teachers from all areas of education, our project was to communicate daily with every one of our students, but not about classwork. It could be about anything! Work, friends, home, athletics, hobbies, etc. It was our goal to talk to each student, if only for a few moments. Connecting with them was great for both students and teachers. I started doing the same thing with our basketball program – small talk – the players looked forward to it and so did I. This simple action shows that I care and also the student/athletes want to talk about other things than basketball.

You have probably been doing a form of MBWA in your practices right now, but I try to make a point of doing it every day with every player. It helps relieve stress (both players and coaches) and helps clear the minds of all of us. I do it all season, so the team won’t be startled when I stop and chat with them about basketball. This strategy has worked when something big within the team comes along that you need to get to the bottom of.

How to MBWA with your team

- **Make it part of the routine.** Every day when I first walk into the gym, this is what I am going to do. Don’t make it awkward...just part of being on the team.
- **Just you, not the other coaches.** I have all my coaches do it! But we don’t do it together. I have them choose random players (2 to 5 each day for the assistants). If we approach one player as a staff, I think they would get nervous and feel intimidated.
- **Chat with everyone.** I talk to everyone (including statisticians and managers). It does seem obvious but be sure to talk to each person on the team. Number one player to last practice player. Keep it fair – quick and simple.
- **Ask for suggestions.** Earlier I said that I try to make it non-basketball related. But the day prior to game day I will ask about dismissal time, when and where to eat, etc. It allows them ownership in the coaching process.
- **Follow up with answers.** When you MBWA and get asked a question you can’t or don’t know the answer to, make sure to get back to them with an answer.
- **Don’t criticize.** Make this time fun!!!! This is about relationship building!

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Creating a Culture in Athletics

Sam Koehn
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“Culture.”

This was Merriam-Webster’s word of the year in 2014. In athletics, this is a word that gets mentioned a lot. Historically, coaches from every corner of athletics have attributed their success to the culture of their program. But what is the culture of those programs? And how does one go about creating it? In this article, the core pillars of successful cultures, such as the creation of connections, the commitment to shared goals, the use of consistent language, and finally, how to identify cultural architects and assassins will all be examined.

Connection and Building Trust

The word culture stems from the Latin word “cultus,” which means “to care.” To build a culture, all members on a team/within a program must *connect*. Connection is built on communication—whether that be verbal or nonverbal. Nonverbal behaviors like eye contact, proximity, and body language are all considered as “belonging cues.” These belonging cues are subconsciously recognized and help to create safe connections in groups; a collective feeling of safety is the foundation on which strong cultures are built (Coyle, 2018). This coincides with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, which states that individuals are unable to move into the stage of love and belonging until their safety has been guaranteed.

It is quite often misunderstood that trust must be present before vulnerability can be shared, when in fact, it is the opposite. Sharing one’s susceptibility with others is the pathway in which a relationship of trust is built (Coyle, 2018). The admission of weakness is what *forms* deep connections between group members. When a leader exemplifies this act, there is an increased

chance that other team members will feel comfortable in being honest within group settings. These awkward interactions lead to “highly cohesive and trusting behavior” that ultimately contributes to the overall likelihood of success (Coyle, 2018). Successful teams are led by individuals who make others feel secure and manufacture the correct conditions for members to flourish.

Creating High Proficiency Groups & High-Performance Cultures

The concept of “culture” is often something that people assume will just be passed down from one group to the next. On the contrary, without ownership over group goals and values—culture is nothing. A survey by *Inc.* magazine that spanned across 600 companies cited that less than 2% of employees could name the top 3 priorities of the company that they were employed by (Coyle, 2018). A similar concept was recognized at Johnson & Johnson. Employees were not bought into their “Credo,” which had gone unchanged since 1943.

Discussions were opened up to Johnson & Johnson’s staff—where they were able to challenge ideas within the Credo and to define key concepts. After these discussions, a consensus was reached where the company decided to recommit to their original Credo, and with this new sense of ownership came an increase in commitment to company values. Then, the Chicago Tylenol deaths of 1982 occurred. Against FBI and financial advice, Johnson & Johnson placed a national recall on their product. This was an easy decision because their Credo stated their priority to first be to “patients, doctors, and nurses.” What could have been catastrophic to their company, ended up being one of the best decisions

they could have made. Even though the deaths were limited to Chicago, the country felt that they could trust Johnson and Johnson, because they were vulnerable and transparent. This decision also led to increased safety measures to prevent medicine tampering. Things tend to work out when a team stays together and stays the course.

This is no different in athletics. Programs with a long-standing tradition of success have these same conversations. In collegiate athletics, there is a new team made up every single year. Team leaders and coaches must convey their culture to newcomers, otherwise, they are at risk of losing it. A high-performance group consistently *over*communicates their priorities. Priorities are made highly visible through the use of posters and signage, whilst also being inserted into daily communications.

A high-performance group leads to a high-performance environment. Environments in which the present is connected to a meaningful future (Coyle, 2018). Helping newcomers understand where the team is at presently, and where they want to *go*. By orienting the team to a larger, shared goal, they not only have something to work for—but also something in common. It is difficult to find success through the use of control, a group must be able to elicit buy-in from its members. “Sense and purpose are the glue of any culture,” (Hughes, 2019).

Different Uses of Language

Ambiguity is the enemy of success, the enemy of execution, and the enemy of accountability. The use of unclear language leads to extensive implications. Taking the time to define team expectations is necessary. Athletes don’t know what they don’t know. Until expectations and priorities are clearly laid out, they cannot be held responsible for not adhering to them. That being said, once expectations have been clearly presented, team members must be held accountable for not meeting them.

John Scolinos, a longtime baseball coach, stood in front of a crowd of over 4,000 colleagues and coaches at the American Baseball Coaches Association (ABCA)

convention. He wore a home plate around his neck. Without mentioning his unique accessory, he launched into his commentary. The key points were this, home plate at every level of baseball is 17 inches wide. When someone is unable to hit the strike zone that covers said plate, the plate is not widened. If a pitcher cannot throw a strike, the consequence is a ball, and eventually a walk (Sperry, 2015). What is the consequence then, when a star player shows up late to practice or gets into trouble at school—or worse, with the law? Failure to hold all players to the same standard, and to make them accountable for their actions is the quickest way to lose the respect of the team and to ensure the deterioration of any culture that had been previously established.

As previously mentioned, there must be connection for a program to have success. When speaking, speak to connect. When listening, overcommunicate attentiveness through posture, body language, and affirmations. Studies have shown that the most successful teams have a higher-than-average social sensitivity coupled with equality in the distribution of conversational turn-taking. Everyone has a voice, and with a say comes ownership.

Legendary coaches like UCLA’s John Wooden and San Antonio Spur’s Gregg Popovich relied on candor. Corrections were based on information. Wooden swore by effort-based language in place of motivational or high-praise wording. Popovich countered telling his players a “hard truth” and then “loving them to death” (Coyle, 2018). These coaches operated with clear and concise language and found many victories while doing it.

Defining Leadership and Identifying Cultural Architects and Assassins

As a coach, building a successful culture requires the relinquishment of ego. After all, the mark of a good coach is made progressively less necessary (Coyle, 2010). If the groundwork has been laid successfully, coaches can count on their players to set the standard and to generate more leaders who are willing to do the same.

When simplified, the role of a leader is to set an authentic example. An “authentic

leader” is someone who “demonstrates through actions that they practice the same values and behaviors that they expect from their teammates,” (Forsey, 2019). Leadership is influence (Williams & Wigmore, 2021), and when it comes to culture—leadership can lead to both “cultural architects” and “cultural assassins” (Hughes, 2019). A cultural architect is an individual who possesses more social influence than other members of the group, is respected, and can set the norms that a high-performance group adheres to. These cultural architects also understand that a common purpose is the foundation that connection is built on.

Alternatively, a cultural assassin is a person who is prone to negativity and will likely share this with others. These individuals are known for making excuses and blaming others for their failures. Once identified, a coach should make sure the cultural assassin works alongside them for their entirety within the program, as to lessen the reach of their negative influence. It is pertinent for a coach to understand that no matter how talented, a cultural assassin is not worth the deconstruction of a previously successful culture.

As Scolinos said, it is the responsibility of a coach and a leader to hold himself and others accountable to what he knows to be right. At some point, a cultural assassin must be cut loose from the program. This can be thought of as “addition by subtraction.” Without toxic negativity, the team may find themselves more connected and better off.

Conclusion

“Culture.”

A word that’s meaning is larger than could ever be wholly defined. Successful coaches throughout all of athletic history have attributed their vast achievements to the culture in place within their respective programs. A culture that is built on connections amongst players and staff. A culture that is committed to shared goals and also the use of consistent verbiage. And finally, a culture that has successfully identified cultural architects and removed the influence of cultural assassins. These

are the pillars that make up the foundation of a successful culture.

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