

POINT OF VIEW

What I Wish I Could Tell My Coach: High School Athletes' Thoughts on the Performance of Their Coaches

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Abstract

Extracurricular high school sports are a major part of the educational experience of students at Strathmore High School (SHS), and coaches play a vital role in meeting the philosophy of education-based athletics by designing an athletics program that adheres to the mission statement of SHS (“Empowering a community of accomplished and caring citizens”) and the philosophy statement of the Alberta Teachers Association (for school athletics programs to provide experiences that will help students grow physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and morally). The purpose of this project was to survey all of the student athletes at SHS for the 2019–2020 school year to determine if they felt that their coaches were meeting these benchmarks, as well as to ask them to share openly and honestly with their coaches about how they felt they were doing in their coaching role. Student athletes answered nine survey questions. Although they felt that their coaches could improve in the areas of setting clear and realistic expectations, negativity, and favoritism, they felt that their coaches were doing well in creating community and connection, in role modeling, and in creating a fun experience. This information shows the need for greater conversation and consistency between all of the coaches and members of the athletics staff to ensure the mission and philosophy are being met. I hope that the coaches at SHS, as well as at other schools, will use the findings of this paper to reflect on their own coaching practice to determine in

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what areas they need some improvement and in what areas they are doing well.

Extracurricular high school sports are a major part of the educational experience of students in Canada, as they are in many other countries. Whether in a small town in the far reaches of the Northwest Territories or in a city of millions near the Canada–United States border, sports are in some way incorporated into schools for any student who wishes to participate. This is certainly the case at Strathmore High School (SHS), in Strathmore, Alberta, the school where I teach and have held the roles of coach and athletic administrator for 10 years. Although club or community sports often focus primarily on skill development and elite athletics, the nature of high school athletics at SHS differs in that it is seen, or should be seen, as an extension of the classroom, providing an educational experience for students through the venue of sport. Education-based athletics is a philosophical approach in which the growth and development of the student athlete is not limited simply to the field or court but instead focuses on the development of life skills, values, and qualities that student athletes can use in their lives long after their high school athletic careers (National Association of State High School Associations, n.d.). Considering that over 95% of graduating students will never again play sports at the level they played in high school, it becomes even more important that what they are taught in high school athletics focuses on more than physical skill development (Doshan, 2015).

The mandate of School Sport Canada (2013), according to its code of ethics, is to “promote and advocate for positive sportsmanship, citizenship and the total development of student-athletes through interscholastic sport.” These sporting experiences are offered to students aged 14 to 18 and can vary depending on the size of the school and community, the geographic location of the school, and each school’s resources, meaning some schools can only offer one or two sports with no tryout needed, whereas other schools can offer up to 24 sports and competition to make teams can be fierce. Regardless, the common denominator is that teacher volunteers coach the majority of sports.

In Canada, in comparison to the United States for example, coaches generally are not paid. In some locations, coaches may be

given personal days in lieu of their coaching time or may be paid a small stipend to cover travel costs, but, overall, the Canadian high school sport system is supported by more than 52,000 volunteers assuming coaching positions in more than 3,200 schools across the country (School Sport Canada, 2013). Whenever possible, these coaching positions are filled by teachers who love the sport they are coaching, love the athletes they coach, and understand that school sports involve more than winning a banner or championship. School sports grow athletes and teach them life lessons, skills, and character development through the vehicle of sport.

The role of the teacher-coach is vital in the development of the whole student athlete because of the relationship that is created between the athlete and the coach. As the literature on this topic makes clear, coaches act as caring adult mentors and the lessons they teach to their athletes can lead to the development of quality assets and characteristics such as sportsmanship, resiliency, respect, teamwork, friendship, cooperation, service, self-confidence, sacrifice, as well as countless others (Becker, 2009; Camiré & Trudel, 2010, 2013; Holt et al., 2008; Petitpas et al., 2005).

To guide teacher-coaches in developing more than just an athlete, sporting organizations that support school sports, such as School Sport Canada, the Alberta School Athletic Association, and the Alberta Teachers Association (ATA), have created mission statements or philosophy statements to guide coaches in building and running their athletic programs to align with the philosophy of educational athletics. In the same way, schools often develop mission statements to ensure that all school activities (whether in class or out of class) are being organized and run in a way that keeps the mission statement first and foremost.

On a national level in Canada, the Canadian School Sport Federation (School Sport Canada, 2013) states in its code of ethics that the duty of those who educate through school sports to “encourage, promote and to be an advocate for good sportsmanship, citizenship, and the total development of student athletes through interscholastic sport” (p. 27). On a more local level, the ATA stated that

the philosophy that should guide school athletics programs is that they must provide experiences that will help students

grow physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and morally. The fundamental objectives of school athletics are educational, and all other objectives must be considered secondary. (Semkuley, n.d., p. 1)

This document should serve as a guide to all schools, coaches, and athletic directors as they develop and administer their athletics programs.

It is clear that coaches play a pivotal role in creating programs that uphold the mission and philosophy statements of their organizations. Unfortunately, it is well documented that in an environment that is supposed to be promoting positive values, skills, and attitudes, many high school coaches (and coaches in general) set a poor example for their athletes by belittling and humiliating (Camiré, 2015; Gearity, 2012; Mazer et al., 2013; Stirling & Kerr, 2013; Wilson, 2017). Coaches have been observed yelling, name-calling, cheating, showing poor sportsmanship, showing poor character, and teaching lessons to their athletes that are contrary to the mission or philosophy of the school athletics program. However, I have a theory that many coaches do not understand that their actions are not only contrary to the mission and philosophy of their school and their professional association but also negatively affecting their athletes.

In my 10 years at SHS (in the town of Strathmore, Alberta, population 12,500), as both athletic director and coach, I have noticed that the way some coaches instruct their athletes has a negative effect on the athletes and is trickling down to the athletics program. Athletes often have been heard in the hallways talking about favoritism, bullying, yelling, and humiliation that they have experienced on their team, and coaches have been observed showing poor sportsmanship and behavior before, during, and after games. I do not believe the coaches have any malicious intent and believe they want the best for their athletes. However, I wonder if they realize or understand that their actions and coaching methods are contrary to the mission statement of SHS and the philosophy of the ATA. More importantly, I wonder if they realize the effect they are having on their athletes.

The positive benefits of high school sports are too numerous to count, and to be clear, I have observed some incredible coaches and coaching moments that have had a very positive impact on athletes. I believe that the coaches at SHS truly have their athletes' best

interests at heart. Therefore, the goal and purpose of my project is to understand, through the experiences of SHS athletes in the 2019–2020 school year, if and how they feel their coaches are meeting the mission of SHS—“Empowering a community of accomplished and caring citizens”—and how they feel their coaches are meeting the ATA philosophy that school athletic programs “must provide experiences that will help students grow physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and morally” (Semkuley, n.d., p.1). My ultimate goal is to provide the coaches at SHS with the thoughts and feelings of their athletes so that they can reflect on their own coaching to determine whether they are meeting the mission of SHS and the philosophy of the ATA. No one starts teaching or coaching to hurt or harm students, but I believe that sometimes they do it without even knowing. Gathering feedback is essential in bettering ourselves at what we do, and I feel the best way to do that is to gather unbiased feedback from those for whom we do what we do: our students.

The Importance of Educational Athletics in Positive Youth Development

Numerous studies have looked at youth development through educational athletics, and the benefits identified include many different categories. The physical benefits of educational athletics have demonstrated that in general, those who participate in high school sports have been shown to have healthier behaviors leading to better physical and mental health, such as better dietary habits and weight control (Greenleaf et al., 2009; Merkel, 2013). Student athletes have also been found to have significantly higher rates of exercise and a healthier self-image as well as significantly lower odds of emotional distress, suicidal behavior, family substance abuse, and physical and sexual victimization than students not involved in sports (Harrison & Narayan, 2003). Greenleaf et al. (2009) also found that students involved in sports are at a much lower risk of becoming involved with smoking and marijuana use and that by developing positive health behaviors in high school, adolescents have a higher likelihood of staying physically active during adulthood, leading to a lifetime of health benefits.

The benefits of high school athletics extend far beyond the physical. The developmental benefits of high school sport include behavioral, cognitive, social, and emotional (Camiré, 2015; Camiré &

Trudel, 2010; Holt et al., 2008; Phillips, 2017). For example, involvement in high school sports has been associated with higher grade point averages and lower dropout rates (Grimit, 2014; Lumpkin & Favor, 2012); with students having more positive friendships (Schaefer et al., 2011); with students developing respect, honesty, and goal-setting skills (Camiré & Trudel, 2010; Camiré et al., 2011); and with students developing leadership skills, the ability to deal with disappointment and loss, determination, commitment, and perseverance (Camiré, 2015; Holt et al., 2008; Kennedy, 2008)

Role of the Teacher-Coach in Educational Athletics

As Camiré (2015) makes clear, “positive development does not automatically occur simply by taking part in sport” (p. 125). The role of the coach is vital in fostering the positive outcomes (Camiré, 2015; Gearity, 2009). However, it is even more vital for coaches who are also teachers coaching in an educational setting. A large research base has looked at the role of the coach in a collegiate educational setting (Becker, 2009; Gearity, 2009, 2012; Mazer et al., 2013), but significantly less research has looked at the importance of the coach at the high school level. According to Camiré (2015), teaching and coaching have many shared characteristics that play a central role in the student’s experience of school sport. The greatest part of the teacher-coach’s role is developing a quality relationship and communicating shared values and goals (Camiré, 2015). A number of studies (Camire et al., 2011; Camire et al., 2012) have looked at the role of the coach in educational athletics, and a number of other studies have examined the development of character, communication, and life skill development from the perspective of the high school athlete (Camiré et al., 2009; Camiré & Trudel, 2010); however, few have focused specifically on high school students’ perspectives on what their coaches are doing well or areas that need improvement in accordance with a set mission or philosophy statement.

Positive and Negative Effects of Coaches on Athletes

The potential benefits of athletics in general, specifically the benefits of educational athletics, can be better understood through research findings of what coaches are (the positive effects) and are not (negative effects) doing well. It can easily be assumed that a coach, especially a volunteer teacher-coach, would not put the time

and effort into coaching a team if they did not have a love for the sport and for the athletes they were coaching. Many research studies have shown that coaching can have a dramatic effect on the life of an athlete, and many of these studies used a qualitative method, allowing athletes to share their stories and lived experiences of their time as an athlete (Becker, 2009; Holt et al., 2008; Gearity, 2009, 2012). This type of study is effective in allowing students to put words to their feelings and thoughts, rather than just numbers. It also allows for greater understanding and background for why they have these feelings about the effectiveness of their coaches. Positive coaching methods and effects have been explained in various studies and include open communication; respect; trustworthiness; caring; encouraging teamwork; focus; skill development; and, most importantly, creating a fun and positive learning environment (Becker, 2009; Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2009; Gearity, 2009, 2012; Mazer et al., 2013; Stirlin, 2013). According to Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, and Jones, “it is essential that the context of high school be overseen by caring and compassionate coaches, because the quality of the relationship coaches build with youth significantly influences developmental outcomes” (as cited in Camiré, 2014, p. 506). The actions and words of a coach truly can follow an athlete for a lifetime.

These same studies have also shed light on negative coaching methods such as name-calling, belittlement, degrading comments, acts of humiliation, emotional and physical violence, not teaching, not caring, being distracting, and intimidation. Stirling (2013) hypothesized that perhaps coaches use these types of actions because this was the way they were coached and this is what they know, because they lack the knowledge of other developmental strategies, and because athletes accept these types of coaching techniques without question. Gearity (2009) suggested that coaches perceive their actions to be effective but that athletes perceive these actions differently. Some research has explored the athlete’s perception of the effectiveness of a coach’s behavior and methods in a collegiate and semi-pro settings (Gearity, 2009, 2012; Stirling, 2013), and other research has focused more on the experiences of high school students (Camiré, 2015; Camiré & Trudel, 2010, 2014; Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2009; Holt et al., 2008), but the literature lacks research on high school students’ perceptions of whether their coach was

fulfilling the mission of the school, of how their coach was or was not achieving it, and of how (or if) their coach could better serve their needs as student athletes. This study looks at these questions and at how and if, according to student athletes, their coach was meeting the ATA philosophy that guides school athletics programs.

This research adds to the body of knowledge, not only by asking high school student athlete if their coach is meeting these missions or philosophies but also by adding a *how* and a *why* to the question. It is hoped that coaches at SHS, as well as other schools, will use the information in this study to reflect on their own coaching practices and determine whether they need to change their coaching behavior to better care for the entirety of the athlete and help them to grow physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and morally (Semkuley, n.d.).

Method

Because the purpose of this study was to gather honest feedback from the student athletes at SHS, I determined that a qualitative study using an anonymous survey would be the best way to discover the lived experiences of these athletes. Although I would have preferred to sit down with these athletes face-to-face, I felt that because I teach and coach at SHS I would not receive honest opinions from these students because they may fear favoritism or retribution if I knew from whom the responses came.

Ethical Clearance

Before any students saw or completed the survey, both the administration at SHS and the university ethics board gave ethical clearance. All participants and parents of participants were emailed a letter detailing the research process and were required to read and agree to understanding of a consent form prior to participation. All responses from participants were anonymous with no way for responses to be paired with the individual giving the response.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected from the student athlete body at SHS for the 2019–2020 school year. Those invited to participate were male and female students, aged 16 to 18, who had participated in one of the nine sports offered by SHS. The sport seasons being

played at the time were volleyball (male and female), football (male), cross-country running (male and female), soccer (male and female), curling (male and female), and basketball (male and female). Because certain seasons had yet to occur at the time of the survey, SHS students who had participated in badminton (male and female), track and field (male and female), and rugby (male and female) in the 2018–2019 school year were included as well.

Survey Creation

Nine survey questions were created with the hopes of eliciting the honest, unfiltered opinions of student athletes at SHS. The questions were intended to bring students back to the mission of SHS and the ATA philosophy statement (which were listed at the beginning of the survey), were open-ended, and were written with the intention to not elicit a specific response but to give students the freedom to answer in any way they chose. The survey presented to students was created using Google Surveys, a survey method that is often used in SHS, so students would be familiar with the survey tool.

Data Collection

Once ethical clearance was received from the university ethics board at Grace College and Seminary, the survey was sent via Google Surveys to 108 athletes, and of those sent, 34 responses were received, for a response rate of 31%. Responses were collected without any identifying features so that the gender, age, and sport played by the athlete were unidentifiable.

Data Analysis

Once the surveys were completed, the data from all responses for each question were put into lists and recurrent themes or patterns of responses were identified. I initially made a list of themes, then had two other teachers who were not involved in athletics read the lists of responses, to reinforce themes that I had identified and to identify other themes I may have overlooked.

Results

At the beginning of the survey, the respondents first read both the SHS mission statement (“Empowering a community of accomplished and caring citizens”) and the ATA philosophy on high school

sports (“Athletic programs must provide experiences that will help students grow physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and morally”).

Question 1: What Positive Athletic Experiences Have You Had at SHS? Why Are These Important to You?

Student athletes gave 11 responses to this question were received and spoke of a variety of positive experiences. The main experiences identified were fun, enjoyment, and excitement. Students spoke of feeling excitement the first time their team won the Zone Championships. They also said that sports gave them “something to look forward to at the end of the school day and on the weekend” and that athletics gave them the chance to “relax and release energy at the end of the school day.” Student athletes said that they enjoyed bus rides with teammates and that these experiences created some of their fondest memories of their high school career. Student athletes said they were able to create friendships, developed confidence, and learned about teamwork and leadership. They also said that athletics allowed them to take care of themselves physically and mentally. One student athlete said,

While pursuing athletics, whether in a competitive manner or recreational, the environment and people who surround us create such positivity and encouragement towards us as athletes. This is important to me because the attitude makes it feel more like community rather than just competition.

This comment reflects a theme of community that was echoed in many of the responses.

Question 2: How Do You Feel Your Coaches Met the Above-Stated Mission of SHS as Well as the Philosophy of the ATA? Please Explain as Thoroughly as Possible.

Student athletes gave 31 responses to this question and all the respondents felt not only that the coaches at SHS met these standards but also that many of the coaches exceeded them. Words mentioned multiple times included “empowerment,” “sportsmanship,” “connection,” “community,” “inclusion,” “growth,” “perseverance,” “resilience,” “accomplishment,” “accountability,” “relationship,” and “citizenship.” Students felt that their coaches helped them develop

social skills, self-esteem, and physical and mental strength. The student athletes felt that coaches “made sure that [they] always value sportsmanship and being kind to everyone. It is always a priority to be kind and practice sportsmanship towards other players, the refs, and volunteers.” They also felt that coaches “always made [them] feel connected and welcome and encouraged [them] to take a well-needed break on [their] days off during the busy weeks.” One student athlete felt that their coaches taught them to

never back down from a challenge, learn from mistakes, work with others, have respect for others, accept being an underdog and how to use that knowledge to [their] advantage, improve [their] leadership and role modeling skill as well as how to make friends and bring different talents to the table.

Question 3: What Could Your Coach Do Better in Order to Meet the Mission Statement of SHS as Well as the Philosophy of the ATA? Please Explain in Detail.

Student athletes gave 31 responses to this question. Twenty-two students provided constructive criticism for their coaches, and these suggestions covered many areas of potential improvement. Several students mentioned they would like their coach to put more effort in ensuring their team was recognized more by the school and by the other students. Student athletes suggested their coaches have realistic expectations of the team they are coaching, improve in helping athletes learn how to mentally prepare for games, provide more opportunities outside of their sport to volunteer and become a better citizen, and be more understanding that “not every student athlete has the time to balance homework, school, friends, significant others, work, and sports all at once.” Although some responses suggested “more intense and serious practices,” “more playing time,” and “more sports-specific training,” most responses focused on creating team chemistry, creating community, and connecting with the student athletes to learn how to better coach them as individuals.

Question 4: Do You Feel Your Coaches Have Not Met the Above-Stated Expectations? Please Explain.

Student athletes gave 28 responses to this question. Of the student athletes who responded to this question, only four felt that

perhaps their coaches had not met the SHS mission statement and ATA philosophy statement. Unfortunately, those who answered as such did not provide a great deal of detail into why they felt this way. They all mentioned feeling that some coaches met the expectations better than others. The only details provided were “[the coaches] don’t make it as intense and as fast-paced as I think it should be” and “sometimes coaches just focus on skills which can make the team work harder, but there can be division between really good players and players that may have more baseline skills.” More information would certainly be beneficial to understanding the experiences identified by these student athletes.

Question 5: What Coach-Initiated Action or Activity Has Enhanced Your Experience in SHS Athletics? Explain.

Student athletes gave 28 responses to this question, identifying a variety of actions and activities. Some of the words used repeatedly included “fun,” “community,” “welcoming,” “challenge,” “encouragement,” “understanding,” and “guidance.” One student athlete appreciated the coach giving ownership of the team to the players. They said, “My coach told the captains that the team was ours because they could only do so much. We had conversations as captains and as the team and it improved our game as captains and as athletes.” Three students talked about the importance of team building and about occasions when their coach got the competing teams together after the competition for a postgame activity, which had a huge impact on these student athletes. One student athlete noted,

It was a refreshing and interesting activity, because I had never done anything like that with a team before, and I felt like it really made us realize it’s less about who wins the game and more about what we take away from it.

Another student athlete noted, “This reminded our team that games aren’t about winning but making connections with other teens who share a similar interest as you.” Student athletes also noted they appreciated coaches who were flexible with allowing them time to play competitive sports outside of school and who showed an interest in their activities outside of school sports. They also appreciated coaches who were approachable.

Question 6: What Coach-Initiated Actions or Activities Have Diminished Your Experience at SHS? Explain.

Sixteen athletes responded to this question. Nine of them mentioned actions and activities that were diminishing to the athletes' experience. It is interesting that the majority of the responses were very similar. These athletes mentioned coaches were not being competitive enough or not being prepared for practice and were name-calling and belittling players in practice and games. One student athlete mentioned,

Our team can sometimes separate into groups and these groups can sometimes not be very nice to each other. My coaches often do not notice this or if they do, they do little to rectify the situation. They do not help make our team become more team-like and sometimes favor certain people over others.

Other student athletes mentioned the theme of favoritism. They mentioned huge discrepancies in playing time, with one student athlete stating,

I don't like being not played game after game. We show up, want to play, and then stand around while our family watches us sit on the sidelines all game. It hurts and is embarrassing in front of our families.

Student athletes also mentioned the discrepancy in attention that coaches give certain athletes in practice and favoritism that coaches show in choosing certain athletes to be on the team.

Question 7: If You Could Share Openly and Honestly With Your Coach About How You Feel They Are Preparing You to Be a Member of Society Outside of Our School Athletics Program, What Would You Tell Them? Please Include the Positives and the Negatives.

Student athletes gave 31 varied responses, identifying many positives and areas for improvement. The main positive actions student athletes wanted to tell coaches they appreciated included making athletes a more rounded person, teaching life lessons, goal setting, perseverance, collaboration, time management, how to deal with

difficult people, overcoming obstacles, hard work, humility, positive attitude, sportsmanship, kindness, and the importance of teamwork. Of the things student athletes felt coaches could improve on, the themes of favoritism and connection again were raised. Certain student athletes felt that coaches needed to work on connecting with all student athletes, not just a few, by reaching out and showing caring attitudes.

Question 8: If You Become a Coach at SHS, What Is One Thing That You Would Avoid While Coaching? Explain.

Student athletes gave 32 responses, raising a number of consistent themes. They used words such as “bullying,” “hostility,” “bragging,” “blame,” “negativity,” “public humiliation,” “unequal opportunity and favoritism,” “unrealistic expectations,” “anger,” and “exclusion.” The four main themes that came up multiple times included perceived favoritism (more attention given to certain athletes over others and an imbalance in playing time), setting of unclear and unrealistic expectations, negativity, and allowing bullying (coaches allowed bullying behaviors on the team to go unchecked, which had a harmful effect on team cohesion and on the mental health of a number of players).

Question 9: If You Become a Coach at SHS, What Would Be the Most Important Aspect of Your Coaching Philosophy? Explain.

Student athletes gave 32 responses, consistently mentioning fun, growth, community, sportsmanship, humility, relationship, perseverance, growth, respect, and connection. Notably, only two of these responses involved performance or growth in a sport. The rest of the student athletes felt that their coaching philosophy would involve teaching life skills such as teamwork and creating community and connection in a fun atmosphere.

Discussion

Hearing and understanding the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of athletes at SHS has certainly highlighted that educational athletics is an essential part of the high school experience for students. But to understand this, we need to acknowledge that this experience is so much more than the outcome of the sport itself. As

these student athletes highlighted, it is not winning and losing at all! Nowhere in any of the responses to the survey did the student athletes talk about winning and losing—instead, they talked about the experience; the relationships; and their growth and development as athletes, friends, and people. We as teacher-coaches need to hear what these athletes are saying. As the survey shows, the student athletes at SHS are happy with the performance of their coaches in meeting the mission of SHS and the ATA philosophy. However, there is certainly room for improvement. This section discusses not only what we are doing well and how we can keep doing these things, but also where we need to improve.

What We Are Doing Well

Community and Connection

Over and over, the student athletes in this survey mentioned the word “connection,” something that all people yearn for and is essential in the high school years. Students want to feel connected to each other and to something bigger than themselves—and high school sports can be a perfect place to develop that connection. Camiré (2015) described the importance of relationships and connection between coaches and their athletes and how these can lead to positive outcomes, especially off the court or field:

As certified professionals, teacher-coaches must maintain a high level of integrity and cannot entertain friendships with student-athletes that extend beyond the standards of appropriate professional practice. Nevertheless, without being their “friend”, teacher-coaches must get to know their student-athletes on a personal level and strive to develop relationships built on trust and respect that allow them to act as powerful and positive adult influences. (p. 134)

These relationships can become some of the most influential connections in the life of these young people, at a time when connection is essential.

It is important for coaches to maintain appropriate boundaries, but it is possible for them to develop connection and create community with student athletes. As student athletes mentioned in the survey, events such as team building, postgame dinners with

opponents, tournament weekend events, and even the bus rides to and from games can be pivotal times for coaches to create relationships, community, and connection with individual athletes and with the team. As noted in the literature, both individual athletes and teams that have this connection and community often perform better in their athletics (Becker, 2009; Camiré, 2015; Gearity, 2009; Holt et al., 2008). But even more importantly, these connections and relationships within a team and between athlete and coach can be essential in the social and emotional development of an athlete. As Camiré (2015) mentioned, “coaches must be aware of the powerful role they can play in the lives of their athletes, especially during the adolescent years, and that they must use this influence meticulously through the development of quality relationships” (p. 134). When coaches demonstrate through their words and actions that they genuinely care about their athletes, they can create sporting environments that promote closeness, connection, and community, things that benefit student athletes not only on the field or court, but in the everyday ups and downs of life.

Role Modeling

Coaches must understand the power they have as role models to their student athletes. One student athlete in the survey clearly stated this, saying,

You are a role model in a time when most of us need a role model. Some of us don't have dads [or moms] around. The ones that are around remind us how they wish we weren't around. You may be the best role model we see, so take it seriously. We won't remember in five years if we won or lost, but we will remember if you gave us a chance and maybe even a little bit of confidence.

These powerful words are a strong reminder to us as coaches that our athletes watch what we do, listen to what we say, and internalize those actions and words. Camiré (2015) echoed this sentiment in his study where he found that because teacher-coaches have the ability to consistently interact with student athletes in many situations, they can develop very close bonds with their student athletes who do not necessarily have a strong parental figure at home. One respondent in his study stated, “It's sad to say, but I am aware of at least six kids

that I know the father is not present. I can't tell you how many times that it slipped and some kids called me dad by accident" (p. 129). In essence, a coach can end up being a surrogate parent, whether or not it is their intended purpose.

That we are not only seen as role models but also as parental figures to some student athletes cannot be diminished (Gearity, 2009). For some athletes, coaches may be the only stable adults in an athlete's life who can teach them the life lessons that will help them to grow physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and morally, as is the ATA philosophy on high school athletics. In the survey, student athletes consistently responded that their coaches were doing well in encouraging them to try new things; teaching sportsmanship, perseverance, and respect; holding athletes accountable for their actions; and creating safe spaces for growth. One student athlete stated, "The coaches are encouraging and really do care for us."

Fun

Research supports that creating a fun and positive learning environment is essential in learning experiences (Becker, 2009; Gearity, 2009; Goldberg; 2012). It is unfortunate that athletes would experience not wanting to go to practices or games because they were not having fun, but such is the case in research and in responses from the survey of SHS student athletes. In the end, sports are games and games are meant to be fun! Athletes should enjoy themselves when they are playing sports. In survey responses, several students talked about the importance of fun. One student athlete stated, "I believe that while playing sports, you should be able to have fun and be yourself while growing as a person. I would always make sure that the people on my team felt included and they were having fun." Another said,

The most important aspect of my coaching philosophy would be to have all students feel safe in athletics, make sure effort is put in so students see the positive rewards, and finally create a space where fun and enjoyment is consistent.

Positive experiences are essential in creating positive attitudes and effort. If we want our athletes to learn, improve, and perform, we need to ensure we are creating a fun and enjoyable atmosphere for them. We as coaches need to not forget that among the practices, the

games, the winning and losing, and the hard work, essentially sports are games and games should always be fun. If they are not, then we have missed the point.

Where We Can Improve

Unclear and Unrealistic Expectations

Becker (2009) noted that student athletes described great coaches as providing stability to their athletes by ensuring no uncertainty as to the coach's expectations so that the athletes know exactly what to do and what to expect from their coach. Camiré, Trudel, and Forneris (2009) and Camiré and Trudel (2013) also mentioned the importance of clear, realistic expectations and the importance of this in ensuring athletes feel in control of their own athletic experience. This, however, has been mentioned by SHS athletes as an area where SHS coaches can improve. One student athlete noted that if they became a coach, they would ensure they communicated "[their] expectations from the beginning." The student athlete continued, "I think it is important to set a standard for your team the day you meet them. Starting at tryouts if you expect your team to come ready to work and to listen I want to show them that." Another student athlete voiced frustration with coaches "not answering questions." This student athlete continued, "I would want every player to understand fully the purpose and goal for each activity or strategy." Becker (2009) spoke of this same issue, noting that in her research athletes felt that a great coach communicated from the beginning of the season the player roles, individual goals, information, and expectations for the team. Athletes stated that with a great coach, "[they] knew exactly what coach wanted [them] to do in terms of getting better, improving, and helping the team" (p. 108). Additionally, if the great coaches wanted things done in a particular way, they would explain the reasoning and explanations for what they were asking the individual to do. Part of what made the coach great, as found by Becker (2009), was that they took the time to explain *why*. It is important for athletes to have clear, consistent, and honest information given to them about what the coach expects from each athlete and what they expect for the season so that there are no mixed messages (Becker, 2009; Camiré, 2015; Camiré & Trudel, 2013; Gearity, 2009).

Negativity

Negativity on a team can be created in many ways, sometimes by the actions of the athletes, but more often from the actions of the coach. It is clear from the literature that great coaches create a positive attitude on their teams by using encouragement, inclusion, and good listening; by preventing bullying and hostility between teammates; by not yelling, belittling, or humiliating players; and by treating all players with respect (Gearity, 2009, 2012; Goldberg, 2012; Mazer et al., 2013; Stirling, 2013). Negativity can affect an athlete's perception of their coach's credibility and negatively affect the athlete's motivation (Mazer et al., 2013), and as Stirling (2013) found, "these poor coaching practices have been described by athletes as being distracting, engendering self-doubt, demotivating, dividing the team, and can potentially lead to dropout from sport" (p. 625). The last thing any coach wants is for their coaching practices to result in an athlete to dropping out of a sport they once loved.

Many responses from SHS student athletes mirror the findings in the literature. One student athlete stated that if they were a coach, they would make sure to avoid

getting too aggressive with a single player. It is fine to be a certain way with the whole team but [the coach] shouldn't ever single people out to the whole team. It is fine in private but not to the point of embarrassing a player.

Another student athlete felt that their coach would blame them for problems when they went to their coach for help: "Since it is hard to ask for help, making the experience worse can have a lasting effect on the player's confidence and motivation." Student athletes mentioned that their coach could be mean and make negative comments toward the team and individual players and that they used negative reinforcement. One student athlete said that if they were a coach, "[they] would avoid being too harsh to the players on [their] team. [They] would not yell at [their] players and [they] would try to avoid telling them only negatives." They continued, "I think it is important to know positives and negatives about you. If you only hear negatives, you will begin to have a bad mindset towards yourself." These words are true not only in sport but also in all areas of life. If the

negatives are not at least balanced with positives, the athlete and the team will ultimately suffer.

Although actions such as yelling, name-calling, belittlement, humiliation, and allowing bullying on a team may have become normalized in athletics, it is clear that SHS athletes do not like or respond to these types of behaviors. It is essential that coaches at SHS look at their own actions to see if they are using these negative types of behaviors or creating a negative atmosphere on their team, because SHS athletes have made it clear that they do not like or respond to these types of coaching methods.

Favoritism

The issue of favoritism comes up frequently in the literature as well as in the responses from the survey of SHS athletes. As Becker (2009), Camiré (2015), Gearity (2009, 2012), and others have found, athletes want to perceive that the treatment of all athletes is fair. Whether this applies to how the team is made, playing time, and treatment at practice or when disciplinary action needs to be taken, athletes want to know that their teammates are not receiving preferential treatment.

Unfortunately, the issue of favoritism comes up multiple times in the responses from SHS student athletes in the survey. Student athletes mentioned feeling that their coaches have certain players sit all game or that certain players are left out of the team; that coaches favor the athletes they know better and leave others out; that coaches only play the better players, giving the less experienced players less of a chance to improve at their sport; and that certain students would not make a team because the coach did not like them.

An interesting statement from one student athlete is that if they were a coach, “[they] would avoid coaching [their] child’s team as [they] feel it makes the team unbalanced and can create problems on the court.” Strathmore is a small community, and as teachers who have taught here for many years, we know many families and often teach multiple students from the same family. Also, we often know the students from the time they were babies; they grew up with our children and we end up coaching our own children and their friends. It can be a challenge to ensure that we are consciously avoiding favoritism if we end up coaching our own children and their friends. As a coach of my own child, I found it a challenge to make sure I did

not give the impression of favoritism when I put her on the team and when I assigned playing time. It can be difficult, but being aware of the issue of favoritism and being conscious of it while making decisions are vital when coaching students the coach knows well. As coaches, we want to give all student athletes the best and fairest treatment possible.

Limitations

This research undoubtedly has limitations, primarily that the sample size is relatively small. That the sample comes from one site makes it difficult to generalize the results to other schools and settings. However, I feel that the method in which the study was performed will allow for it to be reproduced in other schools and settings so that a larger body of knowledge can be created on this topic.

Another major limitation on this research developed after this project had already begun. The COVID-19 global pandemic hit just weeks before this survey was set to go out to the student participants. Therefore, when initially athletes would have just finished the basketball season and would be well into badminton, track and field, and rugby seasons, we found ourselves with school and all sports canceled. Because students were not actively involved in school sports at the time of this survey, the results could be skewed. To better generalize these results to future students and coaches at SHS, I think it would be important to gather survey results a second time, this time while the participants are actively involved in school sports in a normal atmosphere. The results from this survey and the second survey could be compared to ensure that the themes were consistent before I would feel comfortable generalizing the results.

Moving Forward: How We Can Use This Information at SHS

After hearing what the SHS student athletes had to say, it is clear that we are doing many things well in the athletics department at SHS. However, there is always room for improvement and our athletes have highlighted our deficiencies through this survey. We are also given a clear mandate from the SHS mission statement and the ATA philosophy statement to guide us as an athletics department. However, I wonder if all of us as a department (coaches, athletic director, and school administration) are on the same page. As Camiré and Trudel (2010) and Camiré, Werthner, and Trudel (2009) noted,

a mission statement is only useful if the members of an organization have knowledge of it. They stated, “The two main purposes of mission statements should be to provide a focused guide for decision making and to motivate and inspire employees toward common objectives” (p. 76). As a department, we need to have a shared belief system based on the mission statement of SHS and the ATA philosophy on school sports.

In reflecting on our athletics department and how we share information, it has become clear to me that we do not sit down and talk as a full athletics team. We may share ideas and experiences within the coaching staff of a particular sport, but we do not talk enough as a full department. Because of this, I wonder how many in our department are aware of the ATA philosophy or even think of the SHS mission statement in terms of athletics.

In reading the responses from SHS student athletes, I think it is clear that they are more concerned with the experience of their time in sports compared to the outcome. They overwhelmingly talk of encouragement, confidence, goal setting, teamwork, sportsmanship, hard work, humility, attitude, dedication, collaboration, community, and connection. They rarely mentioned winning and losing or competition. So I feel that as an athletics department, we need to look at our mission statement and the ATA philosophy and more consistently administer our programs in terms of community versus competition, as the athletes have shown that they value community over competition.

How do we do this, then? Meeting as a full athletics staff (all coaches, the athletics director, and school administration) at the beginning of the school year would be a start. At this time, all involved should discuss who we are as the Spartan athletics program, determine our values and goals, and discuss how we can run our programs consistent with these values and goals. There could also be a mid-year check-in and an end-of-the-year discussion and debriefing to see how the year went and discuss successes and areas for improvement.

I feel that all of the sport programs need more consistency in the expectations for the coaches in terms of the SHS mission statement and the ATA philosophy on school sports. As a department, we can ensure the coaches have read the athletics handbook and have read

and signed the code of conduct for coaches. There are certainly different levels of competition and skill depending on the sport. Some sports are going to be more competitive than others. But there needs to be consistency in the behavior expectations of coaches and in what goals we will communicate to our athletes. By meeting as a staff and having these discussions and then having all involved sign the handbook and code of conduct, we can ensure that everyone has knowledge and understanding of the mission and philosophy and then could be held accountable if they are not acting accordingly.

As a coach, a teacher, a parent, and a spouse, I recognize that these meets require an extra time commitment. We do not get paid as coaches, so this takes time away from other areas of our life. However, as teacher-coaches in an education-based athletics program, we are committing to creating an experience for athletes that is a positive place for personal growth. We are expected to help athletes develop lifelong qualities and values that will serve them far beyond their years on the court or field. This extra time is vital to ensuring that we are doing right by our athletes and upholding the values the school and the athletes have identified as important, as this survey shows.

Implications for Future Research

Because of the limitations of this study, I think it would be important to administer this survey again at the same time next year when hopefully the situation with COVID-19 has settled and students get back into a normal school schedule. It would be important to see if the next group of student athletes communicate the same thoughts and feelings, which could help guide the actions of our athletics department.

The information gleaned from this survey, although specifically from SHS student athletes, could be used at any school and this survey could be given to any group of students. I hope that other schools would look at this study and adapt it for their own athletics program.

Conclusion

Coaching can be a thankless job sometimes. As teacher-coaches, we spend countless unpaid hours away from our families, creating practice plans, attending practice, and traveling to games and tournaments. Why do we do this? Stirling (2013) stated it best:

I enjoy having the opportunity to affect a young person's life and mentor them in a way that I, myself, have been mentored. It's pretty special . . . It's a powerful responsibility and I take it seriously. I think that's the part of coaching that I enjoy the most—knowing that I'm in a position where I can make an impact on someone's life. (p. 632)

We teach and we coach because we love what we do. We want to make a difference in the lives of our athletes. As adults, we can assume that we know what is important to our athletes, but it is essential that we willingly listen to what our athletes have to say. I think we may be surprised to know that what they value in their athletics experience goes further than the banners, the trophies, and their team's win-loss record.

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