

Developing the Player-Leader

Coaches must help instill the characteristics that allow their players to grow

By Roby Stahl

Today the sports section of a local newspaper hardly is the place to look for role models, no more than sitcoms that make adults look like weaklings in dealings with their families. In these days of two-career couples and the failure of the traditional family, we as coaches have the responsibility to educate our players on what it takes to become successful leaders and adults.

Back in the early 1980s the U.S. Soccer Coaching School was in the hands of German coach Karl-Heinz Hettergott. He was a teacher and taught us that we must teach our young players to take responsibility on and off the field. By putting young players in situations in training in which they must lead, we can take them out of their comfort zone and develop this responsibility.

One way is to assign players responsibilities each week, such as who leads the warm-up/cool-down session. At the college or professional level, the coach can use a training day and allow the players develop a 20-minute functional (positional) training session for themselves, incorporating five to six teammates. They should then assess their own play in regards to how, where, when, from whom they receive the ball. In essence, they are learning to lead themselves and others.

The following are some of the characteristics that successful leaders share and we seek to instill in our players. A player...

- Must have a vision of where he/she is going. Leaders have an innate ability to see the big picture in athletics and in life. Club directors and coaches must have curriculums developed for each age group throughout the organization, allowing proper player development to occur.
- Is not enticed by short-term success at the expense of long-term happiness. In these days of instant gratification, leaders who keep goals in sight will sacrifice short-term success in order to build a successful organization that properly serves its customers.
- Is willing to put in the time necessary to be successful. When Michael Jordan was the king of hoops, everyone wanted to "be like Mike." Most leaders (players) seek the fame that comes with playing well, but few have any clue as to the hard work that Jordan put in behind the scenes. In life, the successful leader has put in the time at various levels and is always the first one into the proverbial trenches. Leaders have paid their dues and lead by example. They have a constant desire to seek further education in coaching, whether by attending coaching schools or seminars on player management or traveling abroad frequently to watch youth and professional training sessions.
- Works harder than his teammates and is not afraid to fail. Most successful athletes will tell you they have failed many times. Those still playing have learned from these failures and improved as players. The quality coach leads his/her players by understanding they will make mistakes in training and matches. These leaders then create training situations that force players to solve the same problems with little or no advice from the coach.
- Helps teammates do their jobs better. A good leader (player) makes the people around him better. It is easy to blame a team's lack of success on the coach, players, referees, fields, etc. It is far harder to take a team that is struggling and improve its performance through player management and education. Too many players are good when the team is playing well but disappear when it is not. Leaders must rise up in difficult times.

- Takes the time to share responsibility and encourages others. People are interdependent on each other's skills, capacities, unique talents and resources. In order to develop decision makers, a confident leader delegates authority and lets his/her people make mistakes in order to teach them. He/she also bonds those people with common interests to a common goal. The leader helps each person develop to his/her fullest potential, realizing that this potential also will cause them one day to leave the nest to fulfill their dreams. This is illustrated in the work a head college/pro/club director puts into their assistant coaches in order to prepare them for their own head coaching positions.
- Stands for principles and backs his people. Successful leaders must be strong enough to stand up for what is right at the expense of not being popular. They must have strong moral convictions and faith that their knowledge in player management and coaching ideals will not be compromised.

The young people you are in charge of have a dire need for you daily to lead them on the correct path toward their long-term goals both on the athletic field and in life. If you can show them a glimmer of the "sacred trust" that John Wooden has so generously shared with us, you are not only a successful leader – you also are a winner.