

Raising a Team Player: Teaching Kids Lasting Values on the Field, on the Court and on the Bench

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Work Ethic

My greatest joy as a coach was to teach kids who had so much passion for their sport that they were willing to work hard to get better. When I was recruiting high school seniors for my basketball team at Williams College, those were the kids I coveted. Quite often, beaming parents would come in with their sons and declare, "He loves basketball." But then I'd spend time with their boys and realize that they didn't love it at all. Mom and Dad may have seen Junior walking out the door with a basketball and assumed that he was working hard at the playground to improve his game. But he might have been the type to spend the day launching 25-foot hook shots and lazily walking after the ball. Or, if he had a baseball and a bat, he might have been interested only in seeing if he could reach the fences, swing after swing.

Games are won at practice.

It's easy to mistake activity for passion. Anyone can participate in an activity, but without passion, a kid will not be motivated to work hard to become a better individual and team player. As a coach, I didn't want to recruit eighteen-year-olds whose parents or previous coaches hadn't already nurtured in them a passion for basketball and a work ethic to support it. I could enforce the rules of practice and make such players work hard, but would they have seen the inherent value of that work and adopted work ethic as one of their core values? By that age, it's usually too late. We develop our sense of character at a very young age, using the adults in our lives as models and mentors. If we don't learn a particular lesson when we're young, it's very difficult to learn it when we are older. That's why it's so important to start teaching values such as work ethic through youth athletic programs, while the kids are still young. Lessons learned early last a lifetime.



Most girls and boys in youth, high school, and college sports understand that it's the coach's job to inspire them, but they don't understand that inspiration is a two-way street. They don't realize that we coaches - just like teachers - put out our best effort when our kids work hard enough to inspire us. What my best teams at Williams had in common was that they worked so hard to get better that I couldn't wait to get down to the gym each afternoon to teach them. Those young men, none of whom were there on an athletic scholarship, gave me an incredible effort every day, while also carrying full course loads and, with my encouragement, having active social lives. Because they inspired me, I'd often stay up past midnight studying film for them. And if any of them wanted to work on rebounding, shooting, or defense after practice, I made myself available.

I told my players, "Guys, I want you to work so hard that you feel in your heart that you deserve to win." That's deserve to win, not will win. You can't promise a kid that he'll always

succeed if he works hard, but you can promise him that if he doesn't work hard, he will almost certainly fail. My challenge was to get my players to understand the need to work hard every day, not just on game day.

I have always believed that games are won at practice. Each of our twenty-four games was like an exam. How well had we learned the lessons undertaken in practice over the previous days? We "studied" such topics as "How Our Offense Can Solve a Zone Defense" and "What Makes a Man-to-Man Pressure Defense Effective." I drilled and drilled my players, because I would accept nothing less than for them to play hard on every possession. Many times we were victorious because our team was more fit than the opposition; we simply wore them out. Such success helped me sell this message: A work ethic is the foundation on which you build the goals that you equate with success. Every worthwhile accomplishment, in sports and in life, is made possible by a strong work ethic.



I am living proof that a strong work ethic can produce good results. After all, I'd been a young boy with no discernible talents but a willingness to work hard, and I went on to play varsity basketball at Williams and then to play for years with Athletes-in-Action, one of the top amateur teams in the world. When anyone asks how I became so adamant about the value of a work ethic, I say, "Let me tell you about my friend Brian."

Brian and I grew up together on Long Island. By the sixth grade, he was already 6'2" and brawny, and - no kidding - with a heavy beard at five o'clock. I was just under 5', slight, and definitely without a beard. We both loved basketball and played for our school's team. I was small and not very good, and when the game started, my job was to walk over to the corner of the gym and keep score on a chalkboard. Brian was so big that he overpowered everyone, and he was the star of the team. I went to practice every day and worked hard, but I didn't play more than two minutes in a game all year long. But I was fortunate. My father, Harry Sheehy Jr., who had played and coached both basketball and baseball, continued to encourage me. So rather than quitting, as many youngsters are apt to do when they aren't supported by coaches or parents, I went to work that summer to improve my game.

I asked my father to devise a workout plan for me. Then every day, without exception, I walked the twenty blocks to a small park that had hoops and worked hard on my game for a couple of hours. Meanwhile, my good friend Brian went to the beach. Every day.

In the fall, Brian and I both made the seventh grade team. Brian was still bigger and stronger than everyone else and was the best scorer and rebounder in the entire league. I went to practice every day and worked hard, but I still sat on the bench, despite having made some improvements. That next summer, and the following summer, too, I continued my workout plan at the park, and Brian continued to go to the beach. When it was 90 degrees and muggy and I was working, working, working, I thought of Brian at the beach, enjoying the sun and the sand, and I was envious.

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I vividly recall the scorching day when my father came down to see how I was doing. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, and the blacktop court was radiating heat. I just

wanted to put down my ball and go to the pool or even join Brian at the beach. When my father was ready to leave, I said, "Dad, hold on. I'll take five more shots and go home with you." But that didn't sit well with him, and he gave me some advice he'd heard from Bill Bradley, who was then a Princeton basketball star and would someday become a United States senator: "Why don't you work ten more minutes," my father said, in a tone that made it clear his words were less a question than an order.

"When Bradley was ready to quit his workouts, he always continued for ten more minutes because someone, somewhere else, had stopped. He figured that if he worked ten minutes extra every day, he'd win the contest between them if they ever competed." Dad's words made sense, and from that day on, first as a player and then as a coach, I always have said at the end of a day: "When you're ready to quit, work just ten more minutes. Work ten more minutes because someone, somewhere else, is quitting."

Ten minutes may not sound like much, but multiply ten minutes by hundreds of practices. How much progress could you make if you worked just that much more?

I believe those ten extra minutes that summer paid dividends, because that fall I made the freshman team at Garden City High School. I was still small - I tipped the scales at a mere 90 pounds and didn't crack the 5-foot barrier until halfway through ninth grade - but I could see my skills were improving, the result of countless hours spent on the court. Brian was still the star, but I actually got to play a little. And a lot of the other guys were starting to catch up with Brian physically.



By the tenth grade, I had grown a little, and my skills had started to sharpen to the point where I made the varsity team. Brian stayed on the junior varsity team. In the eleventh grade, we both made the varsity team, but I was a starter and Brian sat the bench. From beach to bench. After all those years, all those hot summers when I worked and he went to the beach, our roles had flip-flopped. Halfway through the year, he quit the team, frustrated that everyone was better than he was.

As I told my players, Brian was clearly good enough, strong enough, and skilled enough at an early age to have gone on to become a standout high school player. But he was already so much better than everyone else that he never thought he had to work on improving his

skills. When everyone caught up to him physically, skills became the divider. By the eleventh grade, it was several years too late to start working hard.

No kid should be complacent about his or her skill level. Instead, as demonstrated by Cal Ripken Jr., the Baltimore Orioles shortstop famed for playing a record-setting 2,632 consecutive games, you must work every day to improve rather than have your skills diminish. And if you're big when young, you had better pay extra attention to skills because most kids who are big at an early age don't end up being 7 feet tall. Brian was 6'2" in sixth grade and never grew another inch. I was 5 feet tall and ended up 6'5" with skills.

Young players who see success early may think, "I'm already the best. Why do I need to be better?" Unless their coaches or parents encourage them, they see no need to work hard. But when you're not working, someone else is. And sooner or later, the two of you will come face to face.



Some people are incredible athletes, while others have not one speck of athletic ability. Most people, however, fall somewhere in the middle, and eventually it's skill that separates them. That's where work ethic becomes so important. I believe that work ethic itself should be considered a talent. It helps many athletes - Larry Bird immediately comes to mind - overcome shortcomings in other skills, such as lack of quickness and speed. And work ethic is a talent that carries over into all other areas of life. You may hear a kid say of another student, "She got an A on that test, but she isn't that smart. She just works hard." Well, that's a skill! It should be commended.

Ready to quit? Work just ten more minutes ... because someone, somewhere else, is quitting.

Our children often hear from their peers that it's not "cool" to work hard. So it is imperative that parents and coaches show children - through their words, actions, and examples - that the ability to work hard is a fantastic talent to have. The earlier you can impress this upon a child, the better.

Of course, hard work for young kids isn't the same as it is for high school and college athletes. Coaching eight-, nine-, and ten-year-olds should be about encouraging passion for the sport, not about weeding out kids who aren't as good as the others. You want to help the eight-year-old understand why he has to work harder, but you don't want to turn him off to the game. Passion and excitement come first. Work ethic will follow.

Sometimes parents - who, as working adults, are accustomed to measuring the value of performance, not effort - are overbearing. But you must understand that if your nine-year-old is just a benchwarmer on a school or youth team, this doesn't mean that he won't become a terrific college player in that sport. It also doesn't mean that he won't enjoy and learn from his experience on the team. Some parents might say, "Well, if my child is not good enough to play on an all-star team in youth football, I will take him out of that sport and have him play soccer instead." If my parents had thought that way, I never would have played college basketball. I would have been pushed into another sport instead of being encouraged to work harder and realize my potential in the sport I loved.

I am gravely concerned by the earlier and earlier ages at which we expect results - victories, awards, trophies, and so on - from our children. What are the values we really want to teach? If there is not an encouraging adult around, be it a parent or a coach, to make kids understand what hard work and core values are, the sport they are playing may lose them before they have the chance to grow physically and develop their skills. We lose kids in the classroom, in music, in dance - everywhere - for the same reason. If they aren't taught with patience, enthusiasm, and the understanding that work ethic counts just as much as natural talent, the late bloomers will never bloom.

Too often, youth athletic programs are seen as a vehicle for getting children into college. We often overlook their true purpose: to provide kids with an opportunity to have fun while also building character and learning a number of lessons that will benefit them in every aspect of life. That's why some parents insist, "My boy should play," and blame the coach who doesn't agree. Wouldn't it be more helpful to the child if his parents said to the coach, "My kid needs a positive sports experience, and I really don't care how much you play him. He'll be at every practice, and he'll work hard." And wouldn't it be great for the youngster, when he came home, if his parents didn't say in one breath, "Did you win?"

That coach who doesn't like you - did he finally play you?" What if, instead, they said, "It's great that you're part of the team. Work hard so you'll be ready when you get a chance." Parents often believe that their child will become upset and disheartened if he doesn't get much playing time, and they think this is unfair. But they should understand that whatever role on the team the youngster's hard work creates is valuable, even if he's a substitute. It's a fact: For the majority of players, hard work will lead to a role on their team, not All-City, All-State, or All-American status.

If a player works hard only because he thinks he can become a star, he's doing it for the wrong reason. Some day, somewhere, some time, he'll be disappointed with his achievements. He'll end up saying, "Well, I think I should be starting, and my dad thinks I should be starting. But Coach won't start me, so I don't think it's worth working so hard anymore." But if that player has developed a work ethic, he will understand the value of working every day. He will find that it helps him at every turn, in every challenge, for his entire life.

One player who found his niche on my team at Williams College was a young man named Seth Mehr. He had been on the junior varsity team as a freshman and tried out for the varsity the next year. My assistant coach said, "You've got to cut him." But I liked that he had a ball with him all the time, and that when I'd go up to the gym, I'd find him there working endlessly. Finally I said, "You know, I believe there is a role for a kid who works that hard." Seth created a role for himself; his hard work convinced me to keep him. In time, he became the captain of a team that went to the Division III Sweet Sixteen, and he played 10 to 12 minutes a game. He made a real contribution in practice and in games. After graduation, Seth went on to medical school and became a doctor. He wrote me once to say, "Coach, Williams was a great experience for me. Medical school is hard, but what prepared me for it the most, even more than my organic chemistry lab, was the basketball program." That's the kind of letter I live for.

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Aaron Dupuis was another bench player with a tremendous work ethic. When I recruited him, I said, "You have to worry about two things. You might be a step slow. And you're a local kid, so you'll be watched closely by everyone in town." Undaunted, he came in and

worked his rear end off, and he improved vastly, although he never played much in games. Aaron said, "I want to make the team better on Saturday night, so I'm going to work hard on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday." And that's what he did. Every day he walked into the locker room and pulled on his shorts and shirt, knowing he was going to go out there for two hours to compete. He understood his role and knew his value to the team.

He made our reserves a competitive group by the sheer force of his will. When Aaron wasn't there, it showed. Once he was hurt for about two weeks, and the intensity of our practices took a nosedive. I told the other players, "If we have to have Aaron on the court for you to be competitive, then we have a problem. Because he can't do it for you right now." I'm sure that it meant a lot to Aaron to have me say that in front of the entire team and coaching staff. He was one of the most respected players on our team, and his ex-teammates hold him in high regard to this day.



Many coaches are fixated on results. The basic mistake most make in regard to work ethic is not recognizing the contributions of nonstarters like Seth and Aaron in front of their teammates. In a basketball game, not every player plays; not every player is on the floor when it counts, when there are people in the stands, when there is noise in the gym, when there is an excitement he wants to be a part of. These players don't hear their names shouted by the fans; they won't see their achievements written up in the papers. But some of these kids make tremendous contributions to the team. So as the coach, you have to acknowledge these players, in a way that really means something to them. Take the time to stop practice and recognize their hard work in front of their teammates and coaches. It's the most important recognition they can get. Their teammates are their brothers, their fraternity. And if a player gets positive feedback from a group he really cares about, he will do almost anything for them.



When I was in high school, a boy named Bobby Galvin lived down the street from me. He was a couple of years younger than me, and when I started making a name for myself on the basketball team, he started gravitating toward me because he wanted to be a player, too. He figured that if I could succeed through hard work, anybody could. When I was hired as athletic director at Williams College in 2000, Bobby heard about it, and he dropped me a note. He congratulated me and recalled our time spent in the park together, working on our game. I was sad to learn that he had never had success in the sport and had given it up, but he wrote something really perceptive about that: "Harry, I didn't need to become a

great basketball player. I just needed to be there, practicing. I learned that there is something innately valuable about working hard. At that time in my youth, it was important to have that discipline."

We must often remind parents and coaches that their kids are playing games, not performing brain surgery. But as Bobby said, there is a certain time in a young person's life when there is something extremely valuable about working hard in order to stretch and achieve some level of self-fulfillment. It has been my experience that kids who accomplish something they are proud of through hard work adopt work ethic as one of their core values. And a work ethic can carry a young person a good long way through life.