

THE ESSENCE OF COACHING

I love athletics. I always have, and I always will. Beyond any shadow of a doubt, participation in athletics changes lives. During my days as a high school and college athlete and in my years as a high school teacher and coach, I observed this to be true. In a very real sense, athletics serve as a microcosm of life! There are hard work and reward, setbacks and successes, determination, courage, loyalty, sacrifice, honor, faith, teamwork, and an endless list of other lifetime lessons to be learned on a daily basis. I learned very quickly that, besides my parents, the coaches I played for influenced my life and my development as a young man more than anyone else in my life. Because of this powerful influence, being a high school teacher and coach became my chosen profession, as well as my vocation... or calling in life.

During my 37 years of teaching and coaching high school football, I really began to understand that coaches have an extraordinary platform to change lives for the better, especially if we have our priorities in proper order. I have grown to believe that basically there are two types of coaches: recreational and transformational. **Recreational** coaches focus on teaching kids how to play a game; **Transformational** coaches focus on teaching kids how to live their lives. This is emphasized in the old saying that “**good coaches improve a player’s game; great coaches improve a player’s life.**”

As transformational coaches, there are five areas of growth in young people on which we need to focus. They are: **physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual**. I believe that most good coaches concentrate on developing the first two traits (physical and mental) as they get kids in shape, ready to play and teach them rules and strategies of the game. Great coaches go a step further as they develop those same traits, but also work hard to develop emotional and social maturity as well. This includes teaching kids how to control their emotions, how to respect themselves, their teachers and other authority figures, and how to likewise respect members of the opposite sex, their classmates, opponents and officials. Certainly, great coaches put a high priority on loving and honoring our parents and doing our best each day to bring pride and honor to our family name! Great coaches teach with a high regard for preparing players for their future as adults.

The best of the best, or the **Elite Transformational** coaches, also include the fifth area of growth in their daily regimen. These coaches start with **Spiritual** development as the foundation of their work with young people. They realize that if a young person is faith-filled, the other four areas just seem to fall into place! Elite coaches tend to understand the “**10 - 60 - Eternity**” concept and prioritize their efforts accordingly. Many young people begin playing organized sports somewhere around 2nd or 3rd grade, and most will be finished with organized team sports when they graduate from high school. Many youngsters believe they will go on to play college athletics, yet statistics show that around 5% will actually go on to play at the college level and below 1% will ever play a sport professionally. Typically, then, a vast majority will play team sports around 10 years or less. As coaches, how much priority do we put on preparing an athlete for the game this week, versus the entire season and the playoffs, versus their entire 10-year athletic career? Going a step further, studies show that most Americans today live to be about 78 years old. If most people stop playing team sports at age 18 (when they graduate from high school) and live to 78 years old, what are we doing as transformational coaches to prepare our athletes for that next 60 years of their lives? This is where the mental, emotional, and social development of our players become so important. We do not have to be physically blessed to be a priest, doctor, lawyer, architect, teacher, political leader or CEO of a successful company. Our mental, emotional, and social development are imperative with each of these careers and should be a great coach’s priority in development!

Now consider this... what are we doing, as transformational coaches, to prepare our athletes for the day when they pass from this earth? Are we great spiritual leaders for our players? Have we truly helped prepare them for their spiritual journey to God? Do we have our priorities straight regarding the 10 years of physical development versus 60 years of mental and emotional development versus **ETERNITY** concept? **Quite frankly, is there anything we can do as coaches that is more significant than bringing Christ to others and bringing others to Christ??** I understand that in some public school leagues, there might be administrators who do not support the faith development component of coaching. If that is the case, there are two sayings I have always liked that are appropriate: "We may be the only Bible that some people ever read," and the other is "Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary... use words." Make no mistake about it, after our players' parents, odds are we will become the next most influential adults in their lives! The way we carry ourselves in front of our players... the way we treat others, especially in times of adversity... the language we use and the way we speak... and perhaps most importantly of all the way we treat our spouses will speak volumes to our players who watch us so intently as they are trying to learn how "real men and women" should live their lives. Being an "**elite**" coach creates compelling responsibilities that might at first seem daunting; however, it also provides unbelievable opportunities to impact the lives of young people in extraordinary ways. Transformational, elite coaches are many things... ordinary is not one of them!

When we teach kids to play for a "higher purpose," extraordinary things happen. As a coach, I spent a lot of time convincing our players that they had a **duty** and an **obligation** to give their very best at all times. In doing so, they will bring pride and honor to their parents and loved ones. Perhaps more importantly, there is no better way to thank God for our many blessings, both physical and mental, than to make the most of our God-given abilities each day. I used to tell our players before every game, "Take God with you on every play. Say a quick prayer before the ball is snapped each time. Ask for courage, focus, toughness, or intensity... whatever you need on that play!" I also told them never to ask for victory, because I do think He wants us to always give our best to make the most of our gifts. I would also tell them to "Play every play like a man in God's eyes, because His are the ones that count!" As our guys played their last game for us and the last whistle had blown, I would always encourage them to "Take God with you on every play... in everything you do... throughout the rest of your lives. It will serve you well." Of the many lessons we tried to teach our players, this is the one I most hope they carried with them from their time in our program!

As we reflect on the true measure of a coach, it is not so much about building great teams but is really a lot more about building great young people. As coaches, when our last day on this earth arrives, it really won't matter how many games or championships we won or how many plaques, rings or accolades we accumulated. **What will matter most is how we treated other people and how we influenced and impacted their lives.** These are the things we will be remembered for, and this will be the legacy we leave behind. Ultimately, this will be how we are judged when it counts most!

When we have coached our last game, we will not have to look at the scoreboard at the end of the field to measure our success as coaches. Instead, we should look at the scoreboard in our hearts to see the score that matters most: **HOW MANY LIVES HAVE I TOUCHED AND CHANGED FOR THE BETTER, AND HOW MANY PEOPLE DID I ASSIST ON THEIR JOURNEY TO GOD?** This is how we can best measure success and where we will find our greatest reward. This is... **The True Essence of Coaching!!**

Lord, thank you for the gift of coaching. Please be in our hearts and souls and grant us the courage and wisdom to influence lives each day in a way that is pleasing to you. Amen.