

“And the Crystal Ball says.....”
A Vision of Interscholastic Coaching in the Next Decade

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Several years ago, at the national NIAAA conference in Indianapolis, the Executive Director of the NFHS at the time, Robert Kanaby, gave a keynote speech to about 400+ high school athletic directors from around the country. Among the highlights of his speech was a succinct, yet foreboding message to the assembled interscholastic group.

He shared his concerns about the various challenges and issues facing school-based sport programs today: the growth of private clubs and other for-profit sport organizations that were focused upon the “elite” athletes; the great “scholarship race” that many parents believe they and their student son/daughter are obligated to enter; financial challenges to support the broad scope of extra-curricular activities available to our students; and, the continued scrutinization of coach qualifications at the interscholastic level.

Although the tone of his talk and his message wasn’t meant to be a “doom and gloom” view of school sports, he certainly wanted to get the attention of the people who administer our education-based sport programs. The essence of his message was, “If we don’t do something within the next few years to *shift the culture* of our interscholastic sport programs, we may not continue to have sports in our schools as we know them.” That challenge grabbed the attention of those in the audience that day and continues to be a framework from which there has been regular dialogue to this day.

WHY are there greater challenges now?

There may have been a point in time when school sports and interscholastic coaching were accepted as THE pathway for junior high and high school students to follow. Some might refer to “the good ol’ days” when the whole town came out to the stadium (or gym or field) to watch the local school team defend the “honor” of the school or town against their opponents. Many might even reflect upon how “just being a part of the team” was a much higher priority than being a starter or a team standout. And, yes, there may have been a greater acceptance of the coach’s decision “no matter what” in that era.

All of us involved in the current culture of interscholastic sports recognize that things are very different now and expectations have taken different directions for a variety of reasons. The dearth of available knowledge and exposure surrounding our American sport culture certainly contributes to the sense of “expertise” that many stakeholders (including parents, fans,

students and general spectators) express without hesitation. Five minutes of watching any televised college basketball game where the broadcaster bellows, “*Coach X needs to get out of that man-to-man and go zone right now*” will often give the viewer just enough data to impress those sitting around him/her at the next middle school contest!

The economy has placed more pressure upon families to seek financial assistance in providing necessary post-secondary education. The interscholastic athlete who has a smidgeon of talent will often be seen as “recruiting potential” in the eyes of their parents. Without a firm understanding of how athletic grant-in-aids and the entire recruiting process works, families may become engrossed in recruiting exposure opportunities more so than simply enjoying the sport for all of the other benefits of participation.

It has become more common for non-teaching personnel to take on interscholastic coaching roles. Likewise, there have been more teachers who may not have acquired specific coach/sport training as part of their undergraduate preparation. Although the factors behind this trend vary from school-to-school and for geographical areas, the reality is that more coaches need supplementary and additional training of working with young people than simply knowing their “Xs and Os”. This has become increasingly apparent to school officials who must validate and establish the qualifications of all those working with young people in our schools. Courts of law and state and local legislation have been increasingly clearer about the school’s legal responsibility to provide appropriately-trained sport coaches.

However, rather than musing over and pining for those bygone eras, or throwing up our hands with a “what-are-you-going-to-do?” outlook, we need to make an objective, current assessment of what we (as school sport coaches and program administrators) must do to maintain the significance of education-based athletics within our schools.

WHAT would “shift the culture” in the next ten years?

Depending upon each of our own school dynamics, our district and/or state funding issues, and other assorted influencing factors, we could likely develop a list of concerns that would fill an entire gymnasium. For the purpose of zeroing in on some of the most critical pieces, let’s focus upon arguably the most common concerns and components that could intentionally and purposely impact the interscholastic athletic landscape.

Over the next decade, there will be several things impacting interscholastic athletics, many of which are already in motion. In no particular order:

1. **CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT EXPECTATIONS:** From a variety of sources (local school districts, parents, state athletic associations, state legislation), there will become an increased expectation for professional development for coaches. As has happened with our academic staff members, the bar will be continually raised for greater accountability by schools to insure coaches have been and continue to be trained in best practices.

Our stakeholders, especially parents, have become more accustomed to view certification and accreditation of coaches as an *expectation* rather than a “bonus”. Rather than our coaches viewing this as another burden, we can turn this into opportunities to underscore with our stakeholders that the appropriate, safe and competent approach taken by our school coaches is truly in the best interest of each student. TEACHER-coaches (regardless of possession of a teaching degree, or not) are what all parents should expect for their child in any school-supported sport program.

This same approach should be the very thing that separates our school-based coaches from any other type of coaching environment (e.g., club-based coaching, AAU, Junior-Olympics, private trainers, etc.). The argument won't be about whether non-school based coaches are skilled in teaching their sport; rather, the expectation will be more focused upon each interscholastic student-athlete being coached at all levels of cognitive, emotional, social and physical learning. The selling point back to our communities is that our school-based coaches are focused upon the total development of ALL student-athletes and not just the elite ones!

From the school side, administrators must always be wary of the prospects of legal challenges emanating from athletic concerns. The onus for providing appropriately-trained and responsible interscholastic coaches will fall upon individual schools over the next few years. Much like it is with our certificated, classroom teachers, schools will find that the time spent and the minimal cost of training their coaches is well worth the investment if it minimizes legal challenges. With the estimated cost of litigation fees, coach training programs can often pay for themselves if they prevent even one lawsuit!

2. *CORPORATE PARTNERSHIPS* with schools and sport programs will shift from being viewed as a “necessary evil” to best practice opportunities. Maximizing space, facilities and dollar-power, there will be more partnerships formed that become community assets and enhancements. These opportunities will encompass combined corporate and school expertise with trained personnel collaborating to develop mutually beneficial activities and events. The focus upon “win-win” in these partnerships will be the center of such efforts.

Although many of these type of partnerships were initially created to produce “brand loyalty”, today's current business methods are more oriented to service and enhancement to local relationships. In many communities, the hub of activities and interest stems from the school(s). Alignment and partnering with schools becomes a positive association that many businesses desire.

From the school side, creating value-added features back to the community as a result of these partnerships will pay dividends to the school. When facilities can be improved, expanded and opened for the community (as well as the school district students), district supporters and end-users will likely appreciate the cost-benefit the corporate partnership has generated.

3. *RETURN TO SCHOOL-BASED RECRUITING*: State associations (along with NFHS and NIAAA) will eventually get the ear of the NCAA and NAIA leadership in considering more

school-based involvement and partnerships between their respective organizations. Although recruitment of athletes from club, AAU and JO type programs will continue, there will become more demand upon the *academic* and *character* qualities of recruits and, in turn, greater emphasis placed upon investigating and understanding the school environment that each student-athlete evolves from.

Associated with this shift, there will become more opportunities to provide for and encourage “parent education” as it relates to interscholastic athletics. This initiative will go well beyond the scope of recruiting and venture into a return to “true north” relative to the purpose of interscholastic athletics.

As daunting as it may seem, schools, coaches and national organizations will be working harder to incorporate training for the parents of student-athletes to improve the interscholastic experience. Nutrition, injury prevention and evaluation, skill-development timelines and re-focusing upon the true mission and purpose of school athletics will be many of the critical steps to help maintain sport programs in our schools. With the advances occurring almost daily in technology, the delivery and synthesizing of appropriate information to parents will make this training more accessible to all stakeholders.

There are certainly more challenges that could make any list for the future of interscholastic athletics. As Bob Kanaby shared on that December day in Indianapolis, our interscholastic coaching community can still choose.....choose to shrug and accept the interscholastic trends that seem to intimidate some.....or choose to look into the proverbial crystal ball and “shift the culture” to insure school sports remain a vital and critical segment of the total learning environment of our future students.