



Why Train Middle Level Sports Coaches?

Although the United States is one of the few major countries in the world to offer interscholastic sports in its schools, it is time to refocus on its original mission and purpose or we could very well see it disappear from schools within the next twenty years. There are several myths that need to be dispelled before we can begin to preserve sports in our schools. By dispelling the myths it will become apparent why we must require training of individuals who coach middle school students.

MYTH 1 – Sports is a frivolous activity that has no educational value and therefore should not be a part of our schools.

Sports began in American schools in the mid-1800's to teach discipline and respect for authority in the event the country had to go to war, to socialize an immigrant population, and to teach attributes that are more easily learned on the playing fields than in the classroom. Educators have long believed that sports and activities are an extension of the classroom where students can learn life skills in an extracurricular setting. Research shows, however, that learning positive attributes in sports does not happen automatically. The coach must intentionally teach and model the behaviors they expect their students to learn. Extracurricular sports and activities, which cost just 1-3% of the total school budget, are still one of the least expensive learning opportunities a district can use. However, it is vitally important that interscholastic coaches learn to take advantage of the unlimited number of teachable moments available in these activities to teach life lessons to their students who participate.

MYTH 2 – If you played the sport, you are qualified to coach the sport. Furthermore, the higher the level played, the better the coach.

The skills of playing are very different from the skills of coaching. Don't get me wrong, understanding the sport from the player's perspective is a good start, but we should expect to train coaches and prepare them for the role of coaching. We owe it to the students who participate to provide them a trained coach, just as we do with classroom teachers.

MYTH 3- Coaching is the same at all levels and for all age groups.

While it is true that all coaches at all levels must understand the same general principles of coaching, it is not true that coaching a student of middle school age is the same as coaching high school students. Some of the critical differences of which coaches must be keenly aware include:

1. Length of practice is shorter for younger participants.
2. Intensity and duration of conditioning is much less at younger age levels.
3. Practices and drills should be appropriate for the age level of the student.
4. Having fun and developing skill, not winning, is the primary focus at the middle school level. Even at the high school level, winning should never come before the educational outcomes. At all levels in education-based sports, the experience should be enjoyable first and foremost.
5. Understanding that at the middle school level, this could very well be the student's first organized sport experience. Students feel the importance of representing their school and playing in front of their peers. Coaches must be sensitive to this and not damage the social development of the child.

MYTH 4- Requiring interscholastic coaches to have training will do nothing but scare them away. After all, we have a hard enough time finding coaches now.

Currently, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) has forty-seven (47) of its member state associations who require some level of coaches training before coaches have contact with students on a sports team. There has been some verbal push back on the part of a few coaches, but these states have not experienced a reduction in available coaches. In fact, training helps increase the pool of coaches and aids in their retention as there are a number of individuals who would tell you they couldn't coach because they don't know how to. Training will give these people the confidence that they can do it.

Where to do we go from here?

With the myths dispelled, I hope you agree with me that coaches must have training to ensure that the students who participate have a positive sports experience. The NFHS is currently in discussion with the National Middle School Association to develop an online course for middle school coaches. Betty Edwards, Executive Director, and Al Summers, Director of Conference and Events, have supported the idea of building an online course around the work of C. Kenneth McEwin and John Swaim. Their book, "Clearing the Hurdles-Issues and Answers in Middle School Sports," provides a wonderful starting point for the content that can be delivered to individuals who are coaching or would like to coach at this level.

The course will provide coaches content and resources in the following areas:

- Developing a student-centered philosophy that supports the mission and purpose of middle schools.
- Providing students who want to participate in sports and have been “cut” from the school team an opportunity to be a part of an intra school team. Athletics at the interscholastic level should never have as its purpose identifying the elite athlete. We should provide an opportunity for all to participate.
- Providing interscholastic and intramural programs that encourage participation in, and maximize enjoyment of multiple sports and not specializing in just one sport.
- Establishing and communicating eligibility rules that support the academic mission of the school.
- Completing initial coach training and encouraging continuous professional development to stay current in the profession of coaching.
- Minimizing the risk of participation. Inspecting equipment and facilities and teaching methods of play that minimize the risk of injury to the students who participate.
- Communicating to parents the proper middle school athletic philosophy and policies and suggesting ways parents can support their child and the program.
- Providing the coaches the best practices to allow all students an enjoyable educational experience through participation in sports.

The NFHS, in cooperation with the National Middle School Association, is putting together a committee representing current coaches, administrators, and teachers to review the content that can be included in such a course. We hope to launch the course within the next 18 months.

Since 1920, The National Federation of State High School Associations has led the development of education –based interscholastic sports and activities that help students succeed in their lives. We set directions for the future by building awareness and support, improving the participation experience, establishing consistent standards and rules for competition, and helping those who oversee high school sports and activities.

The NFHS, from its offices in Indianapolis, Indiana, serves its 50 member state high school athletic/activity associations, plus the District of Columbia. The NFHS publishes playing rules in 16 sports for boys and girls competition and administers fine arts programs in speech, theater, debate and music. It provides a variety of program initiatives that reach the 18,500 high schools and over 11 million students involved in athletic and activity programs.

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