

**Keeping High School Sports Relevant in a Changing America**  
**By Kathleen J. DeBoer, Executive Director, American Volleyball Coaches Association**  
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Futurist Alvin Toffler said, “The illiterate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be those who can’t read and write, but those that can’t learn, unlearn and relearn.” A rendition paraphrased for athletics management could read, “The administrative failures of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be those who can’t hire and fire, but those who can’t train, nurture, and retain coaches.”

The turnover rate among high school coaches is 15-20% and closer to 25% annually if you take out football and boy’s basketball. I was in Texas for a coaching clinic in July of 2007. Just on the girl’s side of the ledger there were 1500 vacancies to fill before the start of the school year. Unlike Texas which still requires an educational appointment to coach, in most states a significant number of coaches do not work in the school system or in education at all. This may open up a larger pool of candidates for hire on the front end, but adds many complications for training and retention.

Club sports are thriving and growing quickly in the sports that cater to the middle and upper classes. Where private training has always dominated the individual sports like tennis, golf and swimming, today the team sports of volleyball, soccer, lacrosse, softball and, to a certain extent, basketball and baseball are becoming club driven. Further, these alternative groups are becoming increasingly aggressive in their recruitment of athletes and their tryout and training practices are infringing on high school seasons.

At times it appears we are benignly naïve to this change in our landscape. The stunning success and popularity of high school football combined with the simple financial fact that the cost to play it guarantees that it will always be a publicly subsidized activity, has us living in a fantasy world concerning other sports.

We still build everything around the football model. I received a call recently from a very successful provider of football clinics who wanted to expand their business into volleyball and basketball. He was calling me for the names of college coaches, preferably from marquee programs in the Big Ten and Big XII, who would trade compensation for the opportunity to speak in front of a large number of high school volleyball coaches. His clinic was planned for an April weekend when two 1000-team club tournaments were also being held in the Midwest. He was stunned when I told him that I doubted most of those coaches even knew the name of the high school coach that trained their top prospects. He had no idea that, in volleyball, recruiting is now a club-based activity.

I share this written rant because I believe we must act and act now! I manage an organization of 4500 volleyball coaches. Thirty-five percent of my membership is high school coaches. I care deeply about this sector. Most of my members are both leaders in their respective states as well as veteran coaches. They frequently share their concerns with me about the future of non-football high school sports. Three issues always

dominate the conversation:

1. Coaching Education: When athletes are asked to rate the qualities that are most important to them in a coach, the number one answer is always knowledge of the game. Clearly other traits matter. Coaches with a sound philosophy, strong communication skills, and concern for safety are more likely to succeed over time, but only if they also know how to teach the basic fundamentals of their sport. We all know this and agree on it, yet we have no coaching education requirements in most states that extend beyond first aid, rules, and legal matters. Knowledge in these areas may satisfy insurance carriers and official's supervisors, but they give the coach no tools to teach skills, organize tactics, or run effective practices. Adolescents and their parents can be cruel to those lacking credibility and self-confidence, yet this "sink or swim" method persists. I was in one state recently where a volleyball official needed 12 hours of sport-specific training to receive their license to call matches. The coach, who would spend ten hours with an athlete for every hour that athlete interacted with an official, had no sport-specific training requirement. Our turnover rates are predictable given our investment in the success of our coaches.

2. Developmental Programs: There is a fairly widely accepted law governing the learning of physical skills called "the ten year rule." It states quite simply that, regardless of talent, it takes ten years for a person to reach their potential in performing a skill. Again, we know this, yet most of our introductory programs are simply gone. Physical education, where it exists at all, no longer focuses on sports skills. Publicly-funded community recreation programs have been gutted by budget cuts, especially in areas serving poor communities.

In mid-November I was the banquet speaker for a high school team in a poor rural Kentucky county. My connection to the team was that one of my former college players was the head coach. About 25 people gathered in the county extension building on that Saturday night. Ten players, none over 5'8," comprised both the varsity and the jv teams. They were all ninth and tenth graders, the upper class girls having quit earlier to pursue jobs, boyfriends, or simply less strenuous activity. Besides my prodigy, there were two other coaches, both moms, who readily admitted to me that they knew nothing about volleyball, but had volunteered so the team would not be dropped. Six or seven other parents had come to see their daughters "celebrate" a 5-13 season that had ended with a loss to a hated rival who had been one of the five wins earlier in the year. Several of the parents wanted the head coach fired. As I was preparing to leave, one of the coaching moms came up to me and gave me a real hug, the kind you remember because it is more than a cursory gesture. Her eyes were brimming with tears. "When I was growing up here we never had a chance to play on a team," she said struggling to control her voice, "They don't know it yet, but this is so important for these girls. We can't lose it. Please, please help us not lose it."

My two hour drive home through the dark Appalachian hills gave me time to contemplate her words. I was moved by the rawness of her plea. This was a mother aching for her daughter and her emotion let me know how fragile their situation was. I talked to my former player the next week and encouraged her to start a program for her five-year old daughter and her friends and to build a base of 100 players in the elementary and middle schools to feed the high school teams. She agreed to give it her best effort.

Is this a place we can make peace with club sports and utilize coaches outside our school systems? Schools have gyms and fields, the facilities needed by clubs to provide the programming that the school budget cannot.

It is at our own peril that we stop making the effort to build developmental programs available to the masses.

3. **Brand Identity:** The interscholastic sports experience must differ in a positive way from the club sports experience. High school administrators, principals and coaches must be able to articulate this difference. I speak quite frequently with visitors from abroad who marvel enviously at the American system that ties sport to education. They are astounded at the number of kids that have access to participation opportunities and even more jealous of our ability to produce athletes who actually have marketable life skills. This is a tremendous competitive advantage for our kids and our culture, yet to preserve it we must invest in it.

My husband and I, both in our fifties and former high school athletes, were recently comparing notes about our experience of high school with several close friends of the same age who had not been athletes. They spoke circumspctly of the pressures they had felt to use drugs and alcohol and to “fit in” by experimenting with sex. By comparison our high school days were blissfully dull and mostly event-driven due to our engagement in sports. So what parent wouldn’t sign up their child for such a banal adolescence?

I’m not blaming you for our current state of affairs. The nationwide decreases in funding for schools have had a dramatic impact on extra-curricular activities. Certainly untrained coaches, lack of developmental programs and competition from club sports don’t make your lives easier.

Having said that, we have a statement in our organization: “Whining is not a strategic plan.” I look forward to joining you in San Jose in April to discuss options for working together. Our business is coaching education, we can help each other.

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