



The “Private Coach” in High School ATHLETICS

By Jeff Arbogast

The influx of “private coaches” in high school sports has risen commensurately with the importance Western society has given to athletics in the past 20 years. In order to have student-athletes remain competitive with classmates on a high school level, parents and some athletes themselves have looked at any possible options to further develop conditioning, skill sets and peripheral training options.

The desire to “gain an edge” in the highly competitive high school sports arena began with innocuous camps and clinics, usually available to all and conducted in the off-season by high school and college coaches experienced and certified in the sport they teach.

Next came the step in coaching where parents and athletes sought just a “little bit more” by attending multiple camps, developing longer relationships with those ex-athletes and skill-merchants who took over much of the off-season time, and researching online for training concepts that could gain that ever-needed “edge.”

Finally, we have come to a third level of “private coaching” driven by a game of one-upmanship played by student-athletes around the country: “If you have a camp, I’m going to have multiple camps.” “If you have a school program, I’m going to supplement that with a private program that is designed to help me personally.” “If you are working out with one coach, I’ll be working out with two or three, or more.”

There are many superior individuals present in every high school sport who have the best interests of the student-athlete at heart. Many of these are “private” in their coaching


nature and, in some circumstances, additional training, remediation, and/or skill development will make a difference that is intensely positive. But care must be taken in selecting these individuals due to the driving forces in what makes a private coach a potential risk: financial interest, lack of certification and supervision, liability and immediacy.

A private coach can be a positive in virtually every sport for several reasons. Some high schools hire by need and not by expertise. Some schools do not pay enough to attract good talent in their coaching ranks. Some coaches at the high school level accept coaching positions in order to teach at a high school, but, although certified, have no desire to excel.

Into this mix gets thrown a dynamic of financial interest when a private coach appears on the horizon. In areas of the country where the economy is booming, private coaches can appear to fill a need, while parents are also filling the need for a job for various coaches who woke up one morning and thought “Gee, I think I can do this for money!” Where money exists, individuals will appear who can take it. If parents need to feel like they can “buy” the athletic development of a son or daughter, it will happen. It is not unique to athletics at all.

The scholastic end of the educational spectrum is rife with “skill developers” who remediate coursework, provide ACT and SAT practice tests, and do career counseling and preparation. Should we expect the athletic venue to be different? But in both cases, the driving force is money. If the coach or academic program is among the best available, the student-athlete wins, but there is as much a need for mom and dad to be vigilant in selecting a private coach as when they select an ACT prep class.

While many involved in the private education area are



held accountable by certification and degrees of specialization, the private coach is not. Any individual in this country can form a business, corporation or go it alone and announce to the world he or she is here to help the struggling masses of high school students having difficulty shooting a free throw or heading the ball into the net. For most, a previous high school or college career is the route to that announcement.

There is no regulation of private coaches, no national clearinghouse that certifies or checks backgrounds, no training or sanctioning body, and no supervision other than whatever the parent can assess. This in no way condemns all private coaches, but it does mean that the best ones will be highly sought, highly paid and highly recommended. The majority of those springing up now are not. Ultimately, if they have less expertise they should fail, but whose student-athletes will be the guinea pig to find out which coaches are competent, trained and expert – and which are not?

Certified coaches in high school must pass standards and practices boards, hold current licenses or degrees, and depending upon the state, be evaluated by advanced professionals. They must re-certify, remain current in training theory and application, and follow the mainstream of the community when setting team goals. In addition, the high school coach, whether staff or paraprofessional, is hired with an expectation of supervision “in loco parentis,” or “in the place of the parent” that surpasses the expectation of the private coach. Rather than just being required to teach that free throw or increase that 40-yard dash time, the high school coach is expected to function as a holistic part of an adolescent’s development. Although some high school coaches may fail in some aspects of this goal, most see the student in a complete sense as they coach the individual, not the skill.

Our litigious society presents another red flag for the parent considering the private coach. While the high school coach is certified, trained and insured, the private coach may have any degree of legal accountability, from absolutely nothing and no training, to highly insured and backed up by intensive certification. Obviously, we would all like to hire a private coach who is certified and, therefore, insurable at the highest level.

Imagine this problem in any area of the health field. Would you rather have an uninsured doctor, a doctor who pays a high premium for insurance due to malpractice complaints, or a highly trained doctor with no complaints and low insurance rates due to his skill? Those lower insurance rates

translate to competence accepted by industry standards.

The private coach is more susceptible to litigation due to the individual nature of his or her trade. Again, the best option if selecting a private coach would be to put a premium on certification, approval from specialized boards, or credentials that are accepted as leading the field. If a private coach can demonstrate expertise that is acknowledged by professional peers, he or she has much less exposure to liability. Parents and athletes need to know if the training, skill development and conditioning is proper and healthy. If certified and sanctioned, a private coach is much less likely to cause any injury and therefore less prone to liability actions.

Finally, the private coach has an Achilles heel that cannot be removed. Due to the nature of parents and athletes in this “here and now” society, the feeling of immediacy felt by the private coach is inescapable. “I have to give results NOW!” A high school coach is evaluated to certain standards of winning and losing, depending upon the conditions and sport, but the private coach is financially responsible to provide immediate results.

Mom and dad did not hire the private coach to look at the “long-term” development; they hired the coach to get an edge by the next week, the next game or the next tryout. The private coach’s main advertising will be word-of-mouth, and if the parents don’t get the results they feel entitled to, according to their timeframe, the coach is fired and no positive recommendations are forthcoming.

The problem with immediacy is twofold.

First, the individual athlete may not be ready for the intensive development and training prescribed by the private coach to gain the most benefit in the least amount of time. It is always possible to increase training or conditioning to a level where you “have to break an egg to get an omelette,” but this collegiate view may be detrimental to the adolescent athlete who is being driven to improve by parents and a private coach.

A high school coach usually has less pressure to force immediate success. He or she is able to take time to allow the athlete to develop and condition without injury, staleness or burnout. Regardless of expertise in the private coach, few parents are willing to pay for a long-term program that is in the best interests of the student-athlete. The three or four years a



high school coach has allows a deliberate and measured training program.

Psychologically, the private coach decision made by many parents puts the student-athlete in a no-win situation. First, high school training takes quite a bit of time. Practices, conditioning, games, etc. are time-consuming, and once you add academics, jobs, a social life, church and others to the mix, there are few hours left for sleep. If you add private training to this dynamic, the student now has an even more intensive time-management problem as he or she is already spending a lot of time on athletics.

Secondly, the cumulative training effect of two programs operating at the same time can be more than a high school athlete can handle. This usually forces a choice. Perform the high school program, or do the private program. Be with teammates or go it alone. There is no value judgment; it is simply a difficult choice to require a high school student-athlete to make.

If parents can clear the previous hurdles, find an expert who is trained and develop a relationship that works with a private coach, there exists one last challenge. Can the high school coach and the private coach work together for the betterment of the athlete? In many cases, the answer will be “yes,” and the problems facing the student-athlete do not rest entirely with the private coach. Two egos are involved, possibly two training approaches and two sets of expectations. The key is communication. If parents can elicit communication through both coaches for the betterment of the athlete, the involvement of a private coach may work. But the private coach most likely does not have a “team,” and performance in a “team environment” must be part of the goals and communication.

the coach believed in the young person and made him or her feel special.

The NFHS is using a tag line that describes this relationship between coach and student – “Take Part – Get Set for Life.” Studies have shown that those young people who are involved in high school activity programs are more successful in their professional careers than those nonparticipating students.

Private coaches can work in some cases, but parents should evaluate:

- Certification and training of the private coach.
- Overall goals of the private coach.
- Liability insurance of the private coach.
- The immediacy given to the private coach by the parents.
- The accountability of the private coach.
- The communication between parents, the high school coach and the private coach.

There will always be room for the very best of every profession, and that is certainly true for private coaches. Athletes and parents first need to evaluate the necessity of a private coach, but if, in fact, they feel that they are better off in selecting one, due diligence should be paid in making a choice that ultimately helps provide something that outweighs potential negatives. **CQ**

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And, without a doubt, the key figure in many cases in making this happen is the high school coach. For it is that individual who truly makes a difference in our young people’s lives.

Their efforts beget all of the real heroes in our society, the moms and dads, honest people in business, government, industry and other parts of our society – and especially those who wear the uniform of this great nation and protect our way of life here in America and around the world. **CQ**