



The Purpose and Role of a **Junior Varsity Team**

By Dr. David Hoch

Over the years, some questionable practices and approaches have occurred with respect to junior varsity teams. While limitations and parameters may vary throughout the country, in Baltimore County, Maryland, for example, only ninth- and 10th-grade students can participate on junior varsity (JV) teams. All juniors and seniors have only one option – the varsity squad.

Beyond the consideration of which athletes are eligible for JV squads, the following are just a few of the irregularities that have been observed.

- The JV has its own set of team rules separate and different from those of the varsity.
- The JV game is played with only one intention: winning. No consideration is given for young players to have a chance to gain experience.
- The coach of the JV team is territorial and does not allow freshmen or sophomores to try out for the varsity squad.
- Different offensive and defensive schemes are employed for the JV team which are distinct and unrelated to those of the varsity team.

These examples beg the question of what is the ultimate purpose of a junior varsity team and what is its connection to the varsity squad?

Philosophically, this should be a relatively easy question to answer. JV teams should exist to provide youngsters an opportunity to learn and improve their skills, and to grow and mature as athletes. Also, rules governing the existence and play of JV teams exist to prevent abuses and to provide sound guidelines for play.

Among these policies and procedures, the chain of command should clearly be defined. For all sports, the head varsity coach is in charge of the program. While assistants and the junior varsity coach can make suggestions, the head

coach is responsible for the direction of the total program.

In order to provide the absolute best environment for not only the athletes on the JV team, but also for the entire program, the following suggestions should help:

1. **Make sure that all candidates for a junior varsity coaching position understand the chain of command that exists for your program and the philosophical basis of your program.** Not only is the head coach the person in charge of the sport, but every decision should be based upon what is best for the student-athlete.
2. **Insist that the head varsity coach and JV coach communicate regularly to ensure that the approach taken with the JV team is consistent and philosophically in line with that of the varsity squad.** There is no sense or value to teach skills, and offensive and defensive sets that are different, because this will not enhance any athlete's potential move to the varsity squad. The head varsity coach really is in charge of the total program, and while he may accept suggestions, the decision of what should be taught and used is his responsibility.
3. **Be careful with practice sessions or drills that have a combination of junior varsity and varsity level players in a sport.** The pairing up of athletes of differing size and skill levels is a sure-fire path to injury and accompanying lawsuits.
4. **Understand that the ultimate goal of a junior varsity team is to provide the opportunity to learn, grow and mature.** While preparing and striving to win is part of athletic competition, winning is not the most important outcome for a JV squad. This may be difficult for some coaches and parents to



“Providing an opportunity for our young, inexperienced players to learn, grow and develop.”

understand and accept, but it is absolutely essential in order to fulfill the ultimate purpose.

5. The head varsity coach and the assistants should take an active interest in the junior varsity squad.

After all, these young people are the next wave of players eventually for the varsity team. This expressed interest should involve watching some of the JV games, offering encouragement to the athletes and definitely providing advice and suggestions for the JV coach.

6. Teach the fundamentals that are integral to the system that the varsity team employs.

It is important to understand the level your junior varsity athletes are currently at and adjust the level, scope and complexity of instruction accordingly.

7. Carry as large a squad as possible.

With young players, you can never be completely sure who will grow, improve and develop. Every year, you will always encounter two extremes – one youngster emerges from nowhere and others who fail to reach their projected potential. Your chances of providing skilled players for the varsity squad improve significantly, therefore, with a larger pool of possible candidates.

8. Try to play as many athletes in every game as possible.

Just as with squad size, the more opportunities that you can provide to play increases the level of experience that can be gained by more athletes.

9. Consider scheduling fewer games for the JV squad as compared to the varsity team.

Certainly, athletes and most coaches want to play, but practice time is critical for young athletes to improve their skills. While practice sessions may not be as

thrilling, they do provide opportunities for more repetitions that are necessary to improve skills.

10. Eliminate all JV championships, if possible.

The total focus to win a championship at this level creates the wrong emphasis with parents and some coaches. In essence, it may exclude all of the other more important objectives – providing an opportunity for young athletes to learn and improve.

In a recent edition of the Baltimore Sun, Cal Ripken Jr., the Baltimore Orioles Hall of Fame shortstop, answered questions concerning youth and high school sports. Reacting to an inquiry about the role of winning while coaching young players, Cal responded with, “...coaches should be focusing on developing players, with the ultimate goal being to help the kids improve both from a team and an individual standpoint.”

By embracing Cal’s perspective, our junior varsity squads would exist for the right reason – to provide an opportunity for our young, inexperienced players to learn, grow and develop. Without over-emphasizing winning and the accompanying championships, these young people might also have a better chance to ultimately make the varsity team in the future. This is the proper role of a JV team. **CQ**

Softball photo provided by 20/20 Photographic, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan.

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