

*If you build it they will come – the importance of the NFHS Coach Education Program*

In the 1989 movie “Field of Dreams” Shoeless Joe Jackson tells Ray Kinsella, the character played by Kevin Costner, that “If you build it, he will come.” Jackson was referring to Kinsella’s father in the movie but in many ways the meaning of the phrase could easily be applied to the National Federation of State High School Association’s (NFHS) Coach Education Program. In January 2007 the NFHS launched its Coach Education program with its signature “*Fundamentals of Coaching*” course. With a unique student-centered curriculum emphasizing the role of the teacher/coach in promoting learning and the educational mission of interscholastic athletics “*Fundamentals of Coaching*” was purposefully designed with and for interscholastic teacher/coaches and covers the eight domains of coaching competencies identified in the revised National Standards for Sport Coaches (National Association for Sports and Physical Education, 2006). The course’s *Student First, Athlete Second* philosophy and research based content is delivered in a way that assists all coaches in creating the optimal learning environment to ensure the development of the whole student.

To date 44 member state associations have adopted “*Fundamentals of Coaching*” as fulfilling completely, or in some way, their state coach education requirement. The course has been greeted with widespread enthusiasm and excitement with over 35,000 coaches signing up for the course since its launch. This is a good start for the NFHS Coach Education program but it is just that, a start.

Although it is estimated that 1 million adults coach in our nation’s schools, it is reported that only 16% have received any formal coach education. This is an important issue for all stakeholders invested in our nation’s youth as research has shown that participating in sports does not automatically result in positive or negative outcomes. Sports are not in and of themselves educational; however, if they are organized and played in certain ways they do support educational goals. The educational value of athletics is largely dependent on how the activity is structured, and in general that means what the coach chooses to teach and model. When structured appropriately, athletics offers a vehicle to teach students skills that contribute to the overall development of each participant.

In the recently published National Coaching Report (NASPE, 2008), it was noted that the need and practicality of coaching education has been debated for well over a half century in the United States. However, the research clearly shows that the quality of a young person’s athletic experience is to a large extent determined by the quality of coaching and/or leadership in the sport program. Participating in organized sport is associated with higher grade point averages, lower high school drop-out rates and higher educational expectations (e.g., Fredericks & Eccles, 2006). The positive effects of participating are pronounced for females where research has shown a positive relationship with self-esteem and self-confidence (Wiese-Bjornstal, 2007).

“Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there”  
(US Humorist and Showman Will Rogers)

The launch of *Fundamentals of Coaching* represents the first step in the development of the NFHS Coach Certification program that is expected to begin late 2009. The NFHS envisions that a number of courses and learning modules will need to be developed and activated to support this initiative. The NFHS is

committed to providing professional development opportunities for teacher/coaches that will both protect and promote the place of educational athletics in our nation's schools. The NFHS is no doubt on the right track and has set an aggressive timeline in terms of product development to achieve its goals. For the sake of our nation's youth we can only hope that we are moving fast enough.

Although there is no research to support this position, some school administrators may be reluctant to require coaches to complete coaching education fearful that additional demands and expense may dissuade individuals from getting and remaining involved. National organizations such as the National Association of State Boards of Education and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) have recognized the importance of coach education however, and have strongly endorsed its need and, in the case of NASSP, the NFHS Coach Education Program. These groups along with the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association support the growing body of research that illustrates the importance of the teacher/coach in determining the experience of all students involved in interscholastic athletics. When one also considers the legal and liability issues related to interscholastic athletics it becomes clear that coach education is not a luxury or something a school, school district or state can choose to ignore, but a necessity particularly if we are to fulfill the educational mission of interscholastic athletics and contribute to the development of the whole child.

The NFHS Coach Education Program may not be the panacea to all issues facing interscholastic athletics but it does represent a hugely important initiative that when complete will transform the face of educational programming for teacher/coaches in our nation.

Darren C. Treasure, Ph.D. – A former Associate Professor at Arizona State University, Darren is the author of the NFHS *“Fundamentals of Coaching”* course, and the learning modules *“The Role of the Principal in Interscholastic Athletics”* and *“Engaging Effectively with Parents.”* More information concerning the NFHS Coach Education program can be found at [www.NFHSLearn.com](http://www.NFHSLearn.com)