

Mequon-Thiensville Cardinal Youth Football

The reason we coach...

The role of a youth football coach is as important as it is complex. It can be part mentor, part teacher, part “dad”, part role model, and yes, even part “coach”. A youth football coach will always have thirty or so pairs of eyes trained on him and an equal number of ears straining to hear. Kids will be looking for attention – in some form or another - and signs of approval. Then there are the parents, teachers, community groups and the public at large that will maintain a high level of attention to your words and deeds.

Adding to this mix is the unalterable fact that the youth football coach can never know just what deed or word will leave an indelible impression on his players. The coach’s interaction with his players has the potential to be the catalyst for enhancing each individual’s personal growth and success. Unfortunately, it can also lead one in another direction, resulting in unintended consequences.

Coaching youth football should never be about reliving one’s past glory or pursuing a missed chance of days long gone. It should never be about winning regardless of the cost. Nor should it ever become a venue for a distorted display of toughness or machismo at practice or games.

Coaching youth football should be about developing young men that just happen to play football. In short, it should never be “about you” – it should always be “about them”.

The true value of your commitment

We all exist in a busy professional and family oriented environment, coexisting with forces that pull us in many different directions. As a volunteer coach, you will have to find room within your own universe to fit not one, but four seasons of coaching youth football. It will take all of your expertise at managing your time, allocating your resources and mustering all of your energy. Your life will become a blur. But the lessons you will be teaching will make the adventure well worth it.

If you assess all of the contingencies – personal and professional – and your situation allows it, you should try to put this experience toward the top of your priority list. Not just because it is football or it is something that needs to be done to win. This isn’t the single A club for the Packers, Badgers or Highlanders.

You should make this a priority because you will be showing a group of young men – in word and deed - that they are as important to you as anything else in your life during your time together. This is truly making it “about them”.

Telling them you are putting them at the center of your life is one thing. Actually putting them at or near the center of your life for three months – one quarter of a year - will inevitably lead them to put you and what you are trying to teach in the center of their life.

Over time, you will earn their trust and they will develop a commitment to you. Eventually, this trust and commitment will extend to their friends, their teammates, and others. That is the true value of your commitment to them. This bond isn’t simply a transient connection or coincidence. It is relationship very much like you have with your own son. It might just be there for the rest of your life. That is truly powerful.

Safety

You are responsible for the health, safety and well being of someone else’s son while they are participating in football.

There will be bumps, bruises, cuts, scrapes, twists and sprains. There could even be breaks, tears and concussions. Regardless of what it is, treat every situation with concern and urgency. You will need to help your players learn to differentiate between the pain of football and contact related soreness and the pain of actual injury. Make sure parents are aware of any concerns that you might have – immediately.

If a player sustains a blow to the head, resulting in a headache, stomachache, or bewilderment, be careful. Parents need to know so they can decide whether to take their child in for further evaluation.

Fear will play a major role in player safety especially at the 5th grade level. Some boys may have never been knocked down before. Others will look great at practice with their team, but may “freeze” when it comes to playing against others. Still others will find every reason under the sun to sit out and miss practice.

Fear will manifest itself in one of these forms or another. Learn to recognize it, help the player see it for what it is and help them work through it. “Throwing them in to see if they can swim” might be the worst thing you can do. Some may respond to that, others might hand in their equipment.

There is no such thing as “being soft” at fifth grade.

Whether it is fear of injury, failure, or the unknown, you must find some way to help them face it and work through it in a safe manner.

Season Goals

The development of a winning attitude and work habits are a more powerful means to that end than simply winning by itself.

Let’s be honest.

The players want to win. Parents want us to win. Our program wants to win. Our community wants us to win. Our opponents want to win. We as coaches and fathers want to win. In certain respects, this is all about winning.

And like it or not, whether it is right or wrong, fair or unfair, we will be judged on our won/loss record. Remember how it is when you play a game, “just for fun” and no one keeps score? There is still an element of competition – even when it the results supposedly do not matter. There is and will always be a mental scorecard, complete with points scored, allowed and results. It is important because it is how you measure up to others. And if you make the commitment to work hard to improve and succeed, you need to have that feedback – you need to know the result of your efforts.

Consequently, the perception is and will always be winning equals results, growth and improvement while losing equals poor coaching, a lack of development and a bad experience for all.

When used correctly, winning can be an important “tool”. It reinforces the positive aspects of values we seek to teach during our time as coaches: the importance of discipline, preparation, effort, commitment, sacrifice, patience, trust and perseverance. Losing – if used as a teaching moment - can also help to reinforce those very same values albeit from a different direction. Losing inevitably opens the door leading to one’s character. An invaluable learning opportunity all the same.

Win or lose, we are paving the way for these young men to become successful in every area of their life.

Winning and Success

Everyone is needed to be successful.

Do we want to win at all costs? No, this is youth football. Furthermore, that reinforces a negative message about priorities in football and life in general.

Do we want to teach and do all of the things necessary to put ourselves in a position to have the opportunity to win every game? Absolutely. This can help to reinforce a positive message that preparation, work, and sacrifice can provide you with the opportunity for success - only if you execute the plan and perform when you are called on.

However, with this approach comes the responsibility we have as coaches to have all of our players better prepared than anyone else we face. Truly lasting success will come from the depth that we are able to develop with all of the players we have.

We will be doing these young men – and ourselves - a disservice in the long run if we always and only rely on the same players.

Football is the ultimate team sport.

Positive Individual Development Leads to Player Development

You cannot separate the player from the person

The key to player development is positive individual development. Football is an extracurricular activity that lasts but three months. Despite this relatively short amount of time, the impact you can have on these young men could last a lifetime. You have the potential of being the catalyst in someone's life.

The values of discipline, preparation, effort, commitment, sacrifice, patience, trust and perseverance must be reiterated and reinforced continually. Set the expectation bar high and push them to leap over it. Although these values are the foundation for success in football, they are also the very essence of success in school, business and life in general.

You cannot separate the player from the person.

Everyone is needed to make a team. Everyone has a role to play within that team. There will be those with natural abilities, those that are just emerging, and those haven't quite figured it out.

It is imperative that as coaches you identify the "at risk" players. "At risk" are those players that need to be coached up to gain some confidence, improve play knowledge and develop better work habits.

Help them build true self-esteem through achievement resulting from effort and hard work. Help them to set goals. Accomplishment will arrive in small doses but you can never overlook the importance pointing out these small victories. The little things seem to always matter the most.

Increasing your coaching interaction with them may get most of them up to speed in short order. Some will take longer. Stick with it as long as it takes. Everyone develops at their own pace so there is no telling when things might finally click. The young man you never gave up on, that struggled through out his entire Cardinal career, might seek you out after a high school game just to say "thanks". That is what coaching is all about.

Develop a method to quantify the strengths and weaknesses of each player so you can more adequately respond to their needs and be more effective coaches. Players with certain strengths and the right attitude could help mentor those that need additional support. This will help build leadership skills and reinforce the team concept.

By the third game of the season, you should have the “at risk” boys in a position to dramatically increase their participation in games and contribute more to the success of the team. By the last three games, you should be peaking and have a team full of football players.

Playing Time

Earn your way onto the field.

Everyone needs to play in the games and not just one play. However, the amount of playing time should be contingent on effort at practice, knowledge of the plays, attendance and attitude. We should not penalize any young men because of differences in physical development; that is just the way it is. There will be late bloomers and as they grow, this too shall change. Positive player development will help put them in a position to contribute – and increase their participation.

There might be some gifted athletes that to this point have gotten by on their skill alone. There is nothing more damaging to a team than to have a different set of behavioral expectations for those that have some natural abilities. Using a player for their skills at game time despite a poor attitude, laziness at practice or lack of preparation is the wrong message to send to the team.

Make it a goal to have every player on your team earn a start on both offense and defense some time during the season.

Substitutions

Situations in the game will always determine who plays when.

You never want to put a player into a situation that he might not be ready to handle. Players need to develop confidence to handle certain situations and you wouldn't want a player soured on football because he feels he failed the team.

Again, safety should always be a consideration. If you sense fear it is best not to put them into the game. Game speed is much faster than practice speed and opponents will take great joy in hitting anyone on the field. This is a judgement call that each position coach needs to make.

Certain players shouldn't be reserved for mop up duty when we are up or down a whole bunch of points. Do not relegate certain players to special teams only.

Make it a point to surround the “at risk” player with those that are further along. All will benefit from this arrangement. All will be in position to contribute to the team. It is definitely a win-win situation.

Bring out the best in everyone on the team and we will succeed beyond anyone's imagination.

Build for the future

Keep firmly planted in the present, but with an eye to the future. Make a four-year plan, make sure the entire coaching staff is on board, revise and review. Aim to make the 7th and 8th grade seasons one that they are in a position to just cut it loose and play. Graduate them to the next level fundamentally strong, other oriented and young men of great character. Then get to those games on Friday nights and be their biggest supporter.

You will change their life and yours in the process.