

The Role I play in the Education Process

Life Skills through Sports and the Role of a Coach

Most of you reading this are probably involved in athletics. I challenge you to think of all the characteristics that have made you successful in your life and then think about how you got those skills. When I think of mine, I think about competitiveness which I learned on pickup basketball courts throughout the state of NJ that if you lost you were going to wait a hell of a long time before you got back on the court. I think about being able to fight and stand up for something I believe in. I learned that on those same pickup basketball courts where I was willing as a young kid to even stand up to those that were much older and bigger than I was for a call that may decide a game. Confidence, which also came through playing sports and realizing how important that ability plays in achieving and realizing your potential. I think I have a great way of handling adversity and being tough enough to fight through the ups and downs that I have had in my life while still being able to channel my mind to the next most important thing. That was taught while being a part of teams and taking on the ups and downs of seasons. I think I have a real strength in loving to connect and have great camaraderie with all different kinds of people which has certainly helped me to have relationships with all different kinds of people. I also learned that playing on teams with people from all different back grounds and learning to love people based on their heart and souls and not their color or back grounds.

I think about everything I am, and it is because of sports and the lessons they have taught me. I also think about how important of a role I play in young people's lives teaching them the very same lessons that have helped me navigate this game called life. But now I come to this question. Am I alone in feeling frustrated that people in most walks of life have no idea the Life Skills that are being taught in athletics and the role in education coaches are playing? Maybe Covid has brought this topic to my head as it feels like there is a bit of a tug a war of sorts in terms of who or what an essential employee looks like on a College campus. I take great pride in the role I have in the education process and do not want to just be known as a basketball coach. Here is my argument regarding the role all Coaches play or can play in giving our young people the Life Skills necessary for life.

I am not here to downplay the role a professor has in giving kids concrete knowledge for a particular field, but I do want to defend and point out the impact that athletics and coaches have in getting Student Athletes ready for the challenges that may come their way. Handling Challenges may be a good place to start. As all adults know life is filled with many challenges and quite a bit adversity and how you handle the pitfalls of life may very well determine your success. A sports season mirrors life in many ways: there are a ups and downs, good days and bad days and being able to persevere when the going gets tough often times will determine the type of success an individual and a team may have during that season. Is there a better way to prepare for life than to be extremely passionate about a sport that has a road with all kinds of highs and lows? Is there another classroom on a college campus that would better prepare kids for Challenges than a field or court? If we as coaches can teach kids how to handle adversity better that alone is getting a heck of an education.

Like many career choices most sports require quite a bit of teamwork and communication. On the basketball court if you do not learn to communicate with your teammates it will be very hard to have success. A Core Value that I have found to have had a huge impact on our success has been being “Connected”. It has in fact become difficult to see an interview with a Great Leader and not find being Connected somewhere in the interview. Corporations are run in much the same regard as Sports teams when it comes to leadership and the things they value from their employees and Communication and Connectivity are also at the top of the food chain for the “Business World” as it is the “Sports World”.

We talk about Kaizen (a Japanese term that means 1% incremental improvements) on a daily basis. This term certainly refers to making improvements in your sport but just as important for us is the 1% improvements academically and socially that we try to get our student athletes to buy into. Basically, let’s go to bed 1% better in ALL WAYS than when you woke up. I wonder if this is a term that is stressed anywhere else on a college campus? If each person strives for these little improvement’s day in and day out throughout their existence than we have certainly given a skill that will age well.

There can’t be too many more important tools as you go through life than having a good amount of Mental Toughness. Our definition here with Stockton Basketball is ‘being able to concentrate on the next most important thing no

matter what has just happened”. We are talking about staying “Present”. As one goes through life you really learn how important this tool is. If you’re going through the natural tribulations of life whether that is death, divorce, or financial hardship you have got to be Mentally tough enough to carry on. We need our athletes to learn to carry on despite bad officiating, missing a shot, or just plain old bad luck. We drill this stuff daily to the point that we give them maybe a bit more than they can handle in practice, so they are prepared not only for the games but for that thing called life. I doubt there is another curriculum on campus that is drilling Mental Toughness as a **life skill** as a Coach is.

Confidence is another important Value to our program that I find to be equally important as a life skill. A pretty good definition from the dictionary on Confidence is *a feeling of self-assurance arising from one's appreciation of one's own abilities or qualities*. We take it a step further and try to instill into our players how to become more confident. We stress that one’s confidence is a byproduct of one’s preparation. Sounds like this has some real-life value to me. If one is in a sales Career, in the medical field or most lines of work for that matter having a great self-belief can go a long way probably to the point that it would be valuable to have someone mentor one on the importance of confidence and how to become more so. Not sure if this is being taught in the English department but I kind of doubt it.

Another that that I really value in our program is Accountability. We teach our players that being held accountable is the highest form of love. We try and stress that we believe you are capable of great things and when you aren’t reaching those things, we have got to let you know. An athlete is often coached as an employee is led by his or her boss. It is invaluable that those entering the job market have experience being led, coached, and at times criticized so when that happens in their work lives, they are prepared to handle it.

In a recent conversation with Ben Batory who is the SVP/Head of Franklin Equity Trading for Franklin Templeton Investments and former Basketball player at Amherst College he had several insights.

“The current corporate landscape is highly focused on diversity & inclusion, teamwork, dependability, and accountability. Where can you find a pool of available talent that is well versed in all those areas? *Sports!*”

He went on to say, “In my experience, a background in athletics gives an applicant an advantage over their competition: they innately understand the culture of team, and teamwork...they are generally motivated, disciplined, self-starters requiring minimal direction...they maintain focus on tasks at hand until they are completed and they are “solutions-oriented” (rather than “problem-oriented” ...and they tend to be quick-thinking, resilient, and dependable”. “In my view, a background in athletics is a valuable – and desirable – asset (and skillset) to possess, and it’s something today’s employers are actively seeking!”

If quotes from a Senior Vice President of a Major Corporation isn’t enough here are several snippets from articles on the Web that elaborate why former athletes seem to be valuable to work forces across the country.

In an article on CNBC called ‘ “Here’s Why Businesses Should hire Athletes” by former Vice Chair for talent at Ernst and Young([Here’s why businesses should hire athletes \(cnbc.com\)](http://www.cnbc.com)) they found that 94% of C-Suite(a widely used vernacular describing a cluster of a corporations most senior executives) women played sports. They go on to list three reasons why companies are starting to look to the sports world for employees. They find that athletes are more likely to see projects through till completion, they have an uncanny way to motivate themselves and others, and they know how to collaborate and work as a team. The words used to describe former athletes in this article are driven, disciplined, dedicated, focused, and ones that persevere.

In another article in USA Today High School Sports written by Fred Bastie and titled “Top Six Reasons Why Employers want to hire College Athletes”. These Six Reasons are listed. College Athletes are Goal oriented, Mentally Tough/resilient, Work Hard/ Manage time well, Self-Confident, good teammates, and College athletes tend to be better leaders.

In fact, go into a leadership section or a business section of a bookstore and many of the books are one in the same. The two worlds have never been more intertwined. Not to take away anything from teachers and professors I have had in my life many of them were great at what they did but every important skill I use in my job and to navigate a life full of meaning I learned on a ball field, a basketball court and on a team!

I hope fellow coaches or those involved in our form of Real-Life Education found this rant reaffirming and that we as educators, and our value is far more important than winning and losing games, but it is in teaching life skills through

our sports. In closing Coaches, I encourage you to focus on your values and teaching these Real-life lessons to your athletes and I know that if you do a great job of that the wins will be a byproduct of the lives you have changed.

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