

Examining Strategies Outstanding High School Football Coaches Use to Develop Life Skills and Character in Their Players



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

July 31, 2002

NFL CHARITIES GRANT PROJECT

Daniel Gould, Ph.D., & Larry Lauer, M.S.

210 IM Sports Circle Building

Michigan State University

East Lansing, MI 48864-2041

517-432-0175 (phone)

517-353-5363 (fax)

drgould@msu.edu

Karen Collins, Ph.D., & Yongchul Chung, M.S.

University of North Carolina Greensboro

Department of Sport and Exercise Science

Executive Summary

Examining Strategies Outstanding High School Football Coaches Use to Develop Life Skills and Character in Their Players

Need for the Study

“We are on the field and in the locker room to teach our players how to win. Not just on the gridiron, but in any profession they choose. We want to impart habits that will lead them to excellence throughout their lives. Most of all, we want to teach them the value of loyalty, integrity, and teamwork. Once you know how to work with people, you can accomplish anything” (Holtz, 1998, p. 52).

As the above quote by legendary college football coach Lou Holtz shows, many of America’s greatest coaches are not only committed to teaching their players how to excel on the field, but in life as well. Sport psychological research, however, has shown that positive personality and life skill development does not result from mere participation in sport (Hodge, 1989; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995; Weinberg & Gould, 1999). Character is not caught, but taught in sport! Hence, life skill and character development must be systematically taught to players.

Character is not caught, but must be systematically taught to players!

Although a few investigators have designed interventions to teach character and good moral values through sport, (e.g., Miller, Bredemeier, & Shields, 1997) the scientific community has learned little about the strategies great coaches use on a day-to-day basis to develop character and life skills in their players. The present study was designed to remedy this state of affairs.

Purpose

This study was designed to examine the strategies outstanding high school football coaches used to develop desirable personality characteristics and life skills in their players.

How the Study was Conducted

In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 coaches recognized for their outstanding achievements in developing their players as good citizens and productive individuals. That is, all 10 coaches were finalists or winners of the NFL high school “Coach of the Year Program” -- an honor initiated when a coach is nominated by an NFL

player who felt the coach had a major influence on his character and personal development. In addition to the coaches, former players were identified and interviewed for the purpose of gaining an additional perspective relative to life skill and character development.

All of the 19 participants (10 coaches, 9 players) took part in in-depth phone interviews. Coach interviews lasted between 60 to 120 minutes and athlete interviews last between 30 and 60 minutes. All interviews were tape recorded and conducted by the same individual who was trained in qualitative research methodology and has a strong knowledge of both the sport psychology and youth development research.

Structured interview guides were used to organize the interviews. This ensured that the coaches and former players were asked a common core of questions and that the most critical topics for the study were discussed in sufficient detail. The major components of the coach interview included:

- *Coach Background and Demographic Information;*
- *Coaching Philosophy;*
- *Coaching Style Employed;*
- *Goals for Character and Life Skill Development;*
- *Player Characteristics;*
- *Reactions to Several Life Skill Coaching Scenarios;*
- *Greatest Player Life Skill Accomplishments and Disappointments;*
- *Most Frequent Life Skills Issues Facing Today's Players;*
- *Life Skill Coaching Strategies;*
- *Roadblocks Faced in Coaching Life Skills;*
- *Life Skills Coaching Success Rate; and,*
- *Life Skills Coaching Advice and Recommendations.*

The player interviews paralleled that of the coaches as they were asked a similar set of questions. The questions, however, were framed from a player's perspective (e.g., How would you describe Coach X's philosophy? How much emphasis did Coach X place on winning, fun and development? How did he balance winning, fun and development objectives?)

Who were These Outstanding Coaches

Nine of the coaches interviewed were Caucasian with one being Asian American. The coaches were on average 54 years old, ranging from 47 and 68 years of age. Participants averaged 31 years of coaching experience ranging from a low of 22 to a high of 44 years of experience. The majority of the racial makeup of the teams these outstanding coaches were involved with were Caucasian (61.4%), followed by 32.4% African American, 1.7% Asian American, .5% Native American, and 3% listed as other.

These coaches had high levels of both formal and informal training. All 10 coaches were certified teachers and had at least a bachelor's degree, while 7 of the 10

coaches indicated they had received a master's degree. Further, 9 of the 10 coaches reported having had formal coach training.

Overall, the coaches participating in the study had very impressive win/loss records. The coaches had a combined total number of 1,447 wins, 427 total losses, and total 15 ties. This accounted for an overall average winning percentage of just under 77%. On average individual coaches had won 161 games, with the range of wins from 30 to 304 wins. Similarly, the mean number of losses was 47 games with the range falling from 6 losses to 89 losses.

Finally, when the coaches were asked to rank the coaching objectives of fun, winning, and psychological and social development (1 = most important, 4 = least important). Five of 10 coaches ranked psychological and social development as most important to them. Nine of 10 coaches ranked psychological development as most or 2nd most important. Physical development was listed least important 4 times, while fun and winning were considered least important 3 times.

How the Data was Analyzed

The data from the interviews were analyzed in two different ways. First, the interview of each individual coach and player was thoroughly studied and discussed by the four members of the investigative team and an individual case profile or summary was written. And, second, a series of more specific content analyses were conducted across coaches and athletes in an effort to derive common themes or patterns of responses to specific questions (e.g., strategies used to develop player life skills, coaching philosophical principles).

Major Findings

Success in Coaching Life Skills

The coaches were asked a series of questions relative to their success in developing life skills in their players. Success was described in many different ways. However, one thing was clear (and was corroborated in the player interviews)--these award winning coaches played an important role in their athlete's lives and had a good deal of success in developing life skills. The following excerpts clearly demonstrate the success these coaches had in developing player life skills.

He [the former player] did not come from a good home life and drifted from family to family. Fortunately he was picked up by a family that kind of took him under their wings. They told me this kid is an avid football fan and wants to play one day and asked if I would talk to him. So I talked to him and he was a good kid but just running with the wrong crowd. He had no supervision and no boundaries or expectations. We got him into the football program and he was not very big, wasn't very strong or fast but he was willing to do what you asked him to do and worked at it very hard and loved the sport and really caught on. Football became

very important to him and after graduation he told me that he would have never graduated if it weren't for playing football. He left and moved out of state where he got a job at a resort and now he is one of their top sales people. He just got married and has a young baby girl and I went over during spring break to visit him and he is doing very well.

We had an individual that played for us as a freshman and then his parents wanted to send him to a private school up the street so he would get a better education. It didn't happen so he came back to us as a junior and he was worried about how he would get treated because he went away. I told him, we all expressed to him, hey you are working on your own merits if you come back and if you truly want to be part of our program you're going to succeed on your own merits and we are going to give you that opportunity. I think we treated him very well and we supported him a lot and he was able to come in and talk to us. He was a bit of a slow learner type kid. He continued to work really hard and he got hurt and missed half of his senior year because he had a knee injury. We convinced him that he was still part of our team no matter what was going on. At his graduation he had made me a necklace with a lucky stone. He told me the necklace was for all I had done for him and that I was a great part of his life. He wished me all the luck in the world forever and he had typed out a brief message that I still carry it around in my briefcase about how we as coaches were such a positive effect on him and meant so much to him. He went on to a Division III school and didn't get to play a lot but made it through his first three years, had 3 or 4 operations on his knee and he comes back every year to visit us just to say hi and see how things are going. He felt we had a great influence on his life and just how he lived his life.

While these 10 coaches certainly had a powerful influence on players' lives, they were not always successful. One coach, for instance, discussed an unsuccessful life skill coaching experience in the following way:

Well, we had a kid two years ago and he had some skills as a football player but was a very unique kid socially. He was one of the kids that wore the long black trench coat, had long black hair down to his shoulders and was always struggling with teachers, primarily because of his appearance and demeanor with life. He presumed that he was a social outcast but he was a good football player. Every time he would screw up in school I would get him and work with him. We got him through his senior season and he ended up losing his temper during a game and ended up with a penalty. I sat his butt on the bench for the rest of the game and [he] came to me afterwards and apologized. When all was said and done he finished the season and we had our football banquet three weeks after that. Well, we found out that after all of that he had dropped out of school. I had even talked with him about it and told him to decide what kind of image he wanted to project and decide if you want to be part of society or not. We integrated him even though he was different from our normal football players and he was comfortable and happy with it. Then the minute we were finished he bailed out. I did find out that

he came back and did his equivalency exam but I haven't seen him in a year and a half.

These award winning coaches played an important role in their athlete's lives and had a good deal of success in developing life skills.

Life Skill Coaching Lessons

In addition to looking at the overall success of the coaches in developing player life skills and character, more detailed analyses were conducted to examine specific factors involved in life skills development (e.g., identification of one's key coaching philosophy principles, strategies used to develop player life skills). A number of life skills coaching lessons emerged from the detailed analyses of these coaches and their players. Key lessons and guiding principles included:

- These coaches established and maintained relationships with their players by constantly communicating and by emphasizing an open door policy;
- Player development/well-being was a highly rated, if not the highest priority for these coaches;
- Clear expectations were conveyed and players were held accountable for adherence to those expectations;
- Most coaches were very flexible in dealing with players. While being consistent, they individualized punishment relative to expectations;
- Player discipline was highly emphasized;
- Teamwork and understanding roles was highly emphasized and instilled;
- These coaches emphasized goal setting as well as the importance of having a success oriented-attitude;
- Tough love (e.g., reprimanding player behavior not personality) was emphasized by some of the coaches and tied to a caring attitude while holding players highly accountable for their actions;
- Coaches involved stakeholders, such as player parents in their programs;
- Coaches were father figures and well respected, but were not seen as "players buddies;"

- These coaches were satisfied and very happy coaching at the high school level;
- Players were seen as special and as representatives of their school, family, community and the responsibilities of being “special” was emphasized by the coach and stakeholders;
- Most of the coaches were trained as teachers at the school and many had physical education backgrounds;
- Contextual limitations (e.g., school size, socioeconomic status.) were reported to impact the development of life skills in players;
- Coaches modeled and reinforced emotional control;
- Former players consistently came back to visit these coaches and stayed in contact with them via phone calls and letters;
- No one single coaching style was indicative of being a successful coach in this sample. Finding a style that each individual coach was comfortable with was seen as most important;
- Coaching staff variability (e.g., having coaches of different ages and personality types) was reported as contributing to overall coaching effectiveness and because of this coaching staffs were not haphazardly selected; and,
- In school coaching staffs (teacher-coaches) and their resulting prolonged contact with players contributed to effectiveness.

In essence, these 10 outstanding coaches were committed to developing life skills in their players, while also emphasizing program success. Furthermore, they developed a philosophy and stuck to it, cultivated relationships with the players as both athletes and people, and had clear expectations and stuck to these expectations by holding players accountable. These coaches also knew when to be flexible, were organized, consistently communicated their messages, emphasized and constantly reiterated their beliefs and expectations, and they made sure to consistently communicate with all stakeholders (e.g., parents, players, and other teachers).

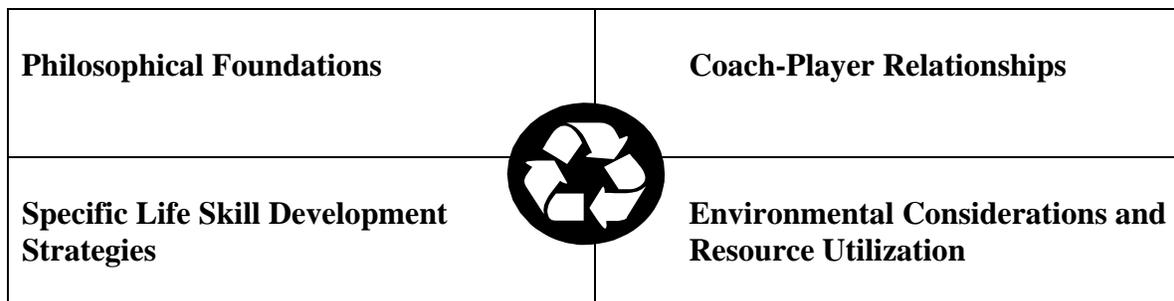
These coaches were committed to developing life skills in their players, while also emphasizing program success.

A Model of Coaching Life Skills

It was clear to the investigative team that these coaches were very effective in developing life skills in their players. While this is not surprising given the fact that these individuals were selected based on their reputations relative to developing players as good citizens and productive members of society, key information was discovered relative to the process of “how” these awarding-winning coaches achieved this objective. Moreover, while specific strategies and principles for doing so were identified, it was also clear that focusing on the specific findings was not enough. The effectiveness of these coaches did not result from the fact that they implemented one or two strategies or held to one or two key philosophical principles. These coaches did not do one or two simple things that magically developed life skills in their players! Rather, coaching life skills was found to be a never-ending process guided by a strong philosophical base, involving the ability to facilitate athlete trust and form strong coach-player relationships. In addition, these coaches implemented specific strategies and follow-up procedures for helping their players develop. Finally, the coaches recognized limits to their efforts, while at the same time found ways to utilize environmental resources to facilitate their life skills coaching.

Based on our findings, a model for understanding the coaching of life skills was developed (See Figure 1). An inspection of this model reveals that there are four primary considerations in teaching life skills. These include: (1) philosophical foundations; (2) coach-player relationship skills; (3) specific strategies for developing life skills; and (4) environmental considerations and resource utilization. Each of these model components and the findings leading to their inclusion will be discussed below.

Figure 1. A model for coaching life skills.



Philosophical Foundations

The first factor in the model focuses on having a coaching philosophy specific to life skill development—although our results show that life skill development cannot be divorced from one’s general coaching philosophy and approach to football. Specifically, there is a need for a coach to have a well-developed philosophy, and it is imperative that coaches place primary importance on the objective of developing their players as good citizens and productive members of society. In this study, for instance, the coaches placed

player psychological and social development as their primary objective with no coach rating it as least important.

It is imperative coaches place primary importance on the objective of developing their players as good citizens and productive members of society.

Having a good philosophical foundation involves more than appropriate objectives. As in the business world (Collins & Porras, 1994), core values are critical. For example, in this study coaches held core values focusing on such things as teaching teamwork, being a “good” person, having discipline, always acting in a classy manner, working hard, always being totally prepared, and respecting and putting one’s family before other needs. These values were repeatedly emphasized, modeled, and reinforced. Deviations from them were not tolerated.

Lastly, these coaches did more than just espouse their various core values and philosophical principles. These principles were infused throughout all aspects of the program and consistently used to make program decisions and guide day-to-day coaching actions. In fact, almost all of the coaching actions discussed in the interviews could be linked tied back to guiding philosophical principles.

Coach-Player Relationship Skills

While having a coaching philosophy that placed prime importance on player life skills development was essential for these coaches, alone it was not enough. Our results revealed that these coaches had strong relationship skills. Specifically, they were excellent communicators and repeatedly emphasized to their athletes the importance of maintaining open lines of communication. Paralleling the recommendations of Martens (1987) this not only involved sending information, but excellent listening skills. Finally, the coaches insisted that those on their staffs also emphasized good communication skills.

While essential, communication was only one element of effective coach-player relationships. These coaches also had the ability to earn the trust and respect of their players. Typically this was done by having a record of success, holding clear expectations, and holding athletes accountable relative to those expectations. Coaches also consistently demonstrated that they cared about their players as people and not just as athletes.

Most interesting was what we labeled the “tough love” findings. These coaches were not afraid to reprimand players when needed. However, when they “got on” players they had the ability to convey to the players that they were attacking their performance or behavior and not their personalities. In addition, there were numerous other examples where the coaches demonstrated their genuine caring for the players.

Specific Strategies for Developing Life Skills

It has been our experience, that when asked, most coaches will indicate that participating in competitive sports builds character and desirable personal qualities in their players. However, these same coaches are often hard pressed to specifically describe how this process takes place. This was not the case with the coaches participating in this study. They identified a specific number of strategies and techniques for developing life skills in their players. For example, general coaching strategies for developing player life skills included such categories as treating players respectfully or team building. In addition to these more generic strategies were much more specific activities such as providing alternatives when cutting players or organizing a team unity night each week.

At the same time, many life skills development strategies were not identified as such. Rather through the process of participation and striving for excellence on the football field these coaches emphasized such as skills and values as discipline, work ethic, and emotional control. The coaches felt that these skills and values would not only facilitate play in football, but could be transferred to other life situations. Thus, in addition to instilling them on the field most of these coaches emphasized using them in off-field activities.

Lastly, what was especially impressive with these coaches was the consistency with which they implemented these strategies. Looking across all coaches it was clear that the players knew what was expected of them and that they would be held accountable to meet those expectations. Coaches were very consistent in emphasizing key life skills development strategies. The strategies were not things said once at the start of the season and then never addressed again.

Coaches were very consistent in emphasizing key life skills development strategies. The strategies were not things said once at the start of the season and then never addressed again.

Environmental Considerations and Resource Utilization

These coaches were optimistic but realistic in their orientations to player life skills development. That is, they realized their limitations as coaches in that they could not overcome all life skills development obstacles and that some players would not develop desirable life skills. In fact, it was felt that some players would develop undesirable characteristics and behaviors as evidenced by comments such as “you cannot reach them all” or “overcome all the problems facing teens today.” These coaches recognized, then, the many outside factors that influence player life skill development such as peers, parents and societal norms.

At the same time, these coaches did not use their recognition of limiting environmental factors as excuses for not trying to develop life skills in their players. This

was very clear in working with parents. While the vast majority of coaches recognized increasing problems with sport parents, most did not view parent behaviors as an insurmountable obstacle that could not be overcome. Instead, they focused on educating, enhancing communication with and working with parents. In fact, these coaches saw parents not as a problem, but as critical resources that could be cultivated to enhance player development.

These coaches saw parents not as a problem, but as critical resources that could be cultivated to enhance player development.

Key Model Considerations

It is important to note that the components of this coaching life skills model are dynamic, highly interactive, and reciprocally intertwined. Thus, it should not be viewed as linear or stagnant.

The model has several uses. First, it allows us to capture key components of the life skills coaching process and provides a framework to integrate specific philosophical principles, coach-player relationship, life skills development strategy, and environmental findings from the present study. Second, it can provide an organizational guide for coaching educators to convey life skills coaching information to young and inexperienced coaches. And, third, the model provides a framework for sport psychology researchers to investigate coach efforts to facilitate player life skills development.

Recommendations and Implications

The results of this study have a number of important implications for both football and youth development. First, the results can be integrated into the NFL/NFF Coaching Academy Educational Program for youth and high school coaches. This program is designed to further increase the quality of youth football coaching in the United States, and in so doing facilitate the growth of the game while at the same time contributing to positive youth development. A significant portion of the program is devoted to enhancing coach's knowledge of life skill development in players and these results show the specific strategies active and very successful high school coaches use to accomplish this objective.

Second, the results of this study show that developing player life skills and character does not have to come at the expense of program success. Indeed, these coaches as a group won over 75% of their games. This finding is extremely important as it is often suggested that character erodes when programs emphasize winning. It is important to note, however, that these coaches, while placing great value on on-the-field success, did not adopt a win at all cost approach. Rather, developing players as people was one of their most highly valued coaching objectives.

Developing players as people was one of the coaches most highly valued objectives.

Third, previous research (Gould, Medbery, Damarjian, & Lauer, 1999) has shown that coaches learn best via examples from their peers. The results of this study provide case studies of respected high school coaches who have successfully contributed to the development of their players as good citizens and productive people. Hence, the results can be disseminated to the community of football coaches via user-friendly case studies and life skill coaching strategy articles, both in football coaching publications and via the coaching section of the newly developed NFL Website.

Finally, this investigation also contributes to the general positive youth development knowledge base. Youth development through sport has taken on increased importance in the general field of youth development in recent years (Larson, 2000). However, little, if any, scientific literature has been conducted on the topic, especially as it relates to coaches and the important role they play in youth development.

Final Thoughts

This study of awarding-winning high school football coaches demonstrates the powerful effects that coaches can have on the lives of the young people they work with. These coaches not only taught their players skills to be successful on the field, but one's that carried to off-the-field endeavors. It is important to remember, however, the considerable sport psychological research shows that young athletes do not automatically gain these valuable life skills from merely participating in sport programs. They must be taught and repeatedly emphasized. Thus, the strategies for coaching life skills identified by these coaches and the identification of factors that influence this process are extremely important. This will help scientists better understand how coaches develop character and productive values in their players and, more importantly, provide specific guidelines for helping other coaches do so.

Research shows that young athletes do not automatically gain these valuable life skills from merely participating in sport programs. They must be taught and repeatedly emphasized.

References

- Collins, J. C., & Porras, J. I. (1994). *Built to last: Successful habits of visionary companies*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Gould, D., Medbery, R., Damarjian, N., & Lauer, L. (1999). A survey of mental skills training, knowledge, opinions, and practices of junior tennis coaches. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 11, 28-50.
- Hodge, K. (1989). Character-building in sport: Fact or fiction? *New Zealand Journal of Sports Medicine*, 17(2), 23-25.
- Holtz, L. (1998). *Winning every day: The game plan for success*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Larson, R. (2000). Toward psychology of positive youth development, *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 170-183.
- Martens, R. (1987). *Coaches guide to sport psychology*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Miller, S.C., Bredemeier, B.J.L., & Shield, D.L.L. (1997). Sociomoral education through physical education with at risk children. *Quest*, 49, 114-129.
- Shields, D.L.L. & Bredemeier, B.J.L. (1995). *Character development in physical activity*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Weinberg, R. S., & Gould, D. (1999). *Foundations of sport and exercise psychology*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

