

# Five More Ways Sports Coaches Model Good Instruction

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An article in the May 2003 issue of *The Teaching Professor* that highlights six ways teachers can learn from coaches got us thinking. The two of us have now been teaching a combined 64 years in college, and we've spent half that time serving as coaches in soccer, swimming, basketball, and baseball on the youth and high school levels. From our experience we've identified five more ways coaches provide a model for good college instruction.

Coaches establish a connection between each practice session and the whole season. We start our season by announcing a set of goals for our players - some general and some lofty. To achieve these goals, we set up a progressive series of practices. To build strong pitching arms, we start pitchers "long tossing" at a distance of 100 feet for 10 minutes. By mid-season the distance is up to 150 feet and the time to 15 minutes. By the time regionals roll around, the pitcher is practicing at 200+ feet for 25 minutes.

For each course we teach we also start by handing out a set of goals, and each period we offer hints and tips that help students achieve these lofty goals. During one class we might workshop a student story, assess that writer's handling of the elements of characterization, and conclude with a creative exercise in which students begin a fictional bio on that story's main character. It's a practice session that moves students forward in their development as writers.

Coaches break down large areas of instruction into manageable skill points. To teach a player to be an effective pitcher, for instance, we don't just send him out to the mound with a ball. Wind-up pitching consists of five units, so we start by showing the player how to take a rocker step, and we make him practice it over and over until his balance is perfect, his arms and legs moving in precision. Practice

doesn't make perfect, as all coaches know; perfect practice makes perfect.

Likewise, in teaching composition we don't place a student in front of a computer and say, "Give me 500 words on something you learned last summer." Instead, we break down all essays into a process of invention, writing, and revision. We emphasize that most essays have an introduction, body, and a conclusion. And those introductions have three or four parts: a hook, a thesis, sometimes a key definition, and a purpose. Besides breaking down the writing process, we work with them on dividing the subject into manageable pieces - not the entire summer but when the family visited Hartland Pond.

Coaches adjust to game conditions, changing strategies mid-game, if need be. In basketball, for instance, if the other team is scoring against our man-to-man defense, we may switch to a 1-3-1 zone or employ a box and chaser to dog a hot scorer. Teachers must be just as flexible, and willing to change their "game plan" when conditions dictate. Rather than being tied to plowing through that lecture or changing at precisely 15 past the hour to learning groups, the effective instructor recognizes when a student makes a salient and interesting point that will take the class into a lively, but unplanned discussion. That teacher adjusts "on the fly;" not sacrificing the overall goal of the session, but responding whenever curiosity is suddenly piqued.

Coaches personalize goals and instruction, intervening one-on-one when they notice players with problems. If our point guard suddenly develops "brick-itis" - her balls clang from the rim rather than swishing through the net - we don't write her off. We watch tape with her, note that her guiding hand is rolling over the top of the basketball, and then devise a repetitive drill that develops positive muscle memory.

In creative writing we also notice bad habits - a writer who falls into the narrative rut of telling rather than showing character - and we switch to a tutorial,

going over the story with the student so as to highlight the less-than-effective method. After showing the student five or six other ways to develop character, then we have the student try them out.

Coaches not only create, but model good learning behaviors. They realize that they can have great influence on their team not only through their instructive words on techniques, conditioning, and strategy; but also through their actions. They serve as role models. They arrive on time for practices and games, keep themselves in top condition, and treat the players fairly, respectfully, and consistently, especially when delivering constructive feedback. Teachers also function as role models for the students they teach, and here they should perform exactly as good coaches do: arrive on time, well prepared and ready to teach, and always mindful that they are "coaching" human beings. •



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