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More Than Lip Service: Coaching as a Christian

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Abstract

"When we help our athletes learn integrity, self-discipline, dependability, humility, and service, we help them develop character."

Posting about growing athletes from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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More Than Lip Service: Coaching as a Christian

Craig Heynen

December 7, 2021

During a typical athletic event in North America, you are likely to see some form of religious gesture. It could be a prayer, pointing to the sky, or even more direct comments during a post-game interview where an athlete credits God for their success. However, a close analysis of these activities and statements often reveals a shallow connection between faith and the sport at hand. As Brian Smith points out in his book *The Assist*,¹ “Saying one thing but either not understanding it or, worse, not actually meaning it—has become the status quo for the Christian sports culture.” (p. 2)

Many Christian coaches have the desire for their faith to be intentionally impactful. They hope that their coaching can shape how the athletes live out their lives not only as Christian athletes, but as Christian *people*. What are some ways that we can convey a deeper and more authentic understanding of Christian living through the sport we coach? Let’s break down what we want to accomplish into manageable concepts. The following examples are ones that I have incorporated, hopefully with success, into my coaching career. Some concepts are modeled from other coaches, while some come from learning about the needs of my student athletes.

Encouragement

Encouragement is a common topic in Scripture. We are called to encourage one another in faith and life.² Friendship is also encouraged in the Bible.³ When athletes are encouraged by their teammates, it builds a greater sense of community and accountability. Christian coaches have a unique opportunity to teach athletes to encourage each other. A primary method is for coaches to directly model this behavior by encouraging their athletes. Encouragement is not necessarily a natural skill, so developing *routines* that include it is a good practice. Team activities could include notes and words of motivation. Team leaders can be assigned specific younger athletes to mentor and encourage. Some sports lend themselves to times when these skills can be practiced (team huddles, time outs). In other sports, coaches will need to make specific efforts to incorporate encouragement.

Ethics

I enjoy teaching a course that focuses on ethics in sports. Ethical issues in the world of athletics and the debates and discussions related to those issues are

interesting. The debates often relate to “gray” areas in sports—these are areas where “gamesmanship” typically comes into play. In athletics, gamesmanship is the unique concept that it is somewhat acceptable to bend or skirt around the rules of the game. The unique nuances to the rules are often very specific to a particular sport. In many cases, the unwritten rules that govern a sport are complex and confusing to outside observers. The ethical aspects of sports reflect the complexity of the humans that participate in them, as well as their moral reasoning.

The way an athlete or coach approaches ethical issues in their sport is significant. Participants often develop a reputation as people of integrity, or as crooked characters that will bend any rule for a competitive advantage. Many of us who have been involved in athletics believe that sports can positively influence moral development; however, research on the topic is conflicted at best. Numerous studies have concluded that sports can often impact moral reasoning in a negative way.⁴ Certainly, moral development in sports does not occur automatically and is not guaranteed.

For Christian coaches, the way we approach ethical issues provides important moments for education. We communicate a great deal to our athletes by being consistent and authentic. The best way to teach ethics is to actively model our own morality. The conclusion, I believe, is that we should handle ethical issues with extra care. The clearer we make our stance to our athletes, the better educators we will be.

Character

Character matters. In a course I teach, students read *Vivid: Deepening Your Colors*, by Syd Hielema and Aaron Baart.⁵ Hielema recounts a story from World War II that models character through the actions of a church community in a small town in France. The Christians smuggled more than 150 Jews across the border to safety in Switzerland during the Nazi occupation. Many years later, a reporter traveled to the town to recount the story, interviewing the wife of the church’s now deceased pastor. The reporter asked, “Not many communities in France helped during the war, but yours did, at great personal risk. Why?” The woman’s first response was in confusion—thinking she had misunderstood the translation, she asked him to repeat the question. Upon realizing she *had* understood the question, she “smiled, gently shook her head, and said, ‘When that boy wandered into town in danger of losing his life, we simply had no choice. We had to try to save his life. Isn’t that obvious? I don’t understand the point of your question.’”⁶

This story sets the stage for the point Hielema makes: character is different than personality, and it is shaped significantly by our spiritual growth. As Hielema states, “We make hundreds of choices every day, ranging from the mundane (which sock do I put on first?) to the more profound (how might I support this hurting person or situation?). All of these flow from the person that has been formed in us, *and* in every decision that we make contributes to our ongoing formation towards the person the Lord is calling us to be.” (p. 72)

I find this way of looking at character helpful and applicable to coaching. Every athlete we coach is different. Their personalities come through in the way they train, practice, compete, and how they act as teammates. But their personalities are not their character. As coaches, we have a great opportunity to help them understand this. We can help them learn that as they mature spiritually, their character is shaped.

When we help our athletes learn integrity, self-discipline, dependability, humility, and service, we help them develop character. When we walk alongside them while providing opportunities for spiritual growth, the advancement in character can be significant. Two specific ways I have seen coaches do this effectively include leadership development and mentoring. Connecting upper class athletes who encompass strong character with less experienced freshmen can be a powerful way for them to grow spiritually and strengthen their own character.

British philosopher Iris Murdoch wrote, “At crucial moments of choice, most of the business of choosing is already over.” This truth rang through the testimony of an elderly French woman and the actions of a church community who risked their lives to bring Jews to freedom. It can also be true for our athletes. Helping athletes develop character prepares them to react to difficult situations in a way that is consistent with their beliefs and values.

Contentment

I have been coaching for over 30 years, and I have coached at the college level for half that time. One of the greatest challenges I have seen athletes face is the struggle for contentment. In the world of sports, success is largely defined by winning, and winning is very difficult. In track and field, there may be hundreds of athletes competing in a meet. Only a handful will “win.” Christian coaches have a great opportunity to help their athletes learn to be content, even when it is difficult.

One effective way for athletes to learn contentment is an outward, rather than inward focus. What I mean by that is shifting from less results-oriented thinking to focus more on how each athlete can work with teammates to be better at what they do. “Process over product” is a sports cliché, but when it relates to contentment, the phrase holds true. It is also consistent with a Christian view of athletics. We don’t compete for wins, awards, or recognition, but to develop the gifts we are given and glorify God through that. It really is a backward view from what we so often see in the world of athletics. But when athletes can learn to approach sports in this way, it gives them a tremendous amount of freedom to compete with joy and confidence, rather than stress and pressure.

Well-Being

On a fairly regular basis, stories break into the news cycle documenting athletes’ traumatic experiences from their coaches carelessness—or, in some cases, downright

abuse. There's no doubt that some of these cases involve depraved individuals preying on young people. The vast majority, however, are the result of coaches losing their sense of care for their athletes under the pressure of athletic success. As a coach, I feel the constant pressure to implement better technology and training practices that professional and semi-professional athletes incorporate. But at what expense?

Recently, an article emerged from the University of Oregon about a prominent NCAA track and field program's strong emphasis on the body composition of their women athletes. The program incorporated very accurate DEXA body scans of the athletes on a regular basis. The coaches encouraged them to keep their body fat percentage in a very low range. However, they did not seem to take individual difference into consideration or to be cognizant of the negative effects this practice was having on women athletes.² When these tensions occur between 'scientific ideals' that the coach can defend and the negative psychological effects on athletes' mental health, a Christian coach has the responsibility to advocate for wellbeing. It can be very easy for coaches to become overly performance-oriented at the expense of the person. Coaches need to better discern when an athlete's health is more important than their athletic performance. Specifically, Christian coaches have a unique responsibility to show their athletes that their care for them as human beings is of primary importance. This is a subtle, yet essential teaching opportunity for those coaches.

This is by no means a comprehensive list. I do not in any way discount the value of Christian practices like prayer and team devotions—we regularly incorporate them into our schedule. But if that is all we do in Christian athletic programs, we are selling ourselves short. Our athletes want to integrate faithful Christian stewardship into their roles. And Christian coaches are interested in the same goals. Even though it is much more challenging, the result will provide a richer experience and a greater opportunity for growth.

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 2. Hebrews 3:13, 1 Thessalonians 5:9-13, 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12
 3. Ecclesiastes 3:9 & 10
 4. *Moral Reasoning in Athlete Populations – A 30 Year Review*. https://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/center_for_ethics/research_fact_sheet.htm

5. Hielema, S. J., & Baart, A. (2013). *Vivid: Deepening your colors*. Dordt College Press.
6. p. 71-72
7. Gardner, S. (2021, October 25). Report: *Women athletes level body-shaming allegations at Oregon Ducks Track and field program*. USA Today. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/college/2021/10/25/oregon-trackand-field-program-hit-allegations-body-shaming/8541161002/>.