

Building Relationships for a Successful Baseball Program: What Works

By: Harry Breland, Oak Grove High School Baseball Coach (Retired)

Many times we as coaches and teachers feel that the success of our program is defined by a winning record and the knowledge of the fundamentals that we possess of the sport we coach. While they are two vital areas for a long and fruitful career, there is much more before we can boast of true success. I am convinced that a coach must possess the ability to form and maintain positive relationships in four areas: players, school personnel, parents as parents, parents as booster club members, and the press. These relationships have certainly served me well over the last 40+ years.

First and foremost, Dr. James Comer from the School Development Program of Yale University states that for significant learning to occur there must be a significant relationship. If a team is to be successful, a significant relationship is of ultimate importance. Just as a coach gets to know the physical and technical strengths and weaknesses of his players in the sport, he must also understand what gives them the ability to perform at their highest level --- the drive, the perseverance, the emotion. A meaningful relationship must be established with each individual player. A coach must recognize and communicate each player's role and its importance to the team as a whole. Some roles are large while some are small, but all are crucial for the total success. That truism will never be so apparent as when in a state play-off game, a "hoss" gets injured and "little Joey" steps up to the plate---eager, nervous, lacking confidence. There is a lump in your throat and your chest hurts as you tell him again that he is ready to go ---your ace in the hole. Does he make it? Well, who knows, we all have hundreds of stories. The most important question is, do you have the relationship with your players that encourage them to succeed and if they don't at first, (you know the drill) try, try again? Few professions provide as great an opportunity for touching lives and making a difference as coaching does.

The second significant area for establishing relationships for a successful program is with school personnel. Coaches, many times, are made to feel that they are the most important persons at the school. A "smart" coach realizes that his players are part of a larger society and need to be successful off the field as well as on it. He also recognizes the disdain that other school personnel can have for the sports program if the coach is "too big for his britches". The major purpose of the high school experience is to educate young people and prepare them for success in life. Some of the ways that coaches can earn the respect of co-workers and also model teamwork to his players are: support other teachers' programs, chaperone dances, proms, drive buses for other activity events, recognize and express appreciation to teachers who attend games, discipline players who misbehave in classrooms, encourage players to concentrate on their class work, attend faculty meetings to build rapport and "pull duty" like everyone else! Be a team player!!

After students and school personnel, comes the relationships with parents... parents as parents, and parents as members of the booster club. When talking to parents, coaches must keep in mind the forefront that children are their parents' most precious possessions and that thought must be treated with utmost respect. While being fair, firm, and honest, a coach must also reach out for the support of the parents and his players. A coach is human, and he makes mistakes and must be able to admit them to keep the respect of the players and parents. He should communicate expectations before the season begins and in a consistent manner adhere to those expectations. Parental support comes when a coach

does what he says he will do, keeps the team at the center of what he does, yet has and communicates genuine concern for all of his players. If we played poorly at Oak Grove, we practiced after the game...everyone practiced... not a few who messed up. New parents might have questioned that strategy... you might too... but that became an expectation and you could hear in the stands, "I know what they'll be doing tonight." It was almost said with pride.

Parents make up booster clubs and booster clubs can add tremendous support to a sports program. A coach must be personally involved in the workings of a booster program. He needs to help establish the purpose of such an organization and to communicate with them about the needs of the program and how they can help. A coach should involve as many parents as possible in projects such as working on the field along side of players and the coaching staff. Nothing builds pride like hard work and fellowship toward a common purpose. Seventy-five percent of the new Oak Grove baseball field was through private donations, fundraisers and actual physical work by booster club parents and community members.

Lastly, building a positive relationship with the press can help to bring recognition for players and promote the success of your team and program. A coach should be accessible to the press and honest in his comments. To build trust, coaches must acknowledge weak spots as well as strengths with sports writers. Many times the media can provide opportunities for players to be noticed by colleges and universities for further playing time.

A winning record and knowledge of the fundamentals may be attributes of a good coach; however, the difference between a good coach and great coach who can build a tradition depends upon the level of positive relationships he forms with players, school personnel, parents as parents, and parents as booster club members, and the press.