Published on Sports Management Resources

Q: Are there management cautions with regard to avoiding imposition of a double standard for male and female coaches regarding athlete retention and satisfaction?

There are many higher education institutions that do not award substantial amounts of athletic aid and depend on partial or non-scholarship athletes to pay a substantial portion of their tuition. At these institutions, to the extent the institution depends on these tuition revenues for maintaining its regular enrollment and economic well-being, athlete retention is often more important than winning and program success as a coach employment expectation. Athletics recruiting is the equivalent of admissions office recruiting with athletics department efforts often considered to be the primary vehicle for institutions to "make" an incoming class that will assure the institution's financial solvency. Generally, there are significant differences between these programs and other scholarship-awarding athletic programs where winning is acknowledged as being more important to the institution than student-athlete retention or student-athlete satisfaction with their athletics experience. These differences also affect how athletes adjust to an environment in which coaches are under a great deal of pressure to win.

These contexts are important to management understanding and avoidance of a "double standard" applied to some female coaches – contending that they have a caretaking and retention obligation while that same standard is not applied to male coaches. Imposing this different standard for female coaches, who are restricted in most athletic programs to coaching female athletes, is not only indicative of lesser respect for female coaches but reflective of an anachronistic and discriminatory gender stereotype which would require that female coaches (but not male coaches) adjust their communication to be less forceful, less demanding or less insistent about athlete effort and the pursuit of excellent performance.

This imposition of a double standard by sports managers is often not intentional. The most common sequence of events is a female athlete or her parents complaining about a female coach being "abusive" or "disrespectful" and the sports manager accepting the complaint as true without investigating whether such coaching behavior was in actuality professional misconduct. Often the coaching behavior is acceptable but demanding instructional behavior. Key to avoiding this mistake is realizing that professional misconduct should never be determined by a student-athlete or parent. Such complaints must be investigated and a determination made by the coach's supervisor, someone with

knowledge of proper pedagogy, on the basis of practice and competition observations- not student-athlete or parent characterizations. It is important to remember that culturally, male athletes and their parents are likely to accept even obvious professional misconduct from male coaches, with parents believing that coaches are making their male children "tougher." In such a context, complaints about a male coach are seldom initiated. A sport manager must therefore recognize that it is more likely that they will receive a complaint about a female coach than a male coach.

Similarly, it is important for sport administrators to understand the common sources of athlete complaints about coaches and avoid overreaction. It is common for athletes to have trouble making the transition from being the proverbial "big fish in a small pond" in high school to being a "small fish in the larger pond" of collegiate athletics. An athlete who was a "starter" in high school may be a non-starter in college or even be at risk at being cut from the team. This circumstance creates considerable angst for the involved athlete and his/her parents.

The athletic administrator should not overreact to male or female athletes transferring out of a sport program. It is common for athletes who find themselves sitting the bench or unable to cope with this new pressure, to transfer to institutions where they are more likely to become starters. For example, NCAA research on Division I men's basketball transfers show more than half of all transfers move to Division II or NAIA or other non-NCAA member institutions. To put transferring to another institution in proper perspective, it should be noted that one in four college students transfer and the rate is similar among athletes, despite rules which impose athletic eligibility penalties in sports like football and basketball.

To complicate matters further, parents are also required to adjust their expectations about the skills and abilities of their sons or daughters who participate in these more highly competitive athletic programs. Hopefully, they provide the appropriate support depending on a realistic and unbiased assessment of their children's skill, ability and effort in comparison to other members on the team, becoming positive forces in the athlete's decision to stay with the program or to find and transfer to a program where they can be starters rather than bench sitters. Unfortunately, some parents simply refuse to believe that their child does not have what it takes to experience success at the higher competitive level. In these cases, it is not uncommon or surprising to find parents that blame coaches or others for their child's lack of playing time, success or satisfaction, especially in this era of "helicopter" parents. These are the most difficult cases for a coach or athletic administrator to handle. The player wants to please his or her parents. Yet, many players are simply not mature enough to undertake a self-evaluation that agrees with the coach's analysis or to independently determine whether they have the ability to succeed. Or, even if the player realizes that his or her skill level isn't at the level required to be a starter, the player may not be capable of taking a position opposite to the opinion of a parent. In such cases the anger of the parent may even fuel an angry reaction by the player. To make matters worse, the player may seek the support of other players on the team who also aren't playing as much or who are not experiencing success. In such situations, it becomes difficult for the coach to develop positive team chemistry because half the team members may be flourishing, excited, satisfied and highly competitive and the other half may be unhappy, dissatisfied or angry. Athletic administrators must therefore recognize that it is common for coaches to face such team chemistry challenges and that player dissatisfaction does not necessarily indicate a coaching deficiency.

There are key practices sports administrators can insist upon to help coaches avoid such challenges. First is making sure that coaches inform athletes and parents about the demands of these highly

competitive athletics programs during the recruiting process. Second, the coach should repeat this message with all team members at the beginning of each year, explaining the intensity of instruction and training at this competitive level, how it differs from previous and lower levels of competition. Coaches should emphasize the importance of athletes meeting with coaches if they have concerns or feel they are having problems adjusting. Third, early intervention by the coach to counsel individual athletes without the necessary skills and abilities and who are unwilling to play a supporting and positive role as a second string player spending most of their time on the bench and supporting their teammates, is essential. Coaches may have to raise the possibility of an athlete leaving the program and finding another institution where they can be happy as a starting player – a continuation of their high school status. Fourth, the athletic administrator should never "second guess" a coach's judgment regarding the talent, playing time or contribution to positive team chemistry of a player or meet with athletes without the coach being present. Such micromanagement is beyond the knowledge base of the administrator, will inevitably result in miscommunication common to three way conversations and will worsen rather than provide a solution to an athlete adjustment issue. The last thing an administrator should do is force a coach to keep a player who is not contributing to the success of a team or who is undermining team chemistry. Fifth, if parents are a part of the issue and the athlete want parents to intercede on his or her behalf, an early informal meeting with the coach, the player and the player's parents might be in order in which the administrator adds a voice to that of the coach, with regard to how common such athlete adjustment problems are. However, such an intervention is often easier said than done when athlete and/or emotions or anger run high. Sixth, the coach's immediate supervisor can be helpful. Student evaluation summaries should be reviewed every year by the coaching staff and administrative supervisor to brainstorm how to tackle team chemistry issues, including the supervisor working hand-in-hand with the coach to help communicate with unhappy parents also be explored. The bottom line is that athletic administrators should not assume that criticism of a coach from a player or parent dissatisfied with the athlete's playing time is an indicator of a coaching problem. Last, but most important, the sport manager must make it clear to coaches if athlete retention a more important consideration than winning with regard to continued employment or compensation and must ensure that such expectations are equally enforced with male and female coaches.

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