

III. Choosing an Assistant by David Hoch

If you only have one candidate for your vacant assistant's position, you might just be grateful to have someone or anyone around to help. However, if you have several individuals who have expressed interest in serving, how can you be sure that you make the best choice? In your search for the best possible person, there are several traits that should be high on your list. A good assistant should be:

1. **Dependable.** This means that he or she will be on time for every practice session, help as requested and meet all of his or her responsibilities. Head coaches have enough to contend with without worrying whether their assistant will be on time or even be able to attend.
2. **Loyal.** It is OK to offer suggestions or debate philosophical issues in private, but an assistant must be totally supportive during practice sessions, games and in public. This also means when talking with parents. A unified front is absolutely necessary for a team to function and succeed.
3. **Understanding** of young people. It is not good enough to merely have knowledge and experience. High school coaches need to teach, nurture and motivate their young charges, and they are all unique. Young people may make mistakes and they definitely learn at different rates, which means that not everything will go smoothly and easily.
4. **Eager** to work with student-athletes. It is important to remember that players on a high school team are still young people. They are not professionals or even high-level collegiate players who can be traded or recruited. Young athletes need repetition in practice sessions and quality instruction in order to develop.
5. **Enthusiastic.** Being excited and bringing high energy to practice sessions every day, sharing their knowledge and contributing to the improvement of student-athletes is absolutely essential for high school coaches.
6. **Positive.** Very few people, and that also includes young people; will be receptive and motivated to work with an individual who is not positive and encouraging. Negative individuals do not inspire, motivate and provide leadership, which is necessary for a team.
7. **Receptive.** While it is OK for assistant coaches to occasionally have differing points of view, they should also be willing to adapt and learn something new in order to fit into the program. After all, in life we all have things to learn and it is important to at least be open to new ideas and approaches.

1. Beyond these basic traits, you will need to consider whether you should hire a candidate with experience or an individual whom you can mold into the assistant that you want. There are benefits to both alternatives. [*“Choosing an Assistant”, continued on next page*]

Someone with previous experience, for example, can offer different points of view, new ideas or perspectives that can help the team. On the other hand, an assistant with previous experience may feel that they know more than you or they may disagree with your approach or decisions. Not only can this be an unsettling, difficult coaching arrangement, it could also cause problems with the team if this chasm becomes noticeable. Players could actually be drawn into choosing sides between the coaches and divide the team.

On the other hand, when choosing a candidate with limited or no coaching experience but one who has many of the desired traits, you can teach and mold him or her into what you need. While you won't have someone to bounce ideas off of, you will have another trusted set of eyes and someone totally working on the same page as you. In the long run, this approach can greatly benefit your athletes.

In addition, the type of assistant that you might choose may vary as you move through your career. Entering my 20th year, for example, I had a great assistant who had been a head coach, possessed great knowledge and often provided me with new ideas. He probably would not have worked as well earlier in my career while I was still developing my coaching philosophy and was not as confident and secure in my own abilities.

If you can also find someone who can balance your strengths and limitations, this can be a major benefit for your program. For example, if you are defense-oriented, having an assistant with offensive expertise will balance out your efforts. Obviously, this consideration is easier in a sport like football with larger staffs, but this can also be done in others. When considering the balance on your staff, you will also want to take a look at organizational abilities – whether someone is quiet or loud and how emotionally controlled both of you would be together.

Even in a sport such as golf, tennis or cross country in which typically there is only one coach for the team, you may be able to find a volunteer to help. It would be helpful to go through the same considerations. The bottom line is that you want to put together the best possible staff for your team.

There is also the possibility that you may not have a say in choosing your assistant. If this is the case, you need to talk with your athletic director and ask for possible input into the decision. Since the relationship between the head coach and assistant is a critical ingredient in the success of any team and program, you will want to have a part in it.

Is there a perfect, ideal pro-typical assistant? Perhaps not. But getting as close as you can to your ideal will be beneficial for your team. Having a good compatible assistant, after all, can also make things less stressful and more enjoyable for you. That alone makes it extremely important to choose the best possible assistant.



Author: Dr. David Hoch - NFHS Coaches Quarterly Publication Committee (Retired Athletic Director at Loch Raven High School in Towson, Maryland, has over 24 years experience coaching basketball at the collegiate and high