

Considerations Involving Team Discipline



By David Hoch

In the ideal world, coaches would teach during practice sessions and provide constructive instruction during games. All players work hard, attend every practice session, are receptive to suggestions for improvement and follow all of the team rules. Throughout the season, there would be no problems and everyone – coaches, athletes, administrators, teachers and parents – would be happy.

However, very few of us, even if we work in an excellent high school, function in a situation where everyone is totally happy and there is complete absence of any problems. It simply isn't the real world. Even in the best of settings, you may occasionally have to discipline an athlete.

While you definitely want well-conceived, written team rules to guide the actions and deportment of your athletes, you also want to have these guidelines approved by your athletic director and possibly also your principal. Why? Because if there is a problem, you will certainly want the backing and support of these two individuals. It is extremely important that your team rules, therefore, are in concert with the established policies and parameters of your school.

In addition, the longer that you are involved in coaching, the more you may find that athletes like an established sense of direction and behavioral parameters. Usually, they will respect and respond well to a coach who maintains a system of fair, firm and consistent discipline.

While all of this is fairly straightforward and seemingly simple, there are some important considerations that may evolve with disciplinary issues. The following should be given some thought.

Do you understand the concept of consistency? It is extremely important for the athlete to know what to expect and that his discipline will be in line with what others would have received for a similar problem in the past. While extenuating circumstances may be involved and could be considered, the possibility of some athletes getting a lighter penalty or perhaps no consequence will ultimately cause major problems on the team. Having or being able to refer to precedence is a good way to ensure consistency of discipline.

Is there room for extenuating circumstances? While the concept of consistency is vital with regard to discipline, there may be special situations that warrant a different approach. There should be little argument that attendance at practice sessions is important for athletes to improve their skills and play. However, missing a practice due to a family

funeral or college visitation certainly is different than skipping for a variety of normal reasons. Is there any leeway within your disciplinary approach for obvious, special circumstances?

If you do take an extenuating circumstance into consideration, you definitely will want to explain the approach and the reasons why to the team. It is extremely important to explain your actions so that you can minimize any misunderstanding and future problems.

What are you trying to accomplish? Ultimately, the disciplined athlete and the entire team should be able to learn something from the disciplinary action. If there was a violation of policy or an on-the-field problem, can this be used to help everyone learn, grow and help avoid future, similar problems? If your disciplinary action is only punitive in nature and there is no associated educational effort, it probably has limited value.

It is really vital to use instances where discipline must be administered as *Teachable Moments* for the team. Without breaking confidentiality or infringing upon a student's rights, explain why this action was important and how it would affect the team. This approach will help everyone associated with the team to gain from a negative situation.

Does the penalty fit the crime? Some coaches back themselves into a corner by assigning the same rigidly defined penalty almost regardless of what happened. Is there a difference between the severity of the team rules or should the first violation be handled in the same fashion as one that was repeated?

While suspending an athlete for a game for fighting during a game or smoking on school property might be suitable, it probably would be considered severe if an athlete was late to a practice session and received the same penalty. One size does not fit all.

Is it possible to separate discipline from conditioning? While asking an athlete to run a few laps for being late might be acceptable, don't assign discipline penalties that normally would be used for conditioning. If penalties involve the same running drills that are used for conditioning – sprints and line drills are usually the most common – athletes become confused and will not exhibit the same commitment and effort to their level of fitness.

Drills for conditioning and those used for disciplinary purposes need to be kept separate and distinct from one another. Athletes need to clearly understand the purpose of what they are doing in practice. 10



Is it alright to use physical punishments? Any physical activity that can lead to injuries and push the athlete to extreme levels as a disciplinary penalty needs to be avoided. It is very clear that corporal punishment cannot be used and has no place in schools.

In some school systems, there are written policies and guidelines with regard to what disciplinary approaches can be undertaken. If in doubt whether a proposed physical penalty would be considered acceptable or corporal punishment, first consult your principal or athletic director.

What is the most effective form of discipline? Since we should always look for educational outcomes and want to avoid purely punitive methods, limiting playing time may be the most effective form of discipline. In addition, not starting an athlete – having him sit out a quarter for a disciplinary issue and playing him when possible in a game – is also an extremely useful method.

Most athletes want to play and start, and not being able to do that seriously gets their attention. As the coach, you really get to the heart of what matters most and this becomes the most effective form of discipline.

Does the penalty inadvertently affect others on the team? Benching a starter, reducing minutes played or removing a player from the squad may affect not only the offending athlete, but perhaps teammates as well. The substitute may not possess the same skills or talent and the team's execution could be altered.

While maintaining behavioral standards is much more important than the final result of a contest, some disciplinary efforts may affect the outcome of a game or a season. Can a penalty be found and used that will minimize the adverse affect on other teammates? Effective discipline needs to consider all aspects and effects.

What should be done if there is a repeat offense? While one of the outcomes of any disciplinary action is that the offender should have learned something and the hope that there will be no future problem. If, however, the same problem erupts again, the same penalty will probably not suffice.

Often a repeated offense will require a new, perhaps more severe penalty. It will also be necessary to consider how many chances an athlete should be given during the season. At some point, repeated offenses or problems cannot be tolerated. Removal from the team is the only solution for the repeat offender with regard to serious violations.

Can student-athletes be involved in disciplinary decisions? If you employ a judiciary board composed of the captains and one or two other leaders on the team, you may accomplish a number of things. The final decision may be better accepted by the offender and the entire team if teammates have a part in the final determination.

Whenever a coach allows for input by athletes into team rules and disciplinary actions, there is a much better likelihood that the team will buy into the recommendations. With input, a decision becomes the players' decision and not something merely handed down to them. Sharing decisions and leadership possibilities is a good technique to consider beyond disciplinary concerns.

What is the long-term effect of the disciplinary action? Not only should the imposed penalty be pertinent to the athlete involved, it should also serve as a deterrent to others in the future. The team members need to be convinced that the violation or behavioral problem was wrong, not in the best interest of the team and that the penalty was appropriate. Without the athletes believing that these premises are correct, the disciplinary approach will not ultimately be successful.

As with most aspects of coaching, maintaining good discipline on a squad can be extremely challenging. It may not be as easy as writing down a few rules on paper and distributing them to the players. Developing an understanding and an approach to discipline involves being receptive to new ideas and doing what is best for your athletes as difficult as it may be at times. **CO**

REFERENCES

Hoch, D. Considerations for Developing Team Rules. *Strategies*. March/April 2003. Vol. 17, No 4. pp. 29-30.

Hoch, D. Shared Leadership. *Interscholastic Athletic Administration*. Winter 2004. Vol. 31, No. 2. pp. 14-16.

Sawyer, T. School Punishment and Physical Education. *JOPHER*. Feb. 2003. Vol. 74, No. 2. pp. 12-13.

Team photo provided by 20/20 Photographic, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. David Hoch is the athletic director at Loch Raven High School in Towson, Maryland (Baltimore County). He assumed this position in 2003 after nine years as director of athletics at Eastern Technological High School in Baltimore County. He has 24 years experience coaching basketball, including 14 years on the collegiate level. Hoch, who has a doctorate in sports management from Temple University, is past president of the Maryland State Athletic Directors Association, and he formerly was president of the Maryland State Coaches Association. He has had more than 200 articles published in professional magazines and journals, as well as two textbook chapters. Hoch is a member of the NFHS Coaches' Quarterly Publications Committee.

