



It's About TEAM!

Coaching Character

What makes high school sports unique from all other levels of sports is that it seeks, above all else, to be a part of the educational experience for its participants.

While the performance of any sports team depends on well designed plays – the Xs and Os – the structure of educational athletics demands that youngsters not only hone their athletic skills, but to make sure that they develop the tools educational athletics provide: lifetime skills like hard work, team work, ethics, integrity, respect, sportsmanship, citizenship and critical skills thinking – tools that will serve the 97 percent of school sports participants as they move on to participate in a bigger game – the game of life.

No one individual may loom larger in this equation than the coach; the closest link to the student-athlete is the teacher-coach. That's right, the teacher-coach.

The teacher-coach, whether or not a school faculty member, is the ultimate delivery system of the real message and meaning of high school sports to young people. It's critical that teacher-coaches have the correct philosophical approach to educational athletics instilled in them first, or else the only message the kids will hear is about Xs and Os, wins and losses, and playing at the so-called next level.

The teacher-coach with the correct philosophical approach to school sports is the coach who seeks to develop each child's character; to be their best as a person first, a student second, and an athlete third. These are the coaches who are long remembered by their former players, players who barely remember the final scores of the games played, but remember the influence coaches had in their personal growth. In other words,

they'll remember the relationship, not the championship ring.

"I think coaches who emphasize character first in their players are those who more successful than perhaps their counterparts who don't realize how important character is to a successful team," says **Jerome Malczewski**, a 1981 graduate of Birmingham Brother Rice who played football at the school before going on to college at the U.S. Military Academy and fighting for his country in Operation Desert Storm. "My experience in playing for Coach **Al Fracassa** was that he develops teams of superior quality because his primary concern is the development of young men of superior character."

"The coach has a dual responsibility, athletic and academic," said **Dr. Blanche Martin**, an East Lansing dentist who was an academic All-America football player at Michigan State University after playing on championship basketball teams in the 1950s at River Rouge High School. "**Lofton Greene** always taught us that first and foremost, we were to be good students because if you didn't do well in school, you didn't play for him. You had to show up to class, be on time – and he was a real stickler about time. If you were one minute late for practice, you didn't play that week. You could be worth 30 points a game. That was the kind of guy he was. He taught us a lot about responsibility, and accountability."

John Sperla is still well remembered for setting a record during the final week of the 1968 Boys Basketball Tournament which stands to this day – scoring 128 points in the Quarterfinal, Semifinal and Final games in leading his Flint St. Matthew squad to a second straight Class D title. He remembers well his coach at the time, **Jack Pratt**, who is still active as a coach with Flint Powers Catholic.



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“It’s a great feeling as a coach to know that there are little kids out there that want to play for you someday.” — Vicki Groat, Battle Creek St. Philip volleyball coach who played at the school for her mother, Shelia Gurerra

Parent and sibling occasionally face each other from opposite sidelines. **Chris Hofer**, who played football for his father, Ken, at Menominee, is now the football coach at Kingsford. He appreciates the opportunity to talk about his dad in coaching terms, rather than as an opponent.

“One thing I always liked the most about my dad was his relationship with his players and the bonds that he formed with a lot of the people that played for him,” Chris says. “That’s probably why I got into coaching the most, just for establishing those kinds of relationships.”

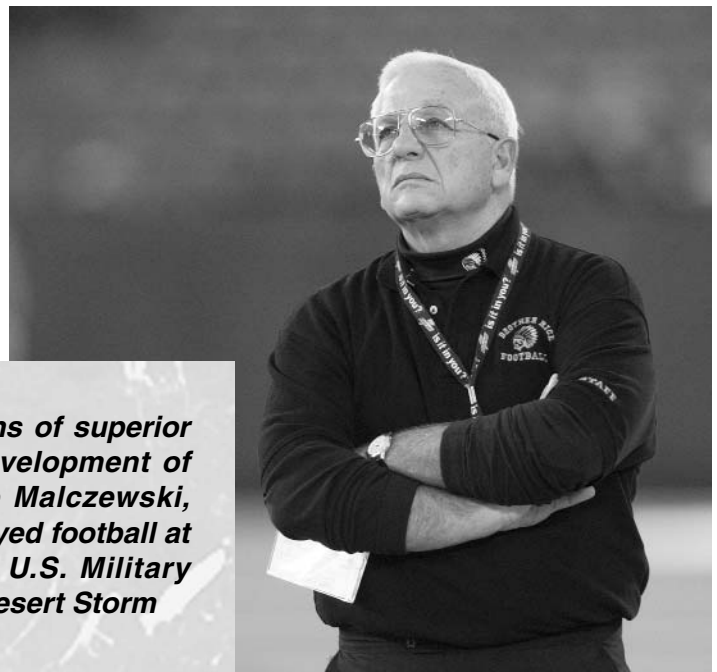
Ken Hofer offers these words of advice for those entering the coaching field: “I think there’s one thing that they really, really have to emphasize, and that’s fairness. We have a tendency sometimes, even though we unintentionally do so, to show more interest in certain groups of kids, and we probably should really be cognizant of that so it doesn’t become an obvious thing. I think another thing is the ‘fine line,’ and by that I mean the fine line between being friendly with the players and being the coach. If you get to that line and you step over it and become friends with them, I think you’re creating a problem. You have to maintain that ‘I’m the coach, he’s the player’ and it has to be the same with every player.”

Student-athletes truly appreciate coaches of character.

“It’s really fun to get on a team and play for someone that really cares about you and really cares about the spirit of the game, not only just winning at all costs, but being a good sport and being someone who lives up to true ideal values and morals in the sport and still playing hard and being successful,” said **Michael Goorhouse**, a former Holland Christian standout in two sports and recipient of the MHSAA Scholar-Athlete Award.

“What he was able to do that some of the other people in my life have not been able to do, is convert what he teaches us in the classroom and what he teaches us on the field and court into experiences that carry over into other aspects of life. He taught us things that I’ve been able to use in my legal career, and that I’ve been able to use terms of raising my own family and coaching other kids.”

“I feel a coach is a role model, a disciplinarian, a teacher, educator, also a mentor,” says **Vicki Groat**, a second generation coach who now occupies the spot on the bench once taken by one of the state’s all-time winningest volleyball coaches, **Shelia Gurerra**, at Battle Creek St. Philip, and who played on MHSAA championship teams for her mother. “I enjoy coaching because sometimes you see kids struggling with a play, an attack or a serve; and you sit them down, you talk to them and to get them to believe in themselves and then they go back out on the court and they do it the right way and they succeed, and you see that enjoyment in their face, that they’re excited about what they just did. And as a coach, that is such an awesome feeling to see a kid go back out and do something great and succeed.”



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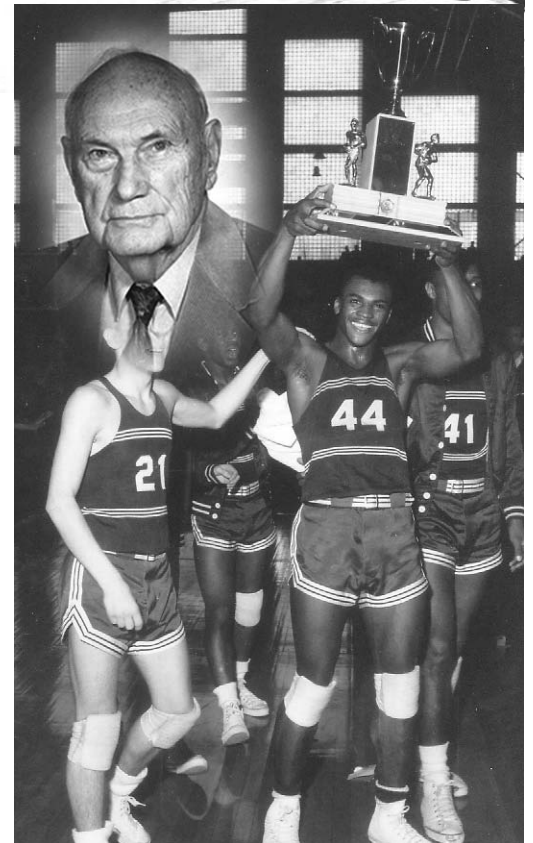
“Coach Al Fracassa (right) . . . develops teams of superior quality because his primary concern is the development of young men of superior character.” — Jerome Malczewski, Birmingham Brother Rice Class of 1981, who played football at the school before going on to college at the U.S. Military Academy and fighting for the U.S. in Operation Desert Storm



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More than 40 former River Rouge players traveled from throughout Michigan and the country for ceremonies at the 2002 Boys Basketball Finals, honoring one of the most storied eras in MHSAA history. Most admitted, however, they returned simply to see Lofton Greene (center, behind banner) once again, a testimony to his influence as a coach, teacher, and person.

“Lofton Greene always taught us that first and foremost, we were to be good students because if you didn’t do well in school, you didn’t play for him. You had to show up to class and be on time – and he was a real stickler about time. That was the kind of guy he was. He taught us a lot about responsibility, and accountability.” — Dr. Blanche Martin (with trophy, left), who played for legendary coach Lofton Greene (inset) at River Rouge



MHSAA File Photo

“As people, especially on the court, she expected us to be great basketball players. Off the floor, she wanted us to be great students,” quotes former Flint Northern basketball standout **Deanna Nolan**, who now plays professionally for the 2003 WNBA World Champion Detroit Shock, about her prep coach **Leteia Hughley**. “I learned a lot from her, not only on the court, but off the court. It was just the type of person she is, and how she deals with people in general. You have to be a people person. That’s one of the things you learn in basketball; you play with all different kinds of people and you have to learn how to get along with them.”

In school sports, the enthusiasm that shoots through a community when a team is successful on the playing surface is incredible, and it centers on the coach. But there’s nothing educational about that by itself. It’s one thing to attract kids and attention by winning games – scores that will be forgotten over time and trophies and medals which will tarnish. There are a lot of people who can that. It’s the true coach, the true teacher-coach, who draws people to the process because they produce individuals of championship character.

“It’s been really nice for me to have him as a teacher where

he encourages me in and out of the classroom at the same time,” says Goorhouse of his high school tennis coach **John Knoester**.

“Even my nieces come up to me and say, ‘Aunt Vicki, I hope to play for you someday.’” Groat says. “Even a lot of little kids out there see you around school, see you at the other athletic events and come up and tell you they can’t wait to start playing volleyball. It’s nice. It’s a great feeling as a coach to know that there are little kids out there that want to play for you someday.”

A truly successful coach is the one who balances athletic and academic achievement, who provides our kids with the tools to move on, who realizes that the L column – the Life column – is more important than the Winning column.

“He taught us to be responsible young people, live up to his expectations, and the outcome would take care of itself,” said Martin of Greene, the state’s all-time winningest boys basketball coach.



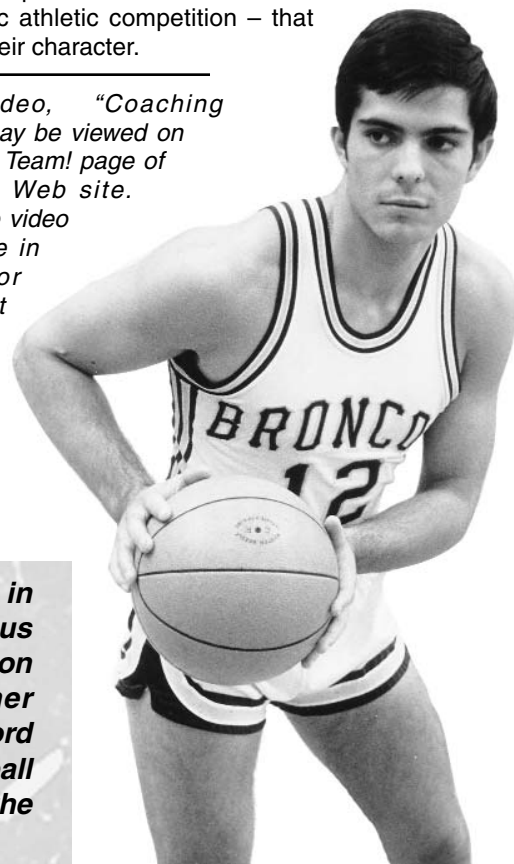
“Off the floor, she wanted us to be great students. I learned a lot from her, not only on the court, but off the court. It was just the type of person she is, and how she deals with people in general - you have to be a people person.” — Deanna Nolan (left), former Flint Northern basketball standout now playing for the 2003 WNBA World Champion Detroit Shock, on prep coach Leteia Hughley.

their parents and the community at large.

- Avoid talking about kids playing at the next level. Who realize that the top players on the teams will distinguish themselves - that they don't need the coaches help.
- Do their best to make all players feel that they're contributing to the team.
- Serve as role models. For example, as a coach, you can't engage in unsportsmanlike behavior toward someone else on the other team or an official and not expect your own team to follow suit.
- Embrace officials at the high school level as teacher-officials. Coaches who understand the important role officials play in this educational process. Coaches who avoid making their relationship with officials adversarial.
- Remember that every time they go to practice or go to a game that they're educators.

Teacher-coaches make the difference in school sports. They affect young lives in a way no one else can. They can be the strongest part of our after-school activities if they do everything, every day in every way to teach our young men and women what's truly important and balanced about interscholastic athletic competition – that it's building their character.

The video, “Coaching Character,” may be viewed on the It's About Team! page of the MHSAA Web site. Copies of the video are available in VHS tape or DVD format at a cost of \$10 each from the MHSAA Office.



“I think the first thing that coaches should know is that the foundation of successful leadership is caring for the people you're leading,” Malczewski adds. “If they don't have that really heartfelt love and sincere concern for their players, they're probably not going to be successful. More importantly, they're not going to develop the type character players we want to have come out of the high school sports programs so they can be successful young men and women in college and can be successful men and women when they're working or when they have families.”

These are coaches who embrace all the individuals on the team; whether it's in the classroom during the school day, or on the competition surface after school. Coaches who keep the correct philosophical approach about school sports.

Coaches who:

- Have an approach to the game that is philosophically in step with the mission of school sports.
- Believe educating young people comes ahead of wins and losses. Who communicate that to student-athletes,

“What he was able to do that some of the other people in my life have not been able to do is convert what he teaches us in the classroom and what he teaches us on the field and on the court, into life experiences that carry over into other aspects of life.” — John Sperla (right) , who went on a record scoring spree for Flint Holy Rosary during the 1968 basketball tournament, speaking of Coach Jack Pratt, who remains in the profession today