Building Better Leaders

Having been involved in athletics as a coach and athletic administrator for 24 years, I have learned that one element that separates good teams from great teams is strong leadership. I firmly believe we can teach athletes to become leaders or in some cases better leaders. Coaches spend a tremendous amount of time on skill development and sport specific strategies, but how many coaches are spending time developing leaders in their program, and how many athletic administrators are supporting leadership development? As an athletic administrator, it is my responsibility to teach our kids how to lead others and encourage our coaches to do the same.

Certainly, there is not one correct way to train our future leaders. My focus on leadership training is to expose student athletes to different leadership styles, concepts, and ideas; basically I try to give them as many tools as possible for their tool belt. This will be an overview of the different strategies I have found to be successful, but many athletic administrators may have to modify some of the ideas to fit their school or situation. The first element of a strong leadership program is creating a purpose statement explaining the program’s aim and goals. This will be different for each leadership group or each school, but it is vital to your program’s success. At Lee’s Summit North High School (LSN), our goal is to provide effective leadership skills to all members for the benefit of personal as well as team growth. We strive to create a positive atmosphere for all our teams and entire activity program. This purpose statement prominently appears at the top of all monthly agendas to reinforce the program’s goals and aims.

The first challenge in leadership training is deciding whom to train. In talking to other AD’s from around the country, many have formed a captain’s council comprised of the athletic teams’ captains. In order to work with more people, we have a Student Activity Advisory Council (SAAC). SAAC is our group of students who demonstrate leadership qualities, but need additional training on leadership skills and strategies. The existing SAAC at my school did not include freshmen students. One of the first changes I made was to include freshmen into this group. At LSN, we support a number of freshman only teams and recognize those teams also need strong leadership. It is important to start teaching young student athletes how to effectively lead from the beginning of their high school careers. In the spring of each year, I email the high school staff and our feeder middle school staff explaining the SAAC program and requesting they complete a recommendation form to identify any students they feel would be good additions to the SAAC program. This includes students who have good attendance, are strong academically, and participate in multiple activities. I also solicit opinions from current SAAC members, and they are required to recommend two other students to join SAAC. After collecting all the recommendations, I begin screening them. There are certain criteria for student athletes to be considered for SAAC membership; these criteria include maintaining a 3.0 grade point average, involvement in more than one school activity, and mandatory attendance at meetings. When finalizing the final list of SAAC members, I also aim to represent all groups which is why multi-activity participation is emphasized. Typically the total number of participants is around 27 with five freshman, seven sophomores, seven juniors, and eight seniors. This allows me to add students each year in any grade. All students who are admitted into SAAC are required to sign a commitment form which emphasizes citizenship and sportsmanship requirements as well as grade expectations (3.0) and attendance requirements (90% of all meetings); parents are also required to sign the form.

Once the group has been selected, there is a May meeting prior to summer. In this meeting we start to get to know the new group additions, utilizing ice breaker activities, and we elect officers for the following year. We have a president (senior), a vice president (junior), and a sergeant of arms (any class). We also start preparation for the Missouri State High School Activity Association (MSHSAA) Sportsmanship Summit which occurs over the summer. This summit allows the students to listen to some fantastic speakers while also meeting fellow student athletes from all around the state and participating in some leadership training activities.

Once our school year begins, we build on our summer leadership training. Our leadership program is comprised of three main parts-- a book study or lunch and learn, a student led activity session, and community service. The first component is the lunch and learn. I meet with this group monthly during lunch. I provide lunch, and for about an hour we have multiple activities and discussions. The sergeant of arms is responsible for creating the ice breaker activity. We then open with discussion on relevant topics to our school activity program. Previous discussion topics have included how to increase student participation at events like tennis and swim and dive as well as how to appropriately deal with social media as student athletes. The third part of the lunchtime meeting is discussing the book for the year. The book allows us to have more meaningful discussions on leadership, and each year a different book or pamphlet is utilized. In the past few years we have used *Captains- 7 Ways to Lead Your Team* by Bruce Brown, *Team Captains Leadership Manual* by Jeff Janssen, *Becoming a Team Leader* by Cory Dobbs and *The Hard Hat* by Jon Gordon. These books are between $5 and $20, and I budget for them yearly. I think it is important to provide students with resources to utilize and start their own leadership library. The above books are great resources which allow the student athletes to share some of the activities and drills with their teammates. We typically discuss a chapter a month depending on the text. The discussions are sometimes led by a SAAC member, or myself, or occur via small group discussions. All of the SAAC members are encouraged to read these resources early in the year and ask questions even if we have not covered the information as a group.

I have also utilized two other resources in our leadership training program. Dr. Greg Dale, Director of Sport Psychology and Leadership Programs at Duke University, has been a fantastic resource. Dr. Dale has presented to our coaches, sports parents, and our leadership group. The time he spent with our leadership group was amazing; it gave them a lot to think about and the follow up discussion was awesome. We also have partnered with the Missouri National Guard. They have presented leadership strategies during our lunch and learn. They also had our SAAC group perform four different leadership activities or physical/mental challenges during one of our lunch and learn times. It was a great way to start the year and foster group cohesion as the members of SAAC were split into four groups, and they had to work with different people to problem solve. The Missouri National Guard is an invaluable and free resource.

The SAAC members liked the Missouri National Guard activities so much, that during our end of the year evaluations, many members expressed a need to do more leadership activities in SAAC. This evolved into us meeting a second time each month, so we decided to meet during our school wide intervention time once a month. For these meetings, SAAC members are split into groups with each group signing up to present during one of the months. Each group consists of four to five members, and their responsibility is to create a lesson/activity on a different aspect of leadership/teamwork. One of the goals we have is making sure that our SAAC members take what they learn and transfer their leadership skills training to real life application with their teams or groups. In order to assist with this, each SAAC member invites a teammate to participate in our leadership activity time. As a result, over the course of a year, eight additional teammates per sport have also been involved in a leadership activity leading more students to being trained and understanding some of the leadership qualities we emphasize. These activities are completely student driven. My role is as an observer and supervisor only. I have found that this is a valuable piece to our overall leadership program.

The third element of our leadership program is the emphasis on servant leadership and community service. We have four main projects and select other secondary projects on an as needed basis. Each officer is responsible for a minimum of one main project with the president responsible for two projects. One of our main projects entails hosting a Macho Man volleyball tournament which is a boys’ volleyball tournament with the winning team playing the girls’ varsity team in the finale. This fundraiser benefits a memorial scholarship fund in remembrance of our former volleyball coach’s stillborn baby that is awarded annually. Our SAAC students promote the event, collect gate money and entry money, establish the brackets, score keep, officiate, and organize the evening. The second project we commit to is the local Polar Plunge fundraiser that benefits Special Olympics. The third main project is a senior citizen prom that we promote, organize, and host for the senior citizens in our community. We host it the weekend before our prom at our high school. We contract a DJ, provide snacks and even crown a prom king and queen. Our SAAC members assist in all aspects of the event even including dancing with any and all of our guests. This is a phenomenal evening completely organized by SAAC members. The fourth major project is the SAAC underclass representatives work as graduation ushers greeting guests and distributing programs. Some of of our smaller projects include working with our feeder elementary schools assisting with general yard work and mulching as well as assisting at Coldwater, a local charity located in Lee’s Summit. All these projects serve two main purposes. One, the students are learning the importance of leaders contributing to their communities. Second, these projects prompt our group to work closely together and foster bonding and group unification. It is amazing to see this group evolve and grow during our community service events.

Undoubtedly, as with any program, it is critical to assess the SAAC program’s success. This is done in a few different ways. First, at the end of each year, I have SAAC members complete an online google survey form. It allows me quick, anonymous feedback that I have used annually to make any necessary changes and enhance the program. These surveys also include a short answer or individual written response section. Another of our evaluations includes senior exit conversations. These exit interviews inevitably provide honest and useful feedback. I also informally survey my head coaches to discern if they notice application of SAAC leadership skills. The coaches also need to be informed of the monthly leadership skills being taught and discussed so the coaches can assist with reinforcing the application of these skills in determining the program’s success. This communication happens via email or at our monthly coaches’ meeting.

A lot is asked of SAAC members, and recognition when people go above and beyond is always appreciated; therefore, each senior member is awarded a plaque at our annual senior athlete award luncheon. It is a small token of appreciation for all their time and dedication. In the previous evaluations, many SAAC members have commented, “This is the coolest award I have ever received,” as they especially like being recognized in front of their peers. Each SAAC member also receives an annual student designed t-shirt. These t-shirts are worn when we perform our community service projects and always contain a leadership quote. Last year’s quote was of Michael Jordan’s, “Earn your leadership every day.”

Overall, I believe in the successes of a strong leadership program and the feasibility of other schools adopting or incorporating a similar program. I have seen our student athletes evolve into leaders. I have witnessed many of them emerge as team leaders even if they are not appointed as a team captain or co-captain. I also have noticed greater support among all of our programs by our student athletes and in turn our student population. I believe this is due in large part to the training and discussion that has occurred during SAAC. So, our activity department has certainly reaped the benefits of the student leadership training which includes lunch and learn, student led activities, and community service. The importance of a good leadership program was summed up best by Vince Lombardi, who once declared, “Leaders aren’t born; they are made. And they are made just like anything else, through hard work.”