



DYNAMIC PRACTICES:

Where Team culture Is Created

From the book: "The Double-GOAL COACH", by Jim Thompson

"If perchance you come to practice one day and

Aren't enthusiastic, pretend."

--Harry Sheehy, *Raising a Team Player*

Of the many challenges that coaches face, making the most of limited practice time is one of the most difficult but potentially one of the most rewarding. Now we face our attention to how a coach can plan and implement dynamic practices that allow a team culture to take hold. The strategies laid out in this paper will allow you to take your players to a new level of team culture and success.

THE COACH AS CATALYST

Whether practices are dynamic and contribute to a team learning to hum depends largely on how much the coach is willing to prepare. And preparation begins with your mental attitude.

The coach must be the catalyst for a team to hum because players tend to respond to the coach's self-confidence and enthusiasm levels. When the coach is down, the team tends to be down. Lynn Frank, my boss at the Oregon Department of Energy, used to say that he could tell what kind of a mood I was in on a given day just by walking around in my area, even if I wasn't there at the moment. My invisible mood visibly impacted the moods of the members of my work team. I learned over time that I could control what I projected if I prepared adequately.

PREPARATION—PART 1: MENTAL PREPARATION

Mental preparation is especially important for volunteer coaches who often come to practice from work. If we've had a good day at work, it may be relatively easy to start practice in an upbeat mood. But if it hasn't been a good day at work, or if we've had to

leave important tasks undone, we can easily let the negative feelings linger and affect the attitudes of our players.

Coaches need to take a moment or two before meeting their players to prepare themselves mentally. This may mean sitting alone in the car for a couple of minutes before entering the gymnasium or practice field. You might say to yourself, “I’ve had a bad day today, but *now* I get to go and coach my team! And I’m getting excited about it!” Initially this may be a matter of talking yourself into it, but if you are like most adults who love sports, it doesn’t take long until you really are excited about being able to work with your team.

Dick DeVenzio, author of *Stuff! Good Players Should Know*, said it well: “Athletes go through school playing ‘mere games’ and preparing for life, for becoming doctors and lawyers and so forth. And doctors and lawyers wait for five o’clock so they can leave work, maybe catch the game of the week on TV, and sit around and talk of the good old days—when they were young athletes.” But you aren’t limited to talking about the “good old days.” You get to coach! And looking back on my coaching career, the times when I was coaching were good days indeed! Reminding yourself of how fortunate you are to be able to share the joy of your sport with your players can help put you into a positive frame of mind.

PROJECTION

Now you are ready to walk onto the field to meet your team. UCLA softball coach Sue Enquist stresses to her players that there are only two things they can control: their attitude and their effort. This is the moment to work on *your* attitude.

It’s important that you project a demeanor that matches how you want your players to practice. You will be back from your players the energy and enthusiasm you project. If you want them to be excited and enthusiastic about being able to practice your sport, then you need to project that same excitement and enthusiasm. If you want them to feel confident about their ability to play their best even against a challenging opponent, then you need to project that confidence.

Taking some time before you enter the practice area to prepare mentally will in turn allow you to set a tone of confidence and enthusiasm right from the start. So take time right before you get out of your car to get yourself ready to project the kind of attitude you want your team to exhibit.

In addition to having the right mental attitude, it is equally important to have a written practice plan. A practice plan will make it much easier to project confidence and make the most of your limited time.

PREPARATION—PART 2: A WRITTEN PRACTICE PLAN

In my many years of coaching, I estimate that I prepared a written practice plan about 75 percent of the time. Whenever I didn't have a written plan, I regretted it. The time seemed to flitter away, and at the end of practice I felt that we hadn't learned as much as we might have. Having a written plan helps you to stay on the task and keeps you from being buffeted about by the whims of the moment.

When I moved from coaching youth basketball to high school, I thought I would finally have plenty of time to cover everything I needed to cover. Before, I was limited to 1 or 2 hours per week. Now we could practice 2 ½ hours, 5 days a week. And we could even practice on Saturday from time to time. Guess what? I still found at the end of a week's practice that we hadn't covered everything we needed to know. For a coach, there is never enough time to practice.

What happens when coaches commit themselves to a written plan for every practice? They have to think through what is going to happen in the limited time available. The first benefit of a written plan is that it forces us to come to grips with how little practice time we actually have compared with how much there is to learn about our sport. We have to prioritize to make sure the most important things get done. And we need to recognize that we can't do everything. If a particularly important drill takes 15 minutes for players to benefit from it, then allocating 5 minutes is a waste of time.

HOW KIDS LEARN SPORTS

There is another important reason to do the hard work of planning. Kids learn sports best through action, by doing rather than standing around listening (or, as often is the case, not listening!). Yet in most practices I observe—and I have seen many over the years—most of the players are standing around most of the time. When I see a team where most of the players are involved and active most of the time, I know I am watching the fruits of a coach who has spent significant time planning his or her practices.

John Kessel of USA Volleyball stresses that it is the number of "touches" a player gets that causes improvement. If a player gets more shots, digs, at bats, dribbles, passes, and so on, she will improve more rapidly. When 11 players are standing around watching 1 player take a shot, they are missing out on the chance to improve.

Many times it can be as simple as adding one or two additional steps to a drill. For example, for a shooting drill in basketball, add an offensive and defensive rebounder and a player to receive an outlet pass. Now the shooter shoots, the defensive rebounder blocks out, the offensive rebounder goes for the ball, whoever grabs the rebound makes an outlet pass to the player who dribbles to the shooting spot to shoot, with the others rotating into new positions. You now have four people engaged instead of one. Add a second or even third group of 4 to the same basket and now you have 8 or 12 players involved.

The chaos of having three different people shooting and rebounding at the same basket can be a mental exercise. You can tell players that if they can concentrate when all this is going on, they will be better able to focus during the normal chaos of a game. Before the drill, encourage players to focus on their shot, on rebounding their ball, on making a good pass to their teammate. Afterward, you can use this as a teachable moment by asking them to evaluate how well they think they did at focusing and what they might do to improve their focus the next time they do this drill.

With some sports it can be more complicated to design drills that involve everyone. Baseball and softball practices are notorious for kids standing around, but it is possible to design them for total involvement. For example, one player (or adult) pitches to the batter. After each pitch that is not hit by the batter, an adult to the right of the plate hits a grounder to a different infielder, and another adult to the left of the plate hits a fly to a different outfielder. Add a runner for every batter who circles the bases. If you still have players left over, you can have them take turns giving each other soft tosses that are batted into a fence while they wait to take the plate. Of course, safety needs to be factored in so that no one gets hit by a bat or a ball coming from an unexpected direction. But it can be done, and every child gets many more touches at the plate, in the field, and on the base paths.

- **The spice of practice:** As with life, the spice of practice is variety. Mixing up activities makes practice more fun. A team that spends an hour straight on a single activity is going to be less excited about it than a team that spends the same amount of time on the activity but in smaller chunks and approaching it from different angles. Using a variety of drills to teach the same skill also keeps it interesting for players. Again, it is planning that allows coaches to build in variety to their practices over time.
- **Why coaches don't plan:** In workshops all over the United States, I have asked coaches if they regularly prepare a written practice plan. Rarely do more than 10 percent of the coaches raise their hands.

If there are so many benefits of planning practice sessions—and there are—then why don't more coaches plan more often? We could say that it's because most youth coaches are volunteers who have lots of other things to do. This is true, but the real reason why coaches don't play their practices more is because planning is hard work! For most people, planning is not fun. Thinking is hard work and planning is thinking of the highest order. It involves trying to anticipate the future ("I think we can get this conditioning drill done in 10 minutes, which leaves 15 minutes to scrimmage if the defensive drill doesn't take more than 15 minutes..."). If you plan your practices, you have an opportunity to gain a competitive advantage because most coaches don't do enough of it.

A BAD WRITTEN PLAN

A written plan, even a bad one, gives you a framework to tackle a problem. In *Sense making in Organizations*, Karl Weick relates an amazing story about a group of soldiers

lost in the Alps in the winter. Their food was running low, they were cold, and they had no idea how to find their way back to civilization. Then one soldier found an old map deep in a pocket of his winter coat. The soldiers were ecstatic at finding the map and began to follow it. Some hours later, they came out of the wilderness and made their way back to their camp. When they were debriefing with their commanding officer, he asked to see the map that had saved them. After a quick glance, he realized that the map was for a completely different area than the one from which they had emerged. It was a map of the Pyrenees.

The soldiers had been given hope by the map and were able to find their way home even though the map was incorrect. Without the “bad” map, they were victims who would have perished in the cold mountains. With it, they figured out how to save themselves. Having no practice plan makes you and your team a victim of whatever happens that day. Having a plan, even a bad one, turns you from victims to doers who can figure out how to get done what you need to get done in spite of the deficiencies of the plan. The conclusion: a bad written plan is better than no plan.

You can always deviate from your plan, which shouldn't be set in stone. For example, you may have thought you could cover a new skill in 10 minutes, but after the 10 minutes you realize your players haven't gotten the hang of it, you can make an adjustment and allow more time for it (which means something else will not get done). Or you can make a note to cover this skill again at the next practice.

You can also seize opportunities that arise. For example, a player may get discouraged over being unable to make a play. You may decide that this is an opportunity to reinforce the idea of what a winner is on this team (reminding players about the ELM Tree). You may cut short a drill to have a team conversation about the importance of effort and not allowing for discouragement when things don't come easily. This is not necessarily something that you can plan for, but you may want to seize the opportunity when it shows itself.

If you save your practice plans for the next season, you will increase your effectiveness as a coach, especially if you take notes to remind yourself what worked and needs to be modified or changed completely. A written plan is a tool to make the best use of a very scarce resource—practice time—either by following the plan or by selectively deviating from the plan when it makes sense to do so. Without a written plan to guide your daily practices, your team is simply not going to achieve its potential.

