BOOK REVIEW

Case studies in coaching: Dilemmas and ethics in competitive school sports.

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Case Studies in Coaching: Dilemmas and Ethics in Competitive School Sports

Coach Wooden, like most truly “successful” coaches, understood that winning and losing games was secondary to teaching life lessons:

“The University of Chicago’s Coach Amos Alonzo Stagg was congratulated by a local reporter after a good season back in the 1920s: ‘You did a great job!’ Coach Stagg paused, then replied, ‘I won’t know how good a job I did for twenty years. That’s when I’ll see how my boys turned out.’ The wins and losses matter: ‘How my boys turned out,’ mattered more to Coach Stagg. It mattered more to me too.”

-Coach John Wooden

Middle school and high school coaches typically execute their practice plans with expertise, yet they sometimes are less prepared to deal with overly involved players, parents, and myriad pressures associated with coaching. Former coaches Baghurst and Parish offer assistance in dealing with some of the challenges faced by coaches in Case Studies in Coaching: Dilemmas and Ethics in Competitive School Sports. Drawing upon the coaching experiences of 17 contributors of actual real-life situations, the authors present 21 cases in which coaches are confronted with personal, professional, or ethical issues they must immediately address. Although each case study is brief (2-6 pages), the authors provide sufficient background information to contextualize the situation so the reader understands the realities and challenges facing the coach. The authors suggest that the decisions made or actions taken by the coach potentially will affect his or her career, make a difference in the lives of players, and impact the team, parents, school, and community.

This book uses a story-telling, conversational approach with the goal of engaging the reader in the situation with the coach as the focal point. The authors seamlessly blend descriptive information with quoted exchanges between coaches, players, and other individuals involved in the scenario. Specifically, the cases deal with coaching styles, use of facilities, academic ineligibility, running up the score, work-job balance, coaching girls versus boys, coach-to-coach and coach-with-athlete relationships, handling pressures from boosters, parents, and school administrators, athlete injuries, adherence to school and team policies, cheating, eating...
disorders, and harassment. The authors move the reader through the circumstances of the situation toward the issue or problem ending with the coach at a crossroads or with a question about what to do next. This is an intentional segue to the questions that follow each case. These questions, which always begin by asking the reader to identify the stakeholders, ask what mistakes the coach might have made, what the coach could have done differently, what possible actions should the coach be taking, and who might be asked to help resolve the problem? Each chapter also provides additional readings (books, articles, and online resources) that can help coaches further their abilities to be better prepared to handle challenging situations.

Students in coaching education or coaching certification programs could potentially benefit from examining these case studies, which the authors suggest are presented in order of complexity. Beginning coaches also could profit from considering how they would deal with real issues they may confront. One or more of these cases might be used in coaching clinics with coaches discussing alternative approaches to address the issues.

A common thread running through many of the cases is an emphasis on winning with championships and games won seemingly the overarching goal of the coaches. This perception may not be the stated goal of interscholastic sport programs, so it therefore leads to a quandary about whether the identified problems are directly connected with an over-emphasis on winning. Some of the issues or problems facing these coaches seem to be self-imposed because of their approaches to dealing with or actions taken toward players, parents, and others. These problems highlight the importance of quality coaching education programs, coaching clinics, written requirements for coaches, and timely athletic director guidance provided instruction in and expectations for appropriate behaviors and actions. Three of the cases deal with coaches playing or pushing athletes who are injured, actions that not only are ethically unacceptable but potentially litigious. Coaches have to know and understand this, or they should not be coaching.

Other cases represent real challenges for coaches through no fault of their own. For example, the time demands of coaching will challenge them to find acceptable balance between their personal and professional lives. The unique opportunity that coaching offers to develop close personal relationships with players must be carefully tempered by how close this relationship can be, how to treat players equitably, how to meet each player’s individual needs without impeding personal accountability, and how to partner with parents for the betterment of players. If this book can teach how to strengthen appropriate ways to address each of these, it can be helpful to coaches.

This book could have been enhanced with the addition of more cases like the one in which the coach was accused of sexual harassment. It also could have been strengthened with a greater emphasis on ethical dilemmas dealing with academics, eligibility, use of performance-enhancing drugs, and situations not associated with winning. In addition, having more cases associated with individual sports (only three of the 21 cases did) would have provided more balance and been helpful to coaches of these sports. Having cases dealing with players who are unmotivated, disruptive to team chemistry, lacking in skills, and self-centered could also really benefit coaches.
This book contributes to the literature in coaching education because it offers real-world situations to get young or inexperienced coaches to consider how to deal with issues they may face. It could be a helpful supplemental reading for an undergraduate introduction to coaching class, or a reference book for a beginning coach. While there are a number of useful scenarios to consider, coaches working with middle and high school teams would have benefited by more interpersonal and ethical dilemmas. Graduate students may find the text content less helpful without the additional consideration and application of ethical theories.