

COUNSEL'S CORNER

Power players may not be ones in lineup

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Who are the power players on your team? I expect that many of you would name your clutch hitter or perhaps your go-to pitcher. Or maybe you would say it is your shortstop or center fielder who consistently make the big plays, or your catcher who sets the tone on the field?

WHILE THESE talented and skilled players can make a difference in a game, I propose that your bench players are the ones who can make a difference in your program — and your career.

I am frequently asked, “What can I do to increase my job security?” One important answer is to create a positive team culture. That response is sometimes met with a puzzled look, as though it is not the magic legal answer they were looking for.

I would argue that a vibrant positive team culture with happy players is as much a guarantee of job security as a multi-year contract. And on the flip side, a program with low morale, a lack of team unity and even just a few disgruntled players remains one of the biggest threats to a coach’s job security.

AS I MENTIONED in this column last month, the end-of-the-year player surveys have become a critical job performance evaluation tool for athletic administrators. Realize now that each of your players will likely be completing a survey on the season. Look down your roster and think about what each of those players will write about their experience on your team.

How will they describe you as a coach and the time they spent as a softball player this year? If you were in their shoes, what would you write?

THE MAJORITY of complaints against coaches that I have seen come not from a clutch hitter or go-to pitcher, but from the student-athletes who do

not see much, if any, playing time. That may seem like an obvious statement: The kids who don’t get to play most often complain. My question to you is, “What are you doing about it?”

How are you interacting with the players who don’t play in games? Or in preparing for competition, are you focusing only on the players who start?

I hear from coaches that, with the pace of the season, it is too hard to spend time on those players who need more developing their skills — that is what the offseason is for. Now is the time to focus on winning games.

THE COROLLARY is that those bench players need to toughen up, sacrifice for the team, give all of their time, energy and heart, continue to try to earn a spot on the field and cheer for their teammates, even if they never get in the game. My response as a coach’s lawyer is that the “deal with your role and be happy” approach to your bench players is not in your best interest or your team’s and will likely affect your job security.

Consider for a moment that your bench players are indeed your “power players.” Those eight to 12 players who rarely play in a game can make a huge impact on your team’s performance, your team’s culture and your career. If they are negative and critical, they can bring the team spirit down. Conversely, if they are positive and enthusiastic, they can invigorate a team. So, how are you coaching them? Are you bringing out the best in your bench? Doing so could be your edge, your competitive advantage.

I absolutely understand and agree with the proposition that players have roles and some are not talented enough to be on the field or in a particular game. Coaches want to win and the best players play the most.

HOWEVER, you also could not adequately function as a team with only those 9-10 players who play in a game. How could you practice without your bench? How could you run drills?

Your second- and third-string players are vitally important to your program. Are you treating them as such?

The teams that I have seen with the most positive culture have had a vibrant, energetic bench. You could see it on those kid’s faces — they love their team and would run through a wall for their teammate or coach. They cheered, played hard in practice and brought a palpable spirit to the team, all while *not* being chosen to compete in games. don’t believe that those were just happy kids. I think the difference was that those coaches valued those players, and those players knew it. At the end of the day, isn’t that why we play on a team — to be part of something greater than ourselves?

The disconnect now is that many kids have grown up believing that the value of being an athlete is in being the star, making the big play, getting the big hit. Youth sports, parents and society have reinforced this notion: Being on a team can be fun, but the best players are the most important. Or you have only played a good game if you got strikeouts, hit a home run or made the heroic diving catch.

Given that, your challenge as a coach is to recognize the value in all of your players, to make that a fundamental tenet of your team culture, to build a *team*. Yes, you still need to have standards and values, and you will need to demand commitment and sacrifice, but you all will benefit by encouraging and validating the contributions each person makes to the team.

The kind, quantity and quality of those contributions may differ, but each one can make you a stronger, more competitive team with a positive team culture.

For those who read this and scowl, thinking that you don’t want to cater to the complainers and that coaching didn’t used to be like this, I concede that times have changed.

Nevertheless, maximizing the value of all of your players gives you the best



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Ekstrand received her Juris Doctor from Duke Law School, and received a master’s in history from Duke University, where she worked as a staff editor for the Duke Law Journal and served as a volunteer assistant coach for seven years with the Duke women’s lacrosse team. She is also a former high school teacher.

chance of succeeding as a team and as a coach.

Don’t make your approach to your bench into this generation’s version of walking to school in the snow both ways uphill. Recognize that it is not easy to board a bus for a five-plus hour ride and a three day, four-game road trip, knowing that you will put your uniform on but most likely will not step up to the plate to bat.

Don’t we all crave a sense of purpose and the knowledge that our time and efforts mean something? See your bench players as a source of power and energy for your team and for your career. A great coach doesn’t only coach the great players.