

COUNSEL'S CORNER

Excel with a communication game plan

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As you prepare and begin your competitive seasons, take a step back from all of your strategizing and skill work, your scouting and travel planning, your practices and meetings. Think about the journey upon which you are about to embark.

For some of you, this is your first season as a coach (exciting!). For others who have coached for several seasons, you are in the thick of it. And for others, you have coached for decades — Rhonda Revelle, Diane Ninemire, Mike Candrea, Patty Gasso, Carol Hutchins, you know, the icons of the sport.

THE POINT IS that this is your career and, while not infinite, you have the opportunity to enjoy multiple seasons.

Recently, while I was presenting a workshop at Dartmouth College, a coach commented that he had been engaging in a helpful exercise: thinking about the experience from his student-athletes' perspective. Simple, yet brilliant.

In this pause before your season, *switch shoes* — not literally, or perhaps you are young enough to play a day in practice. Take some time and think about the experience upon which your players are about to embark. Realize, at best they have four seasons ahead of them, and, if that is the case, this season is a totally new, blank slate moment.

For some of your players, this is their last season — this is it, one last shot. Think about their emotions. What will this season be like for your players? Now shift back to your shoes, reassume your whistle and clipboard. Think about how you are going to lead these players through *their season*?

I have heard that players “make their own experience.” In my opinion, that approach underestimates the influence and impact you have as a coach. Yes, you have captains and perhaps class representatives, but you are the leader

of your team. You have the power to create the kind of experience that your players will remember for the rest of their lives, win or lose. How are you going to do this?

The answer in part is your communication. Know that the No. 1 complaint on end-of-year student-athlete surveys is “poor communication from the coach.” Consider this: Communication is our fundamental interaction with others.

HOW COULD THIS area consistently score so low? I have worked with coaches who receive this criticism and respond that that’s all they do, “communicate all day long.” I believe that communication is only as effective as it is received, processed and responded to. Words can “hit the air,” but that does not mean that is effective communication.

- How do you communicate with your players?
- How frequently?
- In what form? In person, in writing, individually, collectively?
- What is the focus? Always softball, logistics, life, a balance of topics?
- What tone do you use? Is it intentional and deliberate, or a result of your emotions? How does your tone affect your players?
- Do you yell and is that effective? Think hard about this one. Does it bring about the desired action? Does it motivate? Does it fuel confidence? Does it ignite fear?
- How often is your communication a correction of a mistake or telling them what to do or what no to do? What else do they hear from you?

Think about *what* your players hear from you (NOT what you say, but what *they hear* from their perspective) and *how* your communication forms the basis of their softball experience — either their first season or their last. How do you want to impact or shape that experience?

Then realize that this basic interaction — communication with your players — is also a significant part of your job-

performance evaluation. What is your game plan to improve this score? Some suggestions:

- Break your team into small groups, assign a coach to each group and meet regularly. Groups can be position-based or across classes. The focus can vary. Set individual goals and follow-up, recognize something each person contributes to the team or do a fun activity. Strengthen those individual relationships. Rotate the groups periodically.
- Compliment a developing skill, a noticeable improvement, a good practice or a great play in a game, either via an email or a text (a form you can save).
- Take time to talk about things other than softball, have interactions somewhere other than the sports setting.
- Develop a system of tracking individual meetings (a notebook or file for each player, Google Docs, file-sharing software). Information to record: Name, date, length of meeting or copy of communication, key points discussed, action going forward or follow-up plan. And have regular meetings — once a month? A few times a semester? Whatever works for you and your program.
- Establish a way to ensure that each player receives some kind of feedback at a minimum of every two practices — this can be informal, a comment, a correction, an observation. The goal is to prevent the situation where a player shows up for practice for a week or longer and never hears anything from a coach, particularly those who do not play often, if at all, in games.
- Be able to point to your system of communicating, as well as a collection of specific individual communications (emails, texts, notes) in response to any survey results at the end of the year. Save it all. No deleting.



Samantha Ekstrand, the legal counsel whose services are included with NFCA membership, co-founded the law firm of Ekstrand & Ekstrand with her husband Bob in 2002.

She oversees the firm’s management, evaluating prospective cases, advising on case strategy, assisting clients and managing crisis situations. She also drafts and reviews contracts, negotiates employment contracts and separation agreements, analyzes potential legal claims pre-litigation, performs risk management for organizations and prepares simple wills and trusts.

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.

These are just a few ideas, and I bet you have many of your own. The takeaway here is that focusing on communication can do a few things: 1) it can positively shape, even transform, your players’ softball experience, 2) which in turn, can inspire better on-the-field performance, 3) improve “player satisfaction” and those end-of-season surveys and 4) ultimately, help to increase your job security.

Now is the time for you and your staff to think about your communication game plan, before the hectic pace of the season. You will be glad that you did. For your senior players, this is your last chance. And for freshmen, you won’t get another chance to make a first impression.