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MANAGING THE SELECTION OF HIGHLY COMPETITIVE INTERSCHOLASTIC SPORT TEAMS: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM COACHES ON CUTTING PLAYERS

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Abstract

This work used a purposive sample of 15 coaches to record information on the cutting process of highly competitive interscholastic varsity boys' basketball programs. Semi-structured interviews and a content analysis of organizational documents were used to create a basic philosophy on the cutting process. The themes discovered centered on the purpose of interscholastic sport and team selection preferences during the cutting process, methods to reduce the tryout field, and how to break the news to prospective student-athletes about their elimination. Overall, the researchers provide several different strategies suggested by coaches to cut student-athletes from sport teams which they advocate can be done with sensitivity and concern for the student's welfare/mental condition and for the good of the winning-centered team. Furthermore, within the article, the researchers developed a selection matrix or framework with the help of the participants to help coaches identify important strengths and weaknesses of prospects during the tryout period.

Keywords: Externally Controlled Withdrawal, Tryouts, Interscholastic Sport

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Many schools districts in the United States, especially those with poor booster clubs or underdeveloped fund raising programs, frequently cite budgetary concerns as a major reason for keeping player numbers low on competitive interscholastic sport teams (Abrams, 2002; NIAAA, 2009a, b). For instance, facility maintenance, equipment purchases and reconditioning, coaching salaries, and team travel costs associated with transportation, lodging, and feeding can limit the number of players allowed on a team and/or prevent some schools from maximizing the total number of teams they offer. Winning also emerges as another significant reason for the limiting of players retained on a team or teams included as part of an interscholastic program.

In the United States, many coaches "manage" competitive sports at the interscholastic level through placing potential student-athletes into distinct categories based on their physical maturation as compared to their peers, skill level, and age or grade rank. Middle school, junior high, and/or freshman level teams (typically ages 12-15) are organized much differently than those at the junior varsity and varsity levels (typically ages 15-18). The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) and Middle and Secondary School Physical Education Council (MASSPEC) position statement, *Co-Curricular Physical*



Activity and Sport Programs for Middle School Students (2002) demonstrates this well as they presented middle school through freshman level sports as aimed toward providing as many participation opportunities as possible, building fundamental skill level and interest in an activity, promoting lifelong fitness, and improving self-esteem and social skills. By contrast, varsity teams serve as the highest level of competition in the American secondary education system and these teams are established with a preference for the performance ethic and thus, utilize winning-centered coaching methods (Aiciena, 2007; Gearity, 2009; NASPE/MASSPEC, 2002; NASPE2008).

The *Citizenship through Sport Alliance* (2005) and others similarly acknowledged winning-centered coaching as a reality of varsity high school sport in America because winning is something coaches of highly competitive programs were hired to accomplish (Abrams, 2002; Herron, 2011; NASPE/MASSPEC, 2002, NASPE, 2008; Petlichkoff, 1992; Potter, 2010; Saslow, 2005; *Vernonia v. Acton*, 1995). The local and national media in the United States also appear to maintain and promote this preference for the performance ethic through regularly reporting outcomes and commenting on varsity sport results as related to performance expectations (Abrams, 2002; NASPE, 2008). Similar to information presented on high-performance coaches by Mallet and Côté (2006), U.S. interscholastic varsity coaches also seek to win so they can maintain a favorable status to retain their current job, secure a more favorable position (e.g., different job, more money, and/or better facilities), and/or deflect criticisms offered by highly involved parents, school administrators, and local media outlets.

One type of winning-centered coaching tactic frequently practiced by American coaches involves the cutting of players who they believe cannot help them win varsity contests. Munroe, Albinson, and Hall (1999) described being cut or non-selection as removed from the membership of a team during tryouts. Also in what appears to be more of a euphemism, Gould (1987) labeled the cut as an “externally controlled withdrawal” and identified it as a selection process seen in sports which systematically denies opportunities for participation (p.76). The term “cut” as used in this discussion focuses on a coach removing an adolescent from a participation opportunity as a member of the team during the tryout process due to the player’s perceived lack of skill and/or potential as compared to other members trying out. Adolescents attempting to secure a position with an interscholastic sport team in the U.S. know they need to play well, show potential, and/or possess a solid skill set to earn a spot on a team which holds tryouts for a limited number of spots (Petlichkoff, 1992). Petlichkoff (1992) and Weiss and Petlichkoff (1989) described this structure as an elitist system because only the strongest players earn places on highest-level teams. To further support this point and the preference for the performance ethic by U.S. varsity coaches, Gearity (2009) also discovered and argued athletes participating in competitive sport environments acknowledged, accepted, and prepared for winning-centered activities (i.e., cutting) they would not likely experience outside sport participation.

Interestingly, despite the common practice of cutting, little research has been conducted on the process of cutting students from interscholastic sport teams. Weiss and Petlichkoff (1989) and Petlichkoff (1992, 1995) mentioned few investigations in academia focused on cutting students from sports teams up through the mid-1990s. This research effort similarly found little academic work on the topic that was not anecdotal or isolated to one perspective or experience. Although many contemporary issues of cutting-related protests and examinations exist from a variety of sources (e.g., blogs, chat rooms, newspapers, and other social

networks), important coaching education texts published from researchers representing every corner of the world (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009; Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2004; Jones, 2006; Schempp, 2003) provided virtually no information to help coaches address and engage in the practice of cutting. This is interesting because cutting is an active custom in the United States and, as Petlichkoff (1992) and others argued, coaches should pay more attention to removal of teenage and preteen participation opportunities and examine the process of cutting particularly in light of the fact that students generally expect to achieve success when they try (Hallinan & Snyder, 1987; Grove, Fish, & Eklund, 2004). Coaches should also acknowledge this belief because it might expose them to potential litigation where they have to provide answers on due process and retaliation claims on their choice to cut players (Jackson v. Overton County School District, 2007)

Another reason examining cutting in interscholastic sport is important focuses on the process of that activity and how it suggests to boys and girls their innate value or worthiness compared to their peers during an important time in their physical, mental, and emotional maturation process (de lench, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Greene, 1991; NASPE/MASSPEC, 2002). Studies and anecdotal evidence show athletes asked about their non-selection immediately speak in traumatic effects and on some occasions mention how it affected them permanently when not handled appropriately and sensitively (de lench, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Hallinan & Snyder, 1987; Munroe et al., 1999; Saslow, 2005). Petlichkoff (1995) and Gould (1987) also posited coaches should anticipate more negative emotions following an externally control withdrawal from sport. As an example, cutting may lead to problems in development of social relationships especially if coaches use a peer comparison method to explain why they cut someone.

Greene (1991) specifically offered those marked as unworthy or a failure frequently exhibit difficulty in establishing social relationships and may spend the majority of their existence attempting to show they belong or measure up. Interviews conducted by Greene vividly show five highly successful people (e.g., writers, law partner, mortgage banking, news anchor) dramatically affected by the moment they were negatively cut from a sport team. The theme of Greene's piece showcases each person's excessive ambition to succeed in order to avoid the feelings of embarrassment associated with getting cut. To illustrate, former *Newsweek* news correspondent Malcolm MacPherson suggested, "Those of us who went through something like always know that we have to catch the ball. We'd rather die than have the ball fall at our feet," (Greene, 1991 p. 493). Malcolm MacPherson was cut from his 9th grade baseball team. Although Greene showcased various successes, he recognized their success came at a social price and that the coach's handling of their removal from the team greatly affected their development.

The purpose of this investigation is to document the cutting processes and philosophies shared by highly competitive boys' basketball programs through the use of collected organizational documents and semi-structured interviews. As a result of the study, the researchers support and demonstrate the development of a selection matrix or framework created from the collective experiences expressed during the team selection process. The manuscript produces several themes which emerged from the organizational documents and interviews. These themes centered on the team selection preferences during the cutting process, methods to reduce the tryout field, and how to break the news to prospective student-athletes from middle school through high school about their elimination from a sports team to help them adequately cope with what they will most likely find to be a difficult



experience. The following information and perspective is not intended to be seen as an ultimate solution but as a reflection of popular tactics and beliefs practiced and established by varsity high school basketball coaches in competitive school districts. The information provided here is also supported by discussions within coaching education organizations like the Positive Coaching Alliance.

Non-competitive sport programs were not the objective of this investigation although that would be an interesting and potentially important study to pursue. Gearity (2009) acknowledged most studies instead center only on the practices of high performing and competitive programs, yet, Gearity and others also argued research on coaching suffers from a lack of work which document specific acts and duties of coaching and its impact on student-athlete participation (Gallimore & Tharp, 2004). Again, little academic literature exists on the topic of cutting which is necessary and required in many school districts. Coaching education programs, in particular, appear significantly limited due to a narrow understanding of what constitutes effective coaching (Gearity, 2009). This may occur because coaches regularly feel the information and materials presented to them are poorly conceived and communicated (Gearity, 2009; Gilbert & Trudel, 2004; Hedstrom & Gould, 2004). Ultimately, much of the information presented in coaching education programs may not be effective in helping coaches to manage their teams and players in today's winning-centered climate. This work serves to fulfill the need to know more from coaches at highly competitive programs because they are models for other programs and these coaches frequently serve to mentor others interested in the field or profession.

Method

The authors possess a combined 30-plus years of successful basketball coaching and management experience at the highest levels of college and high school sport. Specifically, one author worked in basketball at the Division I level of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and coached at the Division I and AAAA levels of varsity sport in Ohio and Pennsylvania respectively between 1999 and 2010 to help produce six district championships and one state championship. The other author coached both in the NCAA's Division II and III level and separate high school boys' basketball programs in the State of Ohio to two district championships. Each author was also a member of NCAA level men's basketball programs as undergraduates. Finally, both authors enjoyed membership with the National Association of Basketball Coaches (NABC) for several years with one of the authors also participating as a member with the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA).

Although the background and qualifications of the researchers are well established, this study remained fully committed to the responsible reporting of the complete nature of the sample (i.e., coaches from highly competitive programs) and the information they provided to avoid possible criticism associated with researcher bias to support some agenda or pattern of team selection/cutting method. To help establish the results of this work, a qualitative research design was embraced in order to establish themes or relationships between the coaches and the concept of cutting. To accomplish this task, the researchers utilized semi-structured interviews and a content analysis of organizational documents to provide coaches the opportunity to express the intricacies of the cutting process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using prompts which allowed the participants to engage in easier conversation and the freedom to expand the conversation on the realities of the cutting phenomena.

Qualitative research was selected for this investigation because it demonstrates special value during examinations of complex and potentially sensitive issues within context-specific settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Johnson & Christensen, 2000; Neuman, 2000). It has been broadly defined as a research procedure or naturalistic approach which allows investigators to generate detailed and extensive information to shape analysis and reach generalizations through rich participant information that positions the information into the appropriate human context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Johnson & Christensen, 2000; Neuman, 2000). In essence, qualitative research endeavors seek illumination on unique topics of study that quantitative methods may have difficulty in determining, predicting, or generalizing because that method cannot accommodate contextual influence and may only explain variables and their relationships on a phenomenon during a single moment in time (Seifried, 2010).

Sample

The researchers relied on their background and active membership in the coaching fraternity to recruit several highly competitive varsity basketball coaches. The participants ($n=15$) were purposively selected from personal contacts at competitive high school basketball programs in the states of Ohio and Pennsylvania. Prior to the start of the study, participants were screened to ensure their eligibility as current head varsity boys' basketball coaches at the big school level (e.g., Division I- Ohio and AAAA-Pennsylvania) because high schools with the largest enrollments generally provide the highest level of competition in the United States. Upon contact with each coach, the investigators specifically asked for cutting philosophies, strategic plans, and any other paperwork developed or required which successfully help them during the team selection process. Follow-up phone calls confirmed the arrangements for the team selection materials to prevent a misunderstanding about what this meant. The high school institutions used in this study are considered peers, as they possessed enrollments approximately the same size (i.e., range 550-700 per class) and similar socio-economic profiles.

Purposive, or non-probability sampling, appears appropriate to illustrate typical practices associated with cutting or team selection for several reasons. First, while random sampling enables the researchers to generalize results from a small sample to a larger population, purposive sampling acts as a special method to collect subtle, important, and potentially delicate information from a specific and generally difficult to recruit group (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorenson, 2006; Gratton & Jones, 2004; Singleton & Straits, 2005). Next, many also promoted the efficiency of purposive sampling when homogeneity is a characteristic of the participant population (Gratton & Jones, 2004; Patton, 2002; Salant & Dillman, 1994; Singleton & Straits, 2000). Generalization to the rest of the group members (i.e., large school competitive high school programs) is appropriate and permitted in this work because the nature of coaching allows and encourages an interconnectedness between many programs and coaches (e.g., coaches working/playing for or with other coaches, attendance at camps and clinics together, scouting, and recruiting). Finally, purposive sampling also appears suitable for exploratory research, which aims to generate new thoughts and perspectives on a specific and unique phenomenon (Gratton & Jones, 2004; Salant & Dillman, 1994). Within the confines of this research endeavor, the information gathered from the various basketball coaches helped to discover the root of the issue concerning the cutting of students from competitive sport teams.

Interview and Content Analysis Procedures

Initial interview questions centered on attempting to understand the background of those individuals (e.g., length of tenure coaching and as head coach, places they coaches and what level, and playing experience). The second section of the interview focused on specific strategies of the coaches as related to the cutting process. The participating coaches were asked to focus on their philosophy and personal narratives related to cutting. The final set of questions centered on advice, recommendations, and available resources about cutting players from sport teams. Follow-up questions were frequently asked based on the answers or responses provided to fully develop the perspective of each participant. Following the conclusion of each interview, the researchers respected Creswell's (1998) advice and reflected on the dialogue exchange through the use of field notes collected from the interviews.

The investigators also assembled and analyzed a variety of information associated with each coach's cutting philosophy or tactics prior to each interview. A comprehensive content analysis followed the perspectives provided by Morrow and Waters (1982), Neuendorf (2002), Salant and Dillman (1994), and Stemler (2001). This content analysis specifically involved the counting and quantification of words, contexts, characters, interactions, bias, and ideas to extract themes from the most frequently seen, identified, or mentioned (Morrow & Waters, 1982; Stemler, 2001). Special attention to the intensity or depth of feelings was also noted. Appropriately, the "inferences gained from a content analysis may be qualitative or quantitative or some combination of the two depending upon the problem under investigation," (Morrow & Waters, p.32). The theoretical advantage of using a content analysis to examine coaching and team selection documents is that it intends not to pursue or refute a specific hypothesis/question.

The team selection information was also evaluated by asking questions that centered on whether or not each source provided accurate or trustworthy information. Specifically questions like: (a) who created the source; (b) how are the authors related to materials; and (c) have the documents been falsified in any way appear important to establish validity and reliability. Within the various documents provided by the participants, the researchers further attempted to understand the terms and phrases within the information to gain an accurate understanding of those same terms and phrases used. Thus, following Patton (2002), the collective information was triangulated with other qualitative information secured from the interviews. Member checking acted as a method to allow participants to see their comments and add or delete anything they wished. The intercoder reliability was 95%.

Results/Discussion

The age of participants ($n=15$) for this study ranged from 40 to 61 years (mean = 55) and their average tenure as a head varsity coach was 12 years. Seven of the participants coached varsity teams to district championships with five of the interviewees achieving multiple championships. Two coaches won state titles; the highest achievement any high school varsity team can obtain. Eight of the participants received recognition from their peers and the media and were voted as "coach" of the year at least once in their conference. Two were also recognized as coach of the year by their state's interscholastic governing association (e.g., Ohio High School Athletic Association and Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association). All the participants coached multiple players who went on to play NCAA Division I, II, or III basketball and mentored others who currently and previously served as assistant and head coaches of varsity basketball. Finally, most ($n=9$) indicated they enjoyed



membership with the NABC. Several themes regarding the team selection or cutting process emerged from the organizational documents and interviews. That information is presented below.

Team Selection Preferences: Freshman and Middle School vs. Junior Varsity and Varsity

Abrams (2002) and NASPE/MASSPEC (2002) mentioned youth sport programs should aim to maximize opportunities for boys and girls who wish to play competitively and furthermore, they should seek no-cut policies despite the effort and ability of the participant(s). While it is the goal of the coaches interviewed here to give every student the opportunity to participate in competitive sport, all indicated it sometimes became necessary to limit numbers by "cutting" athletes after a tryout period. As an example, the participants communicated support for this perspective using a variety of reasons. First, similar to Abrams, participants in this study asserted that creating teams which possess both talented and poor players could generate situations which increase the likelihood of injury, particularly when it is identified as contact sports like basketball is by the Javits Amendment (34.C.F.R. § 106.41) of 1975. Next, several participants ($n=8$) argued this arrangement could also prompt experienced players to become bored and irritated with slow learning participants at the highest levels (i.e., varsity). The talent gap was also promoted ($n=11$) as possibly evoking embarrassment from beginners while encouraging intimidation by more experienced players if varsity numbers are not properly controlled. This too is similar to claims made by Abrams (2002).

Despite these reservations, all the participants advocated setting the numbers carried on teams to be at the maximum to provide appropriate developmental opportunities for as many athletes as possible, particularly at the lower interscholastic levels (i.e., middle school through freshman). However, they cautiously advised this number to be set at a quantity which will not significantly impede the coach to teach and manage the team toward victory at the varsity level.

This distinction suggested all the interviewees viewed the purpose of highly competitive boys' basketball programs at the middle or junior high school and freshman level as developmental units and that coaches directing those programs should seek to maximize participation, which they placed at about 20 per team at this level. More than one coach commented that the "growth and maturation level of this age group (12-15 years old) remains difficult to predict" because the size, coordination, strength, and mental development of young people is a process which coaches cannot fully control. It also appears difficult to predict desire, work ethic, and commitment student-athletes will show toward the sport. Academic literature which characterized this age group as willing to "sample" a variety of activities to decide from which they like best or feel they are most competent (Weiss, 1987; Weiss & Petlichkoff, 1989) was also supported by participants ($n=13$). Consequently, the participants collectively tried to keep their pool of potential players large to help develop the future growth and success of the basketball program through the cultivation of players' skills and emotions/feelings about their sport. We should note most of the interviewees ($n=11$) suggested managing a group of 20 student-athletes in basketball is "very challenging" and should only be done with, as NASPE/MASSPEC (2002) also recommended, experienced coaches or those programs which are successful at recruiting additional and qualified

help/volunteers. Several participants offered college student interns, former coaches and players as possible qualified volunteers.

In varsity or junior varsity basketball, the collective group noted it is very difficult to manage teams over 12-15 players. They offered several reasons for this target or ceiling. For instance, many ($n=10$) indicated they do not enjoy the financial or physical resources necessary to accommodate a sizeable team or a large support staff (i.e., coaches and managers) adequate enough to help them manage a bigger group. Typically, interviewees indicated their staff sized ranged from 3 to 5 individuals to coach the combined junior varsity and varsity teams in spaces which also forced them to limit their size (i.e., participant capacity) and practice opportunities (e.g., competition for preferred gym times with other extra-curricular activities). In this situation, coaches of highly competitive varsity teams recommended to “be careful about keeping kids they cannot use for the benefit of the program,” like upperclassmen that will not play during the season. The experiences of most interviewees ($n=9$) supported the notion that non-playing upperclassmen will not likely accept a position as a role player on the team and frequently will be more of a disruption than benefit.

All coaches indicated it may be difficult to cut an upperclassman who invested a large amount of time into getting better but if they determined upperclassmen to be more “selfish” (i.e., not team oriented and unwilling to accept a non-playing role) than selfless, they did not hesitate to cut them. This comment likely resulted from the need coaches expressed to produce a team chemistry capable of great success. Thus, at the varsity level, it appears the interviewees collectively advocated only keeping the interested and adequately skilled players to hang around as practice players or scout team members (i.e., players with little chance of playing). Furthermore, they recommended these individuals be underclassmen because there still is potential for growth and development. Many highly competitive programs basically run their junior varsity teams in this manner to help their varsity prepare for opponents.

On some occasions, the coaches ($n=7$) recognized players may lack a useful knowledge of the game but are terrific athletes (e.g., great speed and vertical leap but limited understanding of sport-specific terminology or fundamental skills) with great physical size. These players were presented as posing a major challenge to most coaches because of the investment likely needed to put them on par with others on the team. As noted earlier, varsity level teams center on creating the best team or player possible, thus most coaches ($n=8$) chose to ignore the potential of a player over the possible immediate contribution of others. In the end, the coaches communicated to us that if the investment is likely not worth the team reward, they did not feel obliged to keep that individual at the varsity level. Again, many coaches ($n=8$) proposed it would be a mistake to gamble on these players because of their possible potential. Collectively, the coaches advocated carefully selecting players based purely on athleticism or size and that a roster spot should be considered beyond the immediate season/year.

Similar to Petlichkoff (1992) and NASPE/MASSPEC’s (2002) advice, the coaches overwhelmingly felt lower level interscholastic coaches should focus more of their efforts on performance over outcome to measure their success. Thus, many ($n=10$) sought to create a new threshold to help those coaches of middle school through freshman levels move up the proverbial coaching “food chain.” The new consideration proposed by these participants focused on the ability of junior high or freshman level coaches to produce higher skilled players than just their win/loss record. Atmosphere, effort, and skill improvement were the criteria used by these varsity coaches to grade coaches at the middle school through freshman



levels for the purposes of retaining or reassigning, not wins and losses. Furthermore, the coaches advocated “building skills can eventually produce more winning at the higher levels (i.e., varsity) because kids compete against one another for playing time.”

At the lower interscholastic levels, the coaches did not promote making unnecessary cuts to maintain practice and games schedules tailored to help only the talented win games. As coaches, they felt it was their responsibility to patiently help lower performers get better each day, despite the time it might take away from the more talented players. In their opinion, coaches should not view this time as wasted at the lower interscholastic level because the focus is not on winning necessarily but the development and harnessing the potential from each participant. Appropriately, it appears acceptable to keep larger numbers at the middle school and freshman level because of perceived competence. Many scholars suggested perceived confidence, or sense one owns about their ability to function or master a task, helps predict the likelihood at maintaining interest in mastering a skill or sport (Cassidy, et al., 2009; Feltz & Petlichkoff, 1983; Jones, 2006; NASPE/MASSPEC, 2002; Petlichkoff, 1993). Those who see themselves as highly competent or improving their competency and successful in mastering skills at the lower interscholastic level will most likely persist in maintaining the motivation to continue improving and mastering a skill into the junior varsity and varsity level. Essentially, as noted by the participants, larger numbers at the lower interscholastic level feeding into the varsity program give coaches more to choose from to assure future success of the program.

Next, in order to make the best selection possible, the coaches suggested it was important to understand what to look for from a potential athlete. Specifically, all the participants recommended attending sport-specific clinics or workshops over coaching education programs. The participants interestingly described coaching education programs as “inadequate” toward helping them manage teams and players in today’s winning-centered reality. This finding is not unlike that offered by Reade, Rodgers, and Spriggs (2009). The participants supported workshops and clinics that not only covered important strategies for success (i.e., X’s and O’s) and sport-specific skills but also those which informed coaches about the sports sciences field.

Many academic works argued coaches should become better educated on the growth process of children so they can understand how to provide them with a better opportunity to succeed in a certain position related to their physical strengths and weaknesses (Cassidy et al., 2009; Jones, et al., 2004; Jones, 2006; Schempp, 2003; Weiss & Petlichkoff, 1989). Weiss and Petlichkoff (1989) further mentioned this knowledge would help coaches better understand and appreciate the loss of performance ability during growth spurts so they do not unnecessarily cut a potential contributor to their program. Petlichkoff (1992) also identified sport philosophy, psychology, management, physiology, medicine, and biomechanics as possible topics coaches could and should become more educated on to help with the selection and management of their team succeed. Many of these items/ideas were mentioned by the various participants as reasons to attend workshops and clinic. Furthermore, several coaches ($n=5$) recommended providing a longer tryout period (specific lengths below) to address concerns related to these categories of evaluation. Essentially, longer tryout periods were promoted by participants as giving them the opportunity to learn more about the players’ skill level but also about other important items like personality, coachability, and level of commitment.



Reduce the Field: Before and During Tryouts

A common practice utilized by coaches of highly competitive interscholastic teams ($n=13$) also centered on having student-athletes voluntarily cut themselves before tryouts even begin. The creation of an off-season program which prompts the student-athletes to demonstrate some minimal level of commitment to the sport served as one practice participants unanimously supported. The authors and interviewees understand many states limit or prohibit organized off season programs but many do not and those that do likely still allow time for open gyms and lifting/conditioning sessions. The coaches participating in this research inquiry overwhelmingly believe those student-athletes not committed to the offseason program and their peers during this time should see they will likely not secure playing time once the season starts if they fail to regularly attend volunteer open gym and lifting/conditioning sessions. Embracing this strategy allowed coaches to “identify the potential of people who could quit on their program” during the season or in the future. Academic support exists for the effectiveness of this strategy (Petlichkoff, 1992, 1995).

Some coaches noted “the prohibitive costs (e.g., elimination of free time, money for camp, skipping work) of attending offseason workouts may exceed the level of commitment some are willing to make to the program.” Thus, none of the coaches interviewed supported the use of “scare” tactics to make student-athletes attend open-gyms or offseason workouts. However, as Munroe et al., (1999) proposed, expectations for making a team should be made clear, especially at the varsity level. Specifically, these participants recommended offseason workouts should be committed to explaining and revealing the expectations coaches have for student-athletes about their program. Furthermore, the coaches suggested the expectations for student-athletes participating in other sports outside the basketball season should be presented as well. Hosting an open house or parents meeting about off-season activities was encouraged by four of the participants in this study to help communicate expectations related to this group.

Many of the coaches provided open gym opportunities all spring and summer for current and potential basketball players. All also conducted basketball camps and provided chances for student-athletes interested in their program to attend several different team camps as well. After these offseason activities, each participant indicated they should know which student-athletes will play varsity and junior varsity basketball. In essence, open gyms and team camps can be seen as “pre-tryouts” and many recommended this as an acceptable method to help determine the status of a potential player (i.e., appropriate level of participation within or outside of the program).

Interestingly, some coaches ($n=6$) promoted that they did not formally embrace the concept of the traditional tryout, especially at the varsity and junior varsity level. At their high schools, they enjoyed very little gym time due to the scheduling challenges that their many extra-curricular after school programs and few facilities created. Thus, their tryout sessions took place during their first few days of real practices because “taking time for the traditional tryout would serve to eliminate the limited and valuable practice opportunities before their first game.” Coaches practicing this strategy suggested giving at least three to five practice opportunities to players and make some of those early a.m. workouts along with another after school (i.e., two-a-days). They felt those student-athletes less than committed to their program will leave on their own while others not part of the offseason program will experience great difficulty in trying to “catch up” to the rest of their peers. Some may criticize this application of the tryout period as providing “insiders” with an edge to make the



team but upon pressing the issue during the interview, the coaches assured “outsiders” with talent can still secure a position on the team due to the length of the tryout period. These coaches also defended this tryout practice because they felt strongly that some players can look very good in the unstructured play typical of the traditional tryout yet struggle mightily in the structure necessary to run practices. Collectively these participants believed this tryout method serves as a superior strategy to determine if someone fits the program/system they established. Furthermore, three to five practices appears as a sufficient amount of time to allow the people trying out to play poorly one day but show they still belong on the team.

Finally, the basketball tryout session was also not advertised at many schools. The coaches practicing this tactic ($n=7$) suggested the student-athletes who joined preseason and offseason workouts will know when tryouts/practices begin. A couple coaches also suggested, not formally advertising tryouts, allowed them to keep out the “casual” participant. The casual participant is a person who tries out for the team on an “impulse” without preparation or consideration for the amount of work it takes to be part of a team. When pressed about those schools requiring an organized and advertised formal tryout, the coaches ($n=5$) did recommend the following:

1. Meet prospective players before the first tryout session/practice in pre-established meeting area/classroom and obtain contact information on the names of parents along with phone numbers, email addresses, date of birth.
2. Obtain a list of teachers to contact so they can obtain information about the student’s academic situation and classroom behavior/attitude. Establishing and requiring academic and behavior eligibility guidelines may serve to reduce the tryout group because some student may not be eligible to tryout or remain on a team due to academic and behavior issues they engaged in during the school year. The coaches did not advocate securing specific grades but did make requests for a “general” feel for the student’s academic progress (e.g., maintain a 2.0 grade point average) and communicated this standard to them during the initial meeting.
3. Email the parents information about the coach, team, and tryout schedule. This message should include the length of the tryout sessions and period along with a brief but vague synopsis regarding the criteria for making the team, the coach’s philosophy, expectations for them as parents and their children. It was recommended to avoid providing too much detail about the criteria used for the selection process because coaches could be held accountable to this by the letter from the administration and parents.

How to Break the News: Considerations for the Coach

The easiest students to cut are those who failed to invest in the program the way the coach desired. Keeping these students can send the wrong message to others that they do not need to dedicate themselves to individual and team development because they still can be rewarded with a spot on the team. Team success will suffer at the varsity level and player motivation for skill development/improvement may decrease at the lower interscholastic levels. The most difficult cut coaches felt they had to make revolved around those student-athletes who possess great enthusiasm, followed instruction, and behaved admirably throughout the tryout but are not good enough to make the team. The coaches recommended approaching each individual with sensitivity and empathy along with the information for the

player's removal because as noted above by Greene (1991) and also Jones et al., (2004) mishandled cuts by coaches can lead to harmful developmental effects on young people and a trail of negative events over their life.

Some coaches ($n=3$) indicated they needed to announce cuts through a public method due to incredibly large tryout number, which they acknowledged as over 40 for a combined junior varsity and varsity. These coaches indicated they preferred to post a team list in public areas to provide opportunities for those to see if they made a team. Unfortunately, this method, while efficient, also publicly acknowledges those who failed to make the team. Therefore, these coaches recommended spending a significant amount of time relaying the difficulty of the selection process to the entire assembled tryout group before posting the list and discuss how the selection was both objective and subjective. Furthermore, they communicated it was important to take time to thank the students for their interest in the program. For those cut, they asked them to focus on how they felt about the tryout experience and stressed the opportunities available during the offseason to help them improve their performance, skill level, and athleticism for next season if they intended to try to make the team again.

The participating coaches wanted the students to leave knowing they would not discourage future attempts. Again, Jones et al., (2004) supported this piece of advice. All coaches during the public announcement also asked those players making the team to remain supportive of their peers who did not. Specifically, they were reminded about the difficulty facing those cut and to help lessen the stigma by showing empathy and embracing them through what is likely a difficult time. In certain situations, a few coaches believed it was appropriate and acceptable to ask those cut, if they may possess some interest in helping the team in another capacity (e.g., statistician, manager, videographer, student-coach). This was offered up as a tool to help lessen the blow of not making the team and as a reward for their interest in the activity.

If possible, all coaches indicated they welcomed meeting all cut players individually and giving them important feedback about how they performed each practice session. Some programs, also utilized an evaluation matrix to help explain the thought process and to highlight strengths and weaknesses of the non-selected player during the tryout period (Table 1). They practiced this behavior for a variety of reasons. First, these programs desired not to lose a potential fan and friend of the program through "miscommunication or failing to provide information/feedback about their performance." Maintaining a good relationship to help "establish, maintain, and secure" greater interest in the team was desired by the coaches. Next, in some places, the concept of the tryout evaluation form or matrix was offered as a tool to help coaches avoid potential litigation (Jackson v. Overton County School District, 2007; Yasser & Schiller, 1997). The coaches practicing this tactic acknowledged the legal component and specifically suggested comments in the Team Selection Evaluation Chart should center on specific instances during tryout sessions which demonstrated a need for improvement. Additionally, specific suggestions should accompany identified weaknesses so each player can understand how to improve their future performances. Some schools asked our interviewees to provide this document along with requiring them to meet the individuals cut. Documenting information on each prospective player trying out helped them in situations where memory failed to communicate or identify the weaknesses of the player.

The coaches recommended completing an evaluation form which remained soft but honest on weakness. For example, the participants suggested when writing a comment about the weakness of someone's dribbling, instead of labeling someone as an "awful or pathetic"

check the “Poor” box and comment on specific technique problems, a lack of dribbling fundamentals, or the inability to use both hands. No coaches supported the comparison of athletes against current members of the team during the explanation process. The academic literature further supports this perspective of avoiding the comparing of athletes when explaining why a cut occurred because comparing athletes could negatively affect a person’s self-efficacy and confidence (Munroe et al., 1999).

Coaches should also recognize if a student’s sport involvement corresponds with their identity. Roccas and Brewer (2002) argued membership in large task groups, like sport teams, creates a sense of identity with participants. This means those that make the cut appear more likely to define themselves in a competitive sport framework (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Expectedly, Person and Petitpas (1990) suggested some cut individuals may possess a more difficult time dealing with non-selection because they placed all their time and interest in one activity and have nothing or little to go to in the event of their cut. This was offered as a reason why some individuals were preferred over others in consideration for possible statistician, manager, videographer, or student-coach positions by the participating coaches. Essentially, as one coach noted the idea was “this would help soften the blow of not making the team.”

Finally, following a cut, coaches should expect athletes to engage in self-protection strategies to help maintain a positive image of the self (Grove et al., 2004; Munroe et al., 1999). All coaches noted this as a possibility. Self-protection behaviors attempt to use a cognitive process to diminish negative thoughts and feelings about the self (Agostinelli, Sherman, Presson, & Chassin, 1992). Physical behaviors or actions (i.e., body language) also serve the self-protection process because they act to alter the view of the self from another’s perspective (e.g., how parent looks at child). Students, in the view of the coaches, inherently attempted to negotiate reality by maintaining or controlling how people see them. For sport participants, the athlete cut may look to reduce their connection to sport because it ties them to failure and thus damages their perception of the self. Therefore, as Blinde and Stratta (1992) discovered, it is not uncommon for athletes cut from sport teams to respond by placing more time and energy into their academics so they could achieve more success again.

Participating coaches noted pursuing other objectives and interests frequently emerged as coping method to alleviate the loss of their competitive sport identity. The coaches suggested they should search to recognize self-protection behaviors and can do much to help alleviate the negative feelings of being cut with the information provided during a one-on-one conversation about their performance. This practice also served their objective of trying to keep the cut athletes as fans or friends of our program. Again, they did not want to lose their interest in the sport and would like to see them continue to be part of their program in some other capacity (e.g., spectator or future booster). Collectively, the coaches offered observation of self-protection behaviors is one of the most difficult jobs they experience as a coach but the one-on-one response they provide young people is necessary. With sensitivity and critical concern about the delivery of the disappointing news, the coaches indicated they can help students understand the reasons for being cut and better cope with that decision to maintain a positive view.

Conclusion

This work served to document the cutting processes and philosophies used by coaches of highly competitive boys’ varsity basketball programs with a preference for the performance



ethic. The results of this investigation also provided a selection matrix to help document the strengths and weaknesses of prospective student-athletes and revealed several themes which emerged from the organizational documents and interviews of the participants. These themes included comments on the purpose of interscholastic sport from the middle school to varsity level and their team selection preferences, various strategies to reduce potential tryout fields, and how to break disappointing news to prospective student-athletes about their elimination from a competitive sports team opportunity.

The process of cutting described above should be viewed similarly to other situations because it appears to follow some of their prescribed selection procedures. For instance, many students must meet a predetermined specific criterion to enroll in higher academic level classes. Commonly this criterion is specific, measureable, posted in advance, and equally applied to all students. A similar position is advocated by members of the Positive Coaching Alliance and participants in this study as they suggested coaches can and should make their selection process less subjective or more measurable. Interestingly, failure to do so could open them to potential litigation (*Jackson v. Overton County School District*, 2007; *Vernonia v. Acton*, 1995, Yasser & Schiller, 1997). For instance, Weiss and Petlichkoff (1989) hypothesized most cuts from sports teams result from low skill level, self-esteem, and physical immaturity. Hall of Famers Michael Jordan (Basketball) and Orel Hershisier (Baseball) both were cut from their high school varsity team based on their physical immaturity as compared to their peers or their skill level. This is a form of discrimination which may be illegal if programs receive government assistance or funding and the coaches do not document their decisions. Thus, because we live in a very litigious society, this work argues for the establishment of policy which requires the documentation of the non-selected athletes to safeguard the right of coaches to choose the players on their team and to perhaps help those cut better understand reasons for their removal.

This work demonstrated coaches should remain careful and mindful of the effect cutting has on student-athletes and should make every effort to support as many student-athletes as possible for that level of competition. Thus, this work makes a challenge to the scholarly community to scientifically evaluate the effects of various cutting practices on student-athletes, as this is an underreported area of study. Furthermore, we call to see if the claims and strategies offered by these participants are effective to help reduce the blow of trying out and being cut from a team. Finally, as Gearity (2009) demonstrated, we could further examine poor coaching examples because little empirical information exists on how poor coaches cut players. Again, the potential negative effects provided above may be more likely with poor coaching examples.

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MANAGING THE SELECTION OF HIGHLY COMPETITIVE INTERSCHOLASTIC SPORT TEAMS: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM COACHES ON CUTTING PLAYERS



Chad Seifried & Tim Casey

MANAGEMENT WHITEPAPER

Research Problem

This work serves to document the cutting processes and philosophies shared by highly competitive boys' basketball programs through the use of collected organizational documents and semi-structured interviews. The manuscript produces several themes which centered on the purpose of interscholastic sport during the team selection process, methods to reduce the tryout field, and how to break the news to prospective student-athletes from middle school through high school about their elimination from a sports team to help them adequately cope with what they will most likely find to be a difficult experience. The following information and perspective is not intended to be seen as an ultimate solution but as a reflection of popular tactics and beliefs practiced and established by successful competitive varsity high school basketball coaches. The information provided here is also supported by discussions within coaching education organizations like the Positive Coaching Alliance.

Issue

Many schools districts in the United States, especially those with poor booster clubs or underdeveloped fund raising programs, frequently cite budgetary concerns as a major reason for keeping player numbers low on competitive interscholastic sport teams. The *Citizenship through Sport Alliance* (2005) and others similarly also acknowledged winning-centered coaching as a reality of varsity high school sport in America because winning is something coaches of highly competitive programs were hired to accomplish. Similar to previous information presented on high-performance coaches, U.S. interscholastic varsity coaches also seek to win so they can maintain a favorable status to retain their current job, secure a more favorable position (i.e. different job, more money, and/or better facilities), and/or deflect criticisms offered by highly involved parents, school administrators, and local media outlets. One type of winning-centered coaching tactic frequently practiced by American coaches involves the cutting of players who they believe cannot help them win varsity contests.

The term "cut" as used in this discussion focuses on a coach removing an adolescent from a participation opportunity as a member of the team during the tryout process due to the player's perceived lack of skill and/or potential as compared to other members trying out. Adolescents attempting to secure a position with an interscholastic sport team in the U.S. know they need to play well, show potential, and/or possess a solid skill set to earn a spot on a team which holds tryouts for a limited number of spots. Interestingly, despite the common practice of cutting, little research has been conducted on the process of cutting kids from interscholastic sport teams. Important coaching education works published from researchers representing every corner of the world (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009; Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2004; Jones, 2006; Schempp, 2003) provided

virtually no information to help coaches address and engage in the practice of cutting, which is an active custom in the United States. Coaches should pay more attention to removal of teenage and preteen participation opportunities. Furthermore, coaches and educators should examine the process of cutting particularly in light of the fact that kids generally expect to achieve success when they try. Another reason examining cutting in interscholastic sport is important focuses on the process of that activity and how it suggests to boys and girls their innate value or worthiness compared to their peers during an important time in their physical, mental, and emotional maturation process. Coaches should anticipate more negative emotions following an externally control withdrawal from sport versus a child deciding to quit. As an example, cutting may lead to problems in development of social relationships especially if coaches use a peer comparison method to explain why they cut someone.

Summary

The results of this investigation provided a selection matrix to help document the strengths and weaknesses of prospective student-athletes. It also revealed several themes which emerged from the organizational documents and interviews of the participants. These themes included comments on the purpose of interscholastic sport from the middle school to varsity level, various strategies to reduce potential tryout fields, and how to break disappointing news to prospective student-athletes about their elimination from a competitive sports team opportunity. The participants in this study asserted that creating teams which possess both talented and poor players could generate situations which increase the likelihood of injury. Next, several participants argued this arrangement could also prompt experienced players to become bored and irritated with slow learning participants at the highest levels (i.e. varsity) and possibly evoke embarrassment from beginners while encouraging intimidation by more experienced players.

All the participants advocated setting the numbers carried on teams to be at the maximum to provide appropriate developmental opportunities for as many athletes as possible, particularly at the lower interscholastic levels (i.e. middle school through freshman: up to 20). However, they cautiously advised this number to be set at a quantity which will not significantly impede the coach to teach and manage the team toward victory at the varsity level (i.e. 12-15). All coaches indicated it may be difficult to cut an upperclassman who invested a large amount of time into getting better but if they determined upperclassmen to be more “selfish” (i.e. not team oriented and unwilling to accept a non-playing role) than selfless, they did not hesitate to cut them. Collectively, the coaches advocated carefully selecting players based purely on athleticism or size and that a roster spot should be considered beyond the immediate season/year.

A common practice utilized by coaches of highly competitive interscholastic teams also centered on having kids voluntarily cut themselves before tryouts even begin. The creation of an off-season program which prompts the kids to demonstrate some minimal level of commitment to the sport served as one practice participants unanimously supported. Interestingly, some coaches promoted that they did not formally embrace the concept of the traditional tryout, especially at the varsity and junior varsity level due to scheduling challenges that their many extra-curricular after school programs and few facilities created. Thus, their tryout sessions took place during their first few days of real practices because “taking time for the traditional tryout would serve to eliminate the limited and valuable practice opportunities before their first game.” Coaches practicing this strategy suggested giving at least three to five practice opportunities to players and make some of those early a.m. workouts along with another after school (i.e. two-a-days).

The coaches recommended approaching each individual with sensitivity and empathy along with the information for the player’s removal because mishandled cuts by coaches can lead to harmful developmental effects on young people and a trail of negative events over their life. If possible, all coaches indicated they welcomed meeting all cut players individually and giving them important feedback about how they performed each practice session. Some programs, also utilized an evaluation matrix to help explain the thought process and

to highlight strengths and weaknesses of the non-selected player during the tryout period. The coaches practicing this tactic acknowledged the legal component and specifically suggested comments in the Team Selection Evaluation Chart should center on specific instances during tryout sessions which demonstrated a need for improvement. Additionally, specific suggestions should accompany identified weaknesses so each player can understand how to improve their future performances. Some schools asked our interviewees to provide this document along with requiring them to meet the individuals cut.

Analysis

This work served to document the cutting processes and philosophies used by coaches of highly competitive boys' varsity basketball programs with a preference for the performance ethic. It also revealed several themes which emerged from the organizational documents and interviews of the participants. These themes included comments on the purpose of interscholastic sport from the middle school to varsity level, various strategies to reduce potential tryout fields, and how to break disappointing news to prospective student-athletes about their elimination from a competitive sports team opportunity.

The process of cutting described above should be viewed similarly to other situations because it appears to follow some of their prescribed selection procedures. For instance, many students must meet a predetermined specific criterion to enroll in higher academic level classes. Commonly this criterion is specific, measurable, posted in advance, and equally applied to all students. A similar position is advocated by members of the *Positive Coaching Alliance* and participants in this study as they suggested coaches can and should make their selection process less subjective or more measurable. Interestingly, failure to do so could open them to potential litigation. For instance, most cuts from sports teams may result from low skill level, self-esteem, and physical immaturity. Hall of Famers Michael Jordan (Basketball) and Orel Hershisier (Baseball) both were cut from their school teams based on their physical immaturity as compared to their peers or their skill level. This is a form of discrimination which may be illegal if programs receive government assistance or funding and the coaches do not document their decisions. Thus, because we live in a very litigious society, this work argues for the establishment of policy which requires the documentation of the non-selected athletes to safeguard the right of coaches to choose the players on their team and to perhaps help those cut better understand reasons for their removal.

Finally, this work demonstrated coaches should remain careful and mindful of the effect cutting has on kids and should make every effort to support as many kids as possible for that level of competition. Thus, this work makes a challenge to the scholarly community to scientifically evaluate the effects of various cutting practices on student-athletes, as this is an underreported area of study. Furthermore, we call to see if the claims and strategies offered by these participants are effective to help reduce the blow of trying out and being cut from a team. Also we could further examine poor coaching examples because little empirical information exists on how poor coaches cut players.

Discussion

The results of this investigation provided a selection matrix to help document the strengths and weaknesses of prospective student-athletes. Maintaining a good relationship to help "establish, maintain, and secure" greater interest in the team was desired by the coaches. The concept of the tryout evaluation form or matrix was offered as a tool to help coaches avoid potential litigation. The coaches practicing this tactic acknowledged the Team Selection Evaluation Chart should center on specific instances during tryout sessions which demonstrated a need for improvement. Additionally, specific suggestions should accompany identified weaknesses so each player can understand how to improve their future performances. The coaches recommended completing an evaluation form which remained soft but honest on weakness. For example, the participants suggested when writing a comment about the weakness of someone's dribbling, instead of labeling someone as an "awful or

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