

Part 1

Building on the Positive Relationships with Parents: It's all about Attitude!

I recently saw a quote suggesting that attitudes are contagious and asking whether your attitude toward parents is worth “catching”. It really is all about attitude. Do you look forward to working with the parents in your program or do you dread every opportunity that puts you in direct contact with them?

As a very young coach, I had no experience whatsoever with parents and remember hearing all the horror stories from my mentors as I began my career. I discovered how uncomfortable I was with parents early on when I coached an athlete I discovered was the grandson of Vince Lombardi. Imagine coaching a freshman football team that had Vince's grandson on the roster. I was intimidated by the prospect. I also experienced times when parents were yelling at (coaching) their kids from the bleachers and providing instructions that were opposite what I was asking the athlete to do. This caused problems for me, but more for the athlete who had to decide whether to make dad or the coach happy. I remember walking off the floor after one of the biggest wins in recent school history only to be confronted by a parent who was angry his son wasn't in the game in the last seconds of the contest. All this tension and controversy caused me to come to the conclusion that the only way to deal effectively with parents was to cut them off, to tell them that there would be no conversations about playing time or strategy at all – PERIOD!

As an athletic administrator, I enforced this standard for years thinking that it was the best way to protect coaches from the abuses of parents. But then I experienced two new phenomena. First, I had my own children who were now old enough to participate at the high school level. All of a sudden, my eyes were opened to the experiences of our parents who see the athletic experience through their athlete's eyes. I saw coaches who weren't particularly skilled at communicating effectively and who taught like they were taught – sometimes successfully, sometimes not. I could now understand from a parental perspective why there were occasional conflicts with coaches.

Then I experienced the effect of refusing to engage with parents over the “playing time” issue. Parents learned to not accept my “NO”, but to raise the conflict to the next level in search of someone who would listen and say “Yes”. I found that at some point, I lost control as the conflict escalated to the administrative levels above me. I vowed to find a new way to work these problems. I came across a quote that helped, “(Parents) don't have an attitude problem. (They) just have a personality that you can't handle!” I discovered that I needed to learn how to work effectively with parents rather than just trying to shut them down.

My new philosophy became: “Communicate, Communicate, Communicate!” I learned that it IS all about attitude. Change your attitude; change your life!