

Building a Winning Program Don Nehlen-West Virginia University

To build a winning program, it is important for the head football coach to be aware of many factors that can facilitate the process—factors that are essential for success in starting a new program, whether it has been downtrodden or just average.

When you are appointed as the new head coach of any program—high school or college—you must approach that opportunity as if it were the best job in the country. Tradition tells us that every job is not a winner. But if you begin thinking that you might not succeed, or if you have questions or doubts of this being the greatest situation ever, it would be in the best interests of all concerned that you do not accept the challenge. The position of head football coach is an awesome responsibility and, when handled correctly, it is truly a rewarding experience.

First and foremost, I believe you must "develop a plan." There are five key elements to lead your program and philosophy in the right direction:

1. Attitude
2. Commitment
3. Accountability
4. Dependability
5. Enthusiasm

lets break down each element, along with some tips and thoughts that may help others buy into your plan.

1. Attitude—Understanding the Plan

It all starts here. You can lose your athletes before you get out of the chute if you begin with criticism of previous seasons or past coaching experiences. These young men are most likely to be loyal to their old coaches. To approach them with negative comments will only give them reason to doubt and question who is right or wrong. Remember, this is the beginning—a new start with new techniques and philosophies. In order to get their attention and bring about positive thoughts, you must make sure they buy into your plan.

Here at West Virginia University we have a slogan: "Raising the Bar." It simply means that there will be a new way of doing and measuring things. For instance, it will no longer be tolerated if an athlete misses class, is late for study hall, or doesn't achieve the required lifts in the weight room. We have raised the bar (i.e. like reaching new heights in the high jump) and new standards have been set for the program.

2. Commitment—Living the Plan

Your athletes need to be aware of the good things that can and will materialize if they

believe and are committed to reaching new levels. In other words, all (coaches and players) must march to the same heartbeat, beginning with positive thoughts and an understanding that by crossing all T's and dotting all I's, they will master new fundamentals required to achieve success. If they learn to pay close attention to every detail en route to reaching their goals, they will become better students, athletes, and citizens.

3. Accountability–Accepting the Plan

When starting a new program, "finger pointing" needs to be a thing of the past. Teach your athletes a new technique: to become "thumb pointers." It is easy to point fingers and criticize last year's seniors, coaches, and whatever else, but that is old news and is no longer important.

The task of changing this finger pointing is really quite simple. Determine which of your athletes are leaders. It is your job as the head coach to find these guys and put them in leadership roles. Every team has players who fit this category—those who will step up and take charge—guys who want the run coming right at them on 4th and 2, guys that want to scream downfield and cover kicks. I refer to these athletes as "thumb pointers," and they will become infectious in a positive manner for the rest of your squad.

4. Dependability–Doing the Plan

The "count on me" guys will be the foundation of your program. These young men are your sergeants, the doers, the ones you can count on in a pinch. I believe that the worst mistake a coach can make is to continually utilize the most talented and flashy, yet non-dependable, athlete. He may be the best "potential" athlete at a given position, but more than "potential" is required to get the job done. It is essential to employ a mix of potential players with a greater amount of dependable athletes to be on the right track and stay on

5. Enthusiasm–Enjoying Your Plan

Outside of your family, this program is the biggest thing in the world. However, to some of your athletes, it is still a game. To others it is a vehicle for an education, and to a select few, it is their life and future. In order to generate enthusiasm, you must seek a common bond to unite all your athletes. If every player puts forth effort, you will have a fighting chance for a successful program.

All eyes are on you as their leader. Put bounce in your step, enthusiasm in your voice, and crank it up. Enthusiasm is a key factor for winning. For your athletes to run full speed, practice hard, and play with passion, enthusiasm must be motivated, cultivated, and molded into their everyday experience. Most importantly, make sure that enthusiasm is visibly present when your team charges the field just before kickoff.

Once you have established your plan and have your beliefs or philosophies in place, you need certain groups of people to help you "implement your plan" for your team. These

groups are

1. Staff and Families
2. Administration
3. Booster Groups
4. Media

These four groups of people are crucial to the success of a program, and here is why:

1. Staff and Families

Coach Woody Hayes stated years ago, "You win with people." In building a successful program, the head coach must select his staff with great care. Knowledge and experience are important aspects in the selection of staff members; however, it is a must that you have the right "chemistry." I believe the following characteristics are imperative in the staff selection for any program:

- a) Loyalty—The selected individuals should possess the desire to work with you. They should believe in you, your plan, and your philosophies.
- b) Workers—They should be diligent coaches that end each day only when the day's work is completed. (Don't just meet to meet. Organize, plan, and accomplish the day's agenda.)
- c) Communicators—Your coaches need to be thick-skinned individuals who can disagree on ideas, goals, plays, etc. without being "disagreeable." There will be mutual respect if you allow your staff to be truthful.
- d) Responsible—These men can be trusted to get the job done and to see it through in both good times and bad. After agreement is reached on schemes, ideas, and so forth, your staff will come together and teach what they believe to be right.
- e) Family Men—With all due respect to single coaches (they are needed just the same), mature coaches with children are great role models for your athletes. Family interaction with players and staff is a great way for your athletes to feel at home and secure. This certainly puts "Coach" in a different light and is especially important to those athletes who come from single-parent homes.
- f) Teamwork—Your staff should work as a family with one heartbeat. The coaches should do things as a staff, such as cook-outs, golf outings, picnics, and ball games. The wives should participate in get-togethers, charity functions, card parties, and luncheons. Staff unity is of the utmost importance.

2. Administration

Prior to accepting any job, check into the "track record" of that specific school with regards to the administrations support of their coaches. Questions to ask include, "Are

they committed? Do they care? Did they give the previous coaches the essentials needed to be successful? In crunch times, will they help or handcuff you?"

Following is a list of a few basics needed from your administration for high school and college football programs:

High

School

a) An "athletic period" during the school day. If there is no block time available, then perhaps a weightlifting class offered during the school day for your athletes. You need to have daily contact other than at practice with your team.

b) Buses for after-school transportation to ensure safe rides home.

c) Upgrading of facilities: stadium, practice fields, locker rooms, training rooms, and offices. A new image is a must, even if it is only a simple coat of paint.

d) New equipment if at all possible. Kids like the "new" idea. This can be anything, such as new socks or a new stripe on the helmets.

e) Pep assemblies prior to each home game (and away games if possible). Make them short and sweet, 30 minutes in length. This is a great way to promote school spirit and make the student body aware of what "their team" is all about.

College

a) Upgrade facilities and equipment. Create your new image as mentioned above in sections c & d.

b) Selected scheduling of early classes by the Registrar. This is an absolute must during the season.

c) Money for summer school is important, especially for the second term. This is the time to have your players on campus to begin the bonding process of coming together as a team.

d) If one meal is allowed on training table, make it a great one. Also, make sure the surroundings (tablecloths, plates, glasses, flowers, etc.) are nice as well.

e) Travel with an attitude of first class. There is no need to be lavish; just make sure your players feel good about themselves.

mistakes, who is injured, and who is not playing well. It is most important that you never publicly criticize a player by name. Public criticism will not only cost you the trust and respect of the player in question, but that of your entire team. Criticism is a private matter.

c) Be accessible even when you don't feel like talking. This requirement goes for your staff as well as your players. Educate them from the start on your policy regarding media relations.

d) Keep pushing the good side of your program. There is certainly enough negativity in today's world and people really do want to see our youth excel. Here at West Virginia University, our players visit the Children's Hospital on a regular basis, they participate in the Special Olympics, and the proceeds from our annual Gold-Blue Spring Game are donated to the Children's Hospital.

After developing your plan and getting the right people to help you implement it, the fun part begins. Now, you will begin to execute your plan. This is the most exciting and enjoyable time for a coach. This is the time when your team begins to take shape. Morale, togetherness, mental toughness, effort, accomplishments, pride, academics, style of living, dedication, unselfishness, hard work, loyalty, winning edge, perseverance, soundness, repetition, goals, dealing with adversity, leadership, practicing hard, never quitting, visualization, recognition, honesty, and being the best person you can possibly be are just a few of the many intangibles that will help you to mold your first team

I believe the four phases a football team must go through in executing the plan are as follows:

1) Winter Conditioning–Mental Toughness Phase

The mental toughness phase starts during the first winter. During this time guidelines are drawn, expectations are stated, academics are emphasized, and the need to be an exceptional citizen of the community is stressed. With these things in mind, you now add the weight program. The 6:00 a.m. conditioning drills and the daily or nightly study tables are worked into the schedule. Remember, you have "raised the bar," and these young men are expecting rules, sound ideas, and tough times to make them better. Do not disappoint them. It is imperative that you challenge them, especially during this phase.

2) Spring Practice–Fundamental Phase

Spring practice is "back to basics" time. Since completing the toughness phase, you now should have the full attention of your players. During this fundamental phase, your athletes will learn to become more sound in their blocking, tackling, hustling to the ball, and hitting. Sell your players on becoming better technicians, thus becoming better players.

3) Summer Workouts–Bonding Phase

It is now June and July and you are only three months away from the opening kickoff and the roar of the crowd. Your squad has completed phases one and two and should be feeling quite good about itself. However, it is important that you know—and they know—that they are not quite ready. Now you have the time and opportunity for true bonding as

a team. Lifting, sprinting and running are great ways for a group of athletes to come together with the belief that they are in fact out-working their opponents.

4) Pre-Season Practice–Perfecting the Attack Phase

It is truly the time for battle. Here is where "not over-coaching" comes into play. It is not what you or your staff knows; it is what your players can accomplish to make them successful and to make them winners. Be sound in what you ask your athletes to do. Put in what you know your players are capable of handling and encourage them to play hard. Sound, mistake-free, well-positioned, emotional, full-speed football will take your team to new heights. Add a wrinkle or two each week to your offense, defense, and kicking units, and above all, do not try to do it all the first year.

You have developed a plan for your program. You have instilled a commitment to accountability with your team. You have given them a new attitude and infused your program with enthusiasm. You have begun to rely on the dependability of your players and staff in motivating them toward their potential. You have bonded through the rigors of offseason conditioning and preseason practice.

What's left, New Coach? Go out and have a great year.