

Coaching A Winner: The Keys to a Successful Collegiate Program

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Athletic Coaching: Coaching Philosophy

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Over the past three years, my role with the Eckerd College Sailing Team has evolved from sailor to powerboat guy to Principal Race Officer to the official title that stands today: Home Regatta Coordinator/Assistant Coach. It was obvious after my first semester of sailing that my sailing career was going nowhere, so instead of hanging things up, I traded the tiller for a set of powerboat keys so I could work towards my Race Management Certification from US Sailing. With all the regatta management experience under my belt, the coaching end of things seemed to evolve naturally and effortlessly. With two and a half years of coaching sailing at the college level (and sporadically at the high school level), the following is what my coaching philosophy has evolved into over my career here at Eckerd College.

Part I: Building a Team

One of the most important foundations of a team is knowing how to be a team player. I have always been a strong supporter of team players, regardless of whether I am playing beer league softball in the summer, playing junior varsity basketball in high school, or coaching sailing now at the college level. Part of being a team player is being able to step up and take one for the team when you need to. A team player does not ask a teammate to do something they would be unwilling to do themselves. A true team player does not whine, complain, or make excuses when asked to do something either on or off the field. They just go out and do it. Being a team player builds trust, respect, and confidence with teammates. Team players are much more pleasant people to be around, which also leads to a tighter bond with teammates as well as a tighter-knit team.

Another important part of the foundation of a team is to have a strong leadership contingent right under the coaching staff. The sailing team this year implemented a unique leadership structure. There are two co-captains right under the coaching staff, and there is a group of five coordinators in addition to the captains. This structure really helps spread out leadership duties, so not everything is directed solely at the captains and coaches. The ideal leader is someone who is self-confident, open to others, committed to the team both long and short term, respectful, and a team player.

The third important element of the foundation of a team is the element of respect. The Oxford Dictionary defines respect as “a feeling of deep admiration for someone or something elicited by their abilities, qualities, or achievements.” Respect comes from experience enthusiasm, efficiency, patience, straight communication, teaching ability, motivation, and honesty. Both players and coaches need to have respect for the teammates, coaches, athletic director, staff of the institution, and the sport. A good way to tell if you have respect for something is to ask yourself “how do you know you have respect for each element?”

The final elements of a team’s foundation commitment and motivation go hand-in-hand. Both coaches and players need motivation to be committed. Motivation comes from teammates and coaches, but the

majority of motivation comes internally from self-motivation. Commitment is more than just being committed to the team. To be considered fully-committed, both players and coaches must be committed to winning. They must also be committed to taking care of themselves and staying in shape. People that are fit have much better endurance and are much sharper both mentally and physically than out of shape athletes.

Effort and time are the key parts of commitment. While neither one can be used as a single determination of the true level of commitment, they both have a large say in it. A coach or athlete who puts in the extra time and effort without being asked is the person who is not only committed, but self-disciplined. A truly committed and self-disciplined person is naturally a great team player.

Part II: Managing the Team

The key to successful management of a team is efficiency and organization. I have witnessed plenty of practices that were sloppy, inefficient, and poorly organized at many different levels. Players quickly lose interest and motivation in these types of practices, so they accomplish very little. On the other hand, the most efficient and organized practices keep players engaged, motivated, and competitive, so they end up accomplishing much more in a given practice.

Another key to successful management is how a coach manages each player's unique personality. I find that as a coach you often have to massage players' egos a little in order to keep them happy. If everyone is happy, team chemistry and morale is so much better than if even one person is unhappy. Unhappy people are nothing but cancers to the rest of the team.

One way to prevent people from growing unhappy is to keep things loose and fun when the need for intensity is not there. Raising the level of intensity unnecessarily causes people to be not only less sharp, but also more on edge and more likely to become irritable. High levels of intensity are both physically and mentally draining, so if a coach does not loosen things up occasionally, coming to practice quickly becomes a chore to many players and coaches. A perfect example of a loose and relaxed practice is a no-pads practice in football or wearing shorts in baseball. Keeping a loose and fun, but still intense flow to things seems to keep everyone happy.

Another way to keep everyone happy is to be fair. As a coach, you must not play favorites. Every member of the team must get a chance to play. Both coaches and players should be honest with each other, as honest and fairness build respect, trust, friendship, and loyalty.

The most important aspect of managing a team is straight and honest communication. Clear, honest, and sincere communication amongst teammates and coaches is necessary, as it builds both trust and respect in people. Playing head games with players is one of the worst things you can do as a coach. You only lose trust and respect amongst the players. As long as you can accept that straight out saying what's on your mind is not always the easiest thing to do, it is the most effective way to do it, and the players will thank you for it once everything is all said and done.

I have always been a firm believer of holding players accountable for their actions. If a player ever gets into trouble, it is his or her own problem. As a coach, I will help them out and support them any way I can. Especially at the college level, players and coaches should not wander around wearing team apparel if they are going to be doing stupid things, which I define as something you would not want your coach or athletic director see you do.

Part III: The Recipe for Victory and Thoughts from “The Head Doctor”

The framework of winning comes from goal setting. Goals must be both realistic and reasonable. If a team is coming off a losing season, a realistic and reasonable goal would be to finish with a winning record instead of winning a national championship. A team must have both long and short-term goals, towards which they can constantly work. Goals are not effective if they are too long or short term or are too unrealistic, and teams often lose interest and motivation if they set unachievable goals.

One of the hardest things for an athlete to do is to be mentally prepared on game day. One of the easiest ways to help yourself prepare for games, regardless of whether you are playing an exhibition game or the deciding game for a National Championship, you should prepare for the game using the same routine. The best pre-performance routine is something you can go out and do that is therapeutic and can help you relax. Once you have perfected this routine, you can go into games feeling relaxed and confident.

Earlier this spring, Coach Terkelsen (Eckerd Sailing Coach) appointed me as “The Head Doctor,” after helping the team through some psychological issues and watching them dominate the District Championship this year. I have noticed that athletes often put unnecessary pressure on themselves to perform. The format that the Intercollegiate Sailing Association (ICSA) has used to qualify teams for the National Championship is by giving berths to Nationals based on how many teams each district has. In our district, it has always come down to three teams (Eckerd, USF, and Charleston) fighting for two berths to the National Championship. In reality, with Charleston being ranked consistently in the top five or six overall in the country, the battle for the second spot was between us and USF. The past two years, the Eckerd team put too much pressure on trying to get that second berth and has missed the second berth by a matter of feet, in both the co-ed and women’s divisions.

This year, the ICSA changed things on the co-ed side by adding a National Semi-Final. Instead of going straight from the District Championship straight to Nationals, twice as many teams now moved on from the District Championship to the Semi-Finals. Our district was awarded five berths to the Semi-Finals, so instead of three teams competing for two berths, they were now battling for five. The pressure that was on us to get that elusive second berth was no longer there. With the lack of pressure, backed by the confidence of sailing at home, we went out and simply dominated the District Championship, beating Charleston by 11 points and beating USF by 17 (top three teams are often within five or seven points of each other). Our district also got a third berth to Women’s Nationals this year, so with three teams fighting for three berths, confidence continues to grow.

I cannot help but compare our success in the District Championship to the Boston Red Sox’ comeback victory over the New York Yankees in the 2004 American League Championship Series (ALCS). The way the team went about themselves in the District Championship was just as the Red Sox did in Games 4 through 7 of the 2004 ALCS. They went out, did not worry about results, stayed loose, rallied around each other, and just got the job done. They dominated the District Championship as a result. Like the 2004 Red Sox, the sting of being so close the year before was there for us this year, which I think helped a lot, too.

Our victory in the District Championship this year also had many parallels to the New York Giants’ victory over the New England Patriots in Super Bowl XLIII. In 2007, our co-ed team missed Nationals by less than a foot, a blow much like Eli Manning’s game winning touchdown with 30 seconds left in the

Super Bowl, or Aaron Boone's walk off home run in the 10th inning of Game 7 of the 2003 ALCS. Like the Giants in the Super Bowl, we came out and simply wanted it a lot more than either Charleston or USF.

Mental toughness is so important on game day. By taking the pressure off your team and putting it on the other team, it helps your team relax and settle into the game better. Once a team is settled into a game, they can find their groove, build their self-confidence, and pressure the other team. The other aspect of toughness while competing is physical toughness. Never give up while competing, no matter how far behind you fall. All it takes is a few bounces to go your way or a momentum shift and you are right back in the game. Successful competing stems directly from a coach's personnel. Each member of the team has a role. A coach must know the role of each player in order to be successful. With proper management of personnel, they can ride momentum and confidence to victory.

Part IV: Dealing with Setbacks and Turning Negative into Positive

Setbacks are tough to deal with, no matter when they happen. There are two ways to deal with a setback: get frustrated and give up, or take a step back, think about what just happened, and come up with a rational solution. Successful teams use the latter, while mediocre teams use the former. The key to handling setbacks is to separate yourself from your emotions. The lack of emotions allows you to think rationally and make reasonable decisions. Being able to think things through and analyze possible decisions allows for the best decisions to be made, and thus get the positive vibes flowing much sooner than if a bad decision was made.

With proper personnel management, a coach can also make adjustments in the event of a setback. If both the coach and the player know the player's role, handling a setback will go even smoother. At the college level, you will be forced to deal with setbacks, which can range from a player quitting or being injured to getting written up by Campus Security to getting arrested for a major crime. Rational thinking and knowledge of personnel will help a coach get through tough times and get a team thinking positive again.

Coaching a team is not an easy thing to do, especially at the college level. With team players buying into a team's philosophy and goals, both players and coaches earn respect and trust amongst each other. Maintain a positive attitude and rational thought, no matter how bad things get, bounces will start going your way, and you will start to get some wins.