

Don't Limp Toward the Finish Line

By Joshua Epperson

During my first season as a head coach at Cumberland County High School, my squad ended the year in lackluster fashion. The players were tired, they lost the enthusiasm of just a few months earlier, they didn't expect to win in the post-season and they coasted until the final game of the season.

We lost early in the post-season tournament and the coaching staff and I reevaluated our approach to the team and practices, and tried to figure out a way to finish the next season on a much stronger note.

Higher Expectations

The first thing we tackled was to raise our expectations for the next season. Without high standards, your effort as a coach is minimized and your players are the first ones to see that.

To set the tone early in the following season, we put the phrase "Finishing what we start" on our team T-shirts. Of course, T-shirts alone have little effect on performance, so we stressed defensive deflections as a key to our team being more successful.

Once the expectation was placed on our players to perform on the defensive end, they took it to heart. Our team only averaged about 10 deflections a game the previous season, but increased that total to 32 deflections per game. The expectations and the goal to increase our defensive pressure led to the major improvement in deflections, which helped us win more games.

Leadership

Cultivating the leaders on our team was the next step for us to finish the season strong. To prepare for the following season, we held a captains' meeting with our two seniors to prep them on being effective leaders. We wanted them to have a leader's mindset before the season started.

We discussed the characteristics that effective leaders share and how they can implement those characteristics into their play, as well with their interactions with teammates.

We also stressed integrity, which became the focal point of our discussions. Integrity comes from giving the effort in class and earning good grades, as well as giving 100-percent effort on the court or being supportive on the bench. We stressed to the captains that integrity also means being the last one to leave the court after practice and completing every drill the right way every time.

Finishing Drills and Layups

A major problem our team had the previous season was finishing layups. We missed a lot of easy shots. When your team is missing layups, have them repeat a phrase (we used "nothing but net") to get them to finish the play instead of just releasing the ball.

In became expected of our players that they were going to finish plays at the hoop to score easy points.

We also stressed finishing drills correctly, meaning that no drill was complete until properly executed.

When we ran sprints, no one jogged prior to hitting the end line. Everyone finished running as hard as they could.

And, our practices didn't end until the drill or sequence was done correctly, so that the team left the gym on a positive note.

Staying Positive

Ending practice on a positive note is important, but so too is being positive at all times. Eliminating negativity is essential to improving team attitude.

To keep a positive attitude, highlight your players' roles and strengths on the team. Let every player know why he or she is critical to your team's success. Everyone has a role, so stress how important that role is.

Also, try using a complement before and after a criticism. It provides some much-needed padding to the constructive criticism. And, if you have any internal disagreements, deal with those immediately and keep them within the team.

You need to target positive thinking toward the end of the season. For us, we did an exercise where we took all of our players out to the track on a rainy day before starting post-season tournament play. The players thought we were there to run. But, instead, we sat them on the track 10 feet from the finish line. We placed a trash can at the finish line.

Then, we asked them why we play the game. Some players mentioned winning a state championship, so I asked who won the title five years ago. No one knew, I asked them who won last year and no one knew. This led into an explanation that there is much more to the game than simply winning it all. If everything was about winning, only one team in the state would have a successful season. I wanted to take the pressure off them and help them seeing a bigger picture.

Then, we had every player write down any negative thoughts or fears they had on a piece of paper. We had them file one by one to the trash can and throw their paper into it before crossing the finish line. As they did this, we had them repeat, "I pledge to finish this season strong."

Commit to the Goal

No endeavor succeeds without a strong commitment. Too often we make grand plans, but then do not see them to the end. Make sure your players know that finishing strong is a commitment and a part of the honor of being on your team.

Have your players sign a contract prior to the season including a commitment to completing the season with their best effort.

Throughout our season we often exited huddles or ended practices by saying, "Finish!" We wanted this idea ingrained in their heads. The commitment to finish must endure to the end of the season. Sure and steady, a strong commitment is the last leg of the plan to complete the season the right way.

Our plan worked. We showed marked improvement from one regular season to the next by boosting our win total by 14 games. Instead of being bounced early in the post-season tournament, we defeated some higher ranked teams and ended the year as one of the top 16 teams in the state.