



DAN BAXTER

# More Than a Score

*There are so many life lessons to be learned in athletics. This program makes sure student-athletes are receiving them.*

*By Scott Garvis & Pete Wilkinson*

As athletic administrators, we often tout the many benefits of participating in high school sports. From learning perseverance to leadership, the opportunities are plentiful. But how do we know if these life lessons are really being taught?

We ask coaches to implement teachable moments, we ask captains to be leaders, and we ask all student-athletes to handle the pressure of being on the athletics stage. These aren't easy things to do.

Here at Eastside Catholic High School in Sammamish, Wash., we decided that just hoping all the wonderful byproducts of athletics participation would happen wasn't good enough. Over the past year, we have implemented a structured program to ensure that athletics is truly an extension of the classroom.

Titled "Life Skills and Leadership," the program starts by putting coaches, parents, and student-athletes all on the

same page. Then, it provides specific learning opportunities for student-athletes in all sports. The program is led by Pete Wilkinson, a longtime coach and expert in student-athlete development, whom we hired to put together the curriculum and facilitate workshops in collaboration with the athletic department. This type of endeavor could also be run by a teacher, community volunteer, or the athletic director.

## Program Goals

The overall goal of the Life Skills program is for student-athletes to get more out of their athletics participation. We want them to learn how to be better teammates, leaders, and students through enhanced communication and analytical skills. We want them to understand how to develop and maintain meaningful relationships with peers and coaches.

Many student-athletes today feel a lot of pressure from coaches, parents, and fellow classmates to perform at a high level. They are critiqued constantly and there can be subtle pressure from parents who have invested countless hours and money in their child's training. Attempting to obtain a college scholarship can add another layer of stress. A big part of the Life Skills program teaches athletes how to recognize and deal with this pressure.

Another key area of the program is teaching leadership skills. Captains often have questions that they don't know how to answer: How do I convey to my coach that one of my teammates is making poor decisions? How do I deal with teammates who are creating negative situations? How do I answer those who are questioning the offense we run?

The program also aims to create a culture of communication and trust. We all are striving for the same goals, but personalities sometimes get in the way. By furthering everyone's communication skills, small problems don't become crises, and we all remain on the same page. One of the most important lessons we can impart to student-athletes is how to navigate a

*Scott Garvis is Senior Director of Athletics at Eastside Catholic High School in Sammamish, Wash. He has also served as Athletic Director at Burnsville (Minn.) High School and can be reached at: [sgarvis@eastsidecatholic.org](mailto:sgarvis@eastsidecatholic.org).*



*Pete Wilkinson is Head Baseball Coach at Bellevue (Wash.) High School and founder of the Wilkinson Sports and Life Performance Academy. He has more than 45 years of experience coaching baseball and softball athletes and 20 years working in student-athlete development.*



difficult situation. Learning to deal with a variety of viewpoints is really what life is all about.

Lastly, the program strives to help student-athletes deal with the questions they face in their roles. How do I respond to my parents who are upset that I didn't play in tonight's game? How do I deal with college recruiters? How do I talk with my coach who I feel is mad at me? These are tough questions and student-athletes are often left confused and frustrated, which can lead to undue stress and burnout—or an unsatisfying high school athletic experience. It can also lead to destructive parent involvement and a negative team dynamic.

With these goals, we found it was not difficult to convince academic administrators to implement the program. We presented the proposal as a plan to reach students within our school community through athletics, since about 70 percent of our school population participates in at least one sport. It turned out to be an easy sell to our president, Sister Mary Tracy. She is very supportive of athletics and views the work we do as an extension of the academic classroom.

A big question was how to cover the costs of hiring a leadership consultant. We did some creative financing with our salary schedule and were able to use a coach's stipend. In the past I have also instituted the help of local banks and community service organizations to fund leadership programming.

This is such an important issue that many times is over looked due to constrained budgets. But we really need to invest fiscally in the development of our student-athletes to further our programs.

### How It Works

The first step in implementing the program involves mentoring coaches. Through periodic meetings, we cover several topics that we feel are critical in helping them be outstanding coach-educators, such as vision, covenants and expectations, standards, and communication. In those topic areas, we talk about instruction, coaching and mentoring, and developing leaders. This has led to discussions on expectations, bringing transparency to their programs, team building, and creating approaches to solving problems.

We also stress to coaches the importance of having an open door with their student-athletes. A key part of the program is communication, so each coach must make sure athletes feel comfortable coming to them to talk about anything. And coaches must also embrace their role of mentoring athletes through any difficult discussions.

Second, we talk with parents at the beginning of each season about the art of parenting high school student-athletes. We discuss what exactly should belong to the parent (health and safety) and what should be restricted to the athletes (performance and playing time). Other topics have centered on the team experience and appropriate vs. inappropriate behaviors.

In implementing the curriculum for the student-athletes, we provide a lot of flexibility so the program can work for each individual team. First, coaches can choose among three general delivery methods. One is weekly meetings with teams, another is using a weekend seminar model, and our third option is splitting the program into three sessions: pre-season, mid-season, and postseason.

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Most of our teams choose the weekly meeting model, and we provide three options there. The first provides overall skills for the student-athletes following a set curriculum. Topics covered include:

- Understanding and building fundamental thinking skills.
- How to use imagination and self talk to expand comfort zones.
- How to compete and cooperate with ourselves regarding athletic, academic, and life performance.
- How to build confidence and use it in areas apart from athletics.
- How to formulate and commit to goals.
- How to balance all that student-athletes have going on in their lives and how to avoid burnout.
- How to gain command of their lives.
- How to lead.
- Building a working definition of "winning."

In the second option for weekly meetings, coaches choose a weekly topic that relates to situations they are currently facing. This can include areas like: maintaining focus after a big win; rebounding

from a tough or blow-out defeat; preparing for an especially important game; rebuilding confidence after a particularly poor individual or team performance; finishing the close game by maintaining composure, intention, and direction.

A third option focuses on specific preparation for "big" games and/or sections of the season. Here, we discuss individual respect, understanding choices, and getting a higher level result for the group. We focus on solving problems at higher solution levels rather than lowest common denominator thinking. We talk about how each individual's choices impact the team.

In each of the three options, during the discussions, we ask students to answer specific questions relating to their own experiences so they can make a connection to their own lives. We have tried to relate topics to actual situations athletes face and to the maturity levels of the athletes in the group. To do this, we brief and debrief with the coaches on both ends of the meeting.

A final area of the program involves extra training for members of our Student

Athletic Advisory Council, which contains captains and team leaders. They attend a weekly meeting where we discuss topics involving the curriculum and how that relates to their positions as team leaders.

We also kicked off the Life Skills program by having our advisory council athletes attend a coaches and captains conference. They learned the benefits of taking ownership of their team and how to lead by serving others. This had a profound effect on our teams. Our captains and coaches had the opportunity to discuss what they wanted their seasons to look like and how they were going to effectively communicate that to their teams.

Overall, the best part about the program is that it gets student-athletes to really think and talk about their experiences and how to make the most of them. This is leading them to build more meaningful relationships with their coaches and each other, which bolsters team unity. It is also teaching them to be less fearful about communication and helping them discover their own individual value to the group. We have seen many benefits, and it has been fantastic to watch the student-athletes grow through the program.



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