

## Advice to a Young Coach

I have been asked to write on any topic for the website this month. This is probably an ill conceived idea, since I don't get out much and people who know me NEVER give me a stage to state my opinion. It is well known that I will give that opinion without much reservation and then they have to put out the fire that results. I am not good with words or playing nice for the sake of getting along. This can be used as an asset as a coach, but in a relationship it can be very detrimental.

When considering these truths about myself, I thought of aspects of coaching and in particular aspects of coaching cross country and track I should explore. I considered practice management and why we coach (which I spent hours on and wrote about 10 total pages in an effort to write something moving and worthy of publication). I failed in each attempt, but in the process I asked my wife to proof my attempts and she did. Her stated reason for wanting to proof them was she didn't want me to embarrass myself since I am a math teacher and struggle with words and with understanding the nuances in dealing with people as outlined above. When she offered, I realized that all the topics I was considering as subjects to explore were well trodden ground. I see those articles from time to time and while very useful and motivational, they are not that unique and offer little new, genuine advice to a coach. I didn't feel I could add much to what is already out there. What I did realize however is what has always been in front of me and rarely written about, the value and necessity of our home support systems as coaches.

Let me start by saying that I am entering year 27 of coaching. I have coached year round (cross country, indoor, and outdoor track and field, and summer conditioning) for the last 21 of those. I get two weeks entirely away from the athletes during the late fall after cross country and another two weeks after the state cross country meet. Other than during this time, I am never home before 5 pm Monday through Friday during the school year and most days I am not home until between 6 and 7pm. Once I do get home I receive multiple texts and calls from parents. Usually these messages involve asking questions about things their own athletes were already told sometimes multiple times that they chose not to share with them, so I end up doing the team announcements to the athletes, then online, then to several parents individually after that. This can really add frustration to my day.

On meet days I get home very late for weekday meets and on about 20 Saturdays a year I am gone all day. I get irate phone calls, I have meetings with parents and administration. As any coach knows, this is just how it is. During tournament season I can't even begin to remember if I am coming or going, and finally we have had at least 3 athletes actually live with us on 24 hours notice because their home situation became unstable

I am a coach. I signed up for this. As a great coaching mentor once told me, when you can live without it, get out of it, but for some reason I cannot. I love what I do, and if you are like me, so do you. Just remember that this is your choice and your passion. Whomever you are in a relationship with does not get to experience the parts that make it worth it for us. They probably

do not share the calling to be a coach. If you ask me, for the life of me I cannot explain why I have coached this long, but I do know that there is no way just seeing the at home end of things it would appear worth it to anyone there. What I have figured out through 2 divorces and multiple ulcers is the necessity of a good support system. While your athletic director, school administrators, athletes' parents, and assistant coaches are all important to building a successful program, and clearly part of a coaches support structure, I am more focused on our support structure away from school. The lifespan of a coach in today's day and age is short and all the at work support as well as all the tech knowledge, team building and people skills in the world do our profession no good if that coach leaves the profession in 3-5 years because they do not have a support structure in the other 22 hours a day at home.

I never read an article or talked about this with anyone when I was new to coaching. I observed my coaching mentors. I paid little mind to their situations outside of coaching. I didn't realize the vital role their support systems played in their being able to coach especially in the long term. I knew my high school coach's wife didn't like it when we stole their dog or when we painted him purple, but didn't appreciate that they had made a major investment in our success.

If you are new to coaching, take time to appreciate those at home who support you. There will be times you will be overwhelmed, unable to attend events, when you will be taking calls from irate parents when you should be paying attention to them. Don't always put the most pressing issue first. A good partner at home will understand and not ask for the attention they need in the short term, but you must take time for them if you want to succeed in the long term. Put the phone down! Prioritize! If you have someone around who helps you get through, make them your priority. Trust me, that parent will be there in a couple hours and you will need someone to go grocery shopping when you are stuck at practice until 6pm! My wife has successfully coached our Middle School team. She also chose to go to all our meets for 15 years because she felt compelled to. She now uses meet time to catch up on her own hobbies take care of stuff around the house. I finally realized that she would do what I asked but that asking her to dedicate that kind of time was asking too much. She doesn't want to spend all her Saturdays with them. That is fine. She will do what I ask her to if she knows I need it, so I have to make sure I do not ask too much!

We host our school after season banquets at our house and a few times a month the kids come over and run the trails we have on our farm. I understand she doesn't want to come to every meet and she understands that sometimes the kids will come to the house. When they are there, they don't come in the main part of the house. Sometimes she comes out and pals around with them, sometimes she does not. She is my support system not theirs. That is fine.

Consider that she has raised our dog and restored our house on her own since I am not home nearly enough and she gets that some evenings I am just spent. She has listened to me gripe about countless stupid things our kids, their parents, and our school administration have done. She listens to this too frequently yet doesn't complain. She doesn't need to add to this by feeling the need to entertain the team when they are at the house or attend the meets where I don't even get to talk to her much anyway.

If you are a new coach, spend some time considering the need for strong support. Coaching is hard and it is time consuming. You have to have someone that understands that to be able to hold up in the long term. If you are lucky enough to have a significant other, appreciate them. They are the unsung heroes of the coaching world. No coach, no matter how good their technical skill will be around long enough to affect enough kids to really make a difference without the support at home, and that support at home only comes with a price. That price is making the time and showing them your appreciation.

If you are a great coach, then you will take the responsibility of making your athletes better human beings, not just better runners. This will mean a huge commitment on your part so far as time and emotional investment. This type of commitment will require a support structure. Don't ignore yours. Develop it every chance you have. While some of your support structure is your coaching network and even your in school support system, most of the support you really need is from your home. When you are first starting out, that may be your parents or friends, but as you grow and establish your own home, recognize that a supporting spouse may just be more valuable to your success in the long term than any technical skill or amount of effort you put into the sport. While I know some coaches who succeed and stay single, I can only speak for myself and what I have seen work for most is a support system at home. I can't even find time to get my oil changed in the car and without my wife understanding this and doing the things that make our house function, I would be lost.

For your long term success in the sport, please make sure anyone you become involved with understands the tremendous commitment that comes with being a coach. This is only fair to them and without this basic understanding, tremendous amounts of stress and anxiety can be produced trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. It is a rare person that is good with the requirements of being in a relationship with a committed coach. Some even say they are good with this and truly believe that they will be, but no one truly understands all the aspects that come with being the spouse of a coach until they are around it for an extended time unless they happened to have a coach in their home growing up. Communicate about this early on and again, be appreciative and understanding. Being in a relationship with a coach is difficult and will be full of bumps along the way. It is rare for anyone to be willing to be in a relationship with a coach. If you find that person, treat them right!

Things to understand and do as a coach or to be in a relationship with one:

- 1) Coaching takes a lot of time. This requires anyone in a relationship with a coach to be independent and very flexible in their expectations regarding time spent together.
- 2) Coaches are often frustrated. While no one ever plans to bring home their job, in coaching, we see really dumb things and we see them frequently. If we spend 6 years developing an athlete and watch them go on Senior trip instead of going to the state meet, we will need to tell someone. That someone has to be able to listen and be supportive as a coach, you have to not take home your hard days any more than absolutely necessary and need to learn to put things in perspective.

- 3) Athletes become members of the extended family. If they get kicked out of the house, they are going to call you and you are probably going to give them somewhere to stay. There will be athletes and ex athletes around over Christmas break. This is hard for some people to accept.
- 4) You have to hold each other accountable and stand your ground. To be successful in a relationship with a coach, you have to be a person who will be supportive, but at the same time will make some rules and not be afraid to speak up. If they want to go to dinner they tell you to get your butt home NOW. If they aren't this type of person, eventually, you will cross a line you didn't mean to and things will get more complicated.
- 5) Talk about non-team things daily
- 6) Do things together at least weekly
- 7) Recognize that you are the coach and that doesn't mean your spouse has to love your team and commit their time to them. One of the most successful coaches I know has a wife who doesn't like the sport at all and avoids games at all costs. It works for them. They can talk about the kids and have events for them, but he knows the sports and practices are his area and his concern.
- 8) Be flexible but be firm. Plans will change, but there should be some things which are not negotiable. Be clear on what these things are and hold each other accountable to them.
- 9) Have a life outside of the team. BOTH OF YOU. Understand that your team is a part of life, but that both of you need time and interests away from it and those interests do not have to be shared. Make it easy for your significant other to be independent and do things on their own without feeling the need to be there for each other all the time.
- 10) When you are home, try your best to be home. No matter how hard you try this will not always be possible, but you have to make the effort and really prioritize what MUST be done during the time you actually get to spend together

I hope that my experience is helpful. We need more good coaches to stay in the profession and this is so vital to seeing that happen. I hope you find some value in it.

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