

COACHING: GOOD TO GREAT

Ever wonder what it is that inspires some athletes, and teams, to strive for excellence? How they push the edge of the envelope and extend beyond normal expectations to please their coach? Why some are able to pull from deep within, an insurmountable reserve of energy, in order to complete a task their coach has asked of them. What makes that coach one of the best-of-the-best? From my perspective, there are key aspects and characteristics that distinguish between a good coach and a great coach:

A. Expert of the Game

Great coaches are experts in the sport they coach. They know the ins and outs of the game, the X's and the O's, and they are able to convey this expertise to all involved. They tend to surround themselves with assistants who have superb knowledge of the game and those assistants will be responsible for bringing their knowledge to the team. This not only helps coaches improve any weakness they may have, it supports the development of a strong program where athletes have a better chance at reaching their potential. The coach and coaching staff are so knowledgeable that their own athletes become students of the game.

B. Passionate

Great coaches are exceptionally passionate about their sport. These coaches are able to bring their passion and the energy that comes along with it into everything they do for their team. Their intensity and desire become infectious and inspirational to all involved and under their direction. This want to excel turns into a need for athletes. It becomes a natural part of the athlete's preparation and process. Great coaches positively infect their athletes and their team as a whole by what they bring to the bench or sideline.

C. On/Off Switch

Great coaches recognize how and when to dial up or dial down their passion and intensity about the game. They know that a high level of controlled intensity is what they are looking to get out of their players. They recognize that too much or too little passion at the wrong time can be deconstructive. Passion breeds intensity, and intensity heightens game awareness and ability. It must however be kept in a delicate balance as control can get lost when it is not. Great coaches know how to regulate this balance. It can mean the difference between success and failure.

D. Organized, Structured & Prepared

Great coaches are over-prepared. These coaches have a means to their madness. There is a system they follow in everything they do. Practices and game plans are well thought out. Proper planning is simply part of their personality because everything has a time and a place. All of this organization, structure, and preparation bring a strong sense of purpose to the athlete and the team under the direction of the very best coaches.

E. Basics & Fundamentals

The best coaches insist on basic and fundamental development of their athletes. Whether it is a physical aspect of the game, or a mental one, there is always a focus on improvement. Spending time on things that are not functional serve very little purpose for the “great coach” and such non-functional things are not part of their development plan. Concentrating on the fundamental aspects of the sport, and further development of them, is something the very best coaches consistently integrate into their planning. This will occur through progressive and regressive insight. The best coaches know these fundamentals are critical in order for their athletes to reach the highest levels of performance. Even professional athletes focus on, and consistently repeat, the basic skills because we build ourselves from the ground up. The basics and fundamentals are always on the ground floor: an athlete’s foundation.

F. Consistent

Great coaches are not only exceptional with the above characteristics but they consistently apply these aspects across the board over time. These coaches are reliable and dependable. They are the type of person who can be counted on time after time. The best coaches are relentless with this consistency in all aspects of their coaching, even discipline when it is necessary. This coach will often put aside their personal life for the sake of consistency toward the team, the coaching staff and the athlete.

G. Competitive Atmosphere

The best coaches know the importance of developing a competitive atmosphere in training and in practice. Top athletes love to compete because they understand that competition is the key to achieving top performance and ability. Great coaches use this key as a way to help their athletes continuously unlock higher levels of performance and skill development from their athletes. These coaches will consistently push their athletes to break through barriers and reach beyond their current comfort levels. This coach may even appear to be unfriendly at times. Competition does not rest with the opponent. True athletes will compete positively against their own teammates and constructively against themselves. The best coach can tap into this competitiveness and continue to create a positive environment that facilitates and enhances this competitive atmosphere.

H. Creative

The best coaches are creative thinkers and continuously think outside the box. They are able to come up with new ways to teach, train, practice, and compete, while their counterparts typically stay within their own *status quo*. The best coaches do not abandon tried and true techniques or strategies. These rare coaches take those aspects to peak levels adapting them when necessary to meet their athlete’s needs, and even create something completely different and more effective when the need arises.

I. Good Example

Great coaches who are looking to cultivate peak performance and championship levels of achievement know they must lead by example. To say one thing and then do another does not bode well for ultimate team development. The best coach is a living example of what it is they are trying to teach. They know they are the ones who must set the example. Coaches cannot expect an individual under their direction to follow a path that they do not follow. The top coaches talk the talk and walk the walk. These coaches, they have it, and their athletes can see it, even feel it. In the end, these athletes know that their coach has it are often very proud of “their” coach.

J. Positive and Honest

Bolstering the confidence of athletes is certainly a part of the plan. The best coaches reinforce the positives they see in their athletes while working with the weaknesses. The top coaches do not provide or give false praise because honesty is an important part of the process. Top coaches do not demean or berate their athletes with negative criticism. Rather, top coaches create positive and constructive criticism because positivism enhances the internal motivations. The very best coaches are honest to a fault but they find creative ways to deliver difficult messages to their athlete. Whether bolstering the good or discovering the weak, skill is built upon by honestly approaching these strengths and weaknesses with the athlete. The top coaches do this while maintaining the athlete’s confidence and willingness to improve and go beyond expectations.

K. Read Athletes

Whether it is a personality trait, a gift, or a sixth sense, great coaches are able to read their athletes. They know what makes them respond and what motivates them. They are not only able to feel the mood of their team as a whole but can read the different individual characteristics of each member of their team and staff. It is with complete understanding that they use this ability to adjust and adapt their approach in order to help each athlete reach their true potential as an individual and teammate.

L. Caring

To be considered the very best of the best, it is indispensable to be caring. Great coaches, the ones people and former athletes talk about decade after decade, the ones that will be remembered forever, truly cared about their athletes. This caring, it goes beyond just the athletic arena. If you took the time to ask athletes years after their career has ended why they thought so much of that person they called “coach”, invariably, and in some way, the idea that their coach truly cared about them causes a deep sense of respect. This is not limited to the player as an athlete but also a person. It may be direct, or it may be inferred, but for many, that coach, at least the great ones, they often helped change the athlete’s life. Often, these coaches put their athletes and their team before themselves.

What do all of these aspects and characteristics do when they come together in one person? They create a very deep sense of respect from the athletes under his or her direction. It is not just the normal, everyday kind of respect one has for a person in authority. It is much deeper than can be described. It is something they feel deep into their hearts, even their soul. This respect fundamentally provides a lasting impression on the athlete long after their playing career has ended. Perhaps it can be described as that love between a child and their parent: simply indescribable.

It is the kind of respect that produces an environment, a culture if you will, where athletes are eager to commit themselves to excellence. Excellence is a reflection of specifically directed effort. An athlete's perfect effort is achieved when: they become disciplined in their approach; they willingly make sacrifices for their own development often taking the hard road; they set their priorities in order to achieve a desired result; and they often lead an infectious belief in becoming a champion. It becomes second nature to them whether in training, practice or game day. In the end, the truly respected coach has enabled their athletes to bring it all to the table, every day and with every breath. Where each shift is delivered like their last and their competitiveness seems endless. This coach teaches the athlete to bring their perfect effort to every practice, game or training day.

Coaches that are able to earn this kind of respect from their athletes, they are the ones who can literally tell their players to jump and the players actually mean it when they respond with "*how high coach?*" Only the truly great ones are able to earn this type of admiration from their athletes.

Do you remember that coach? Do you remember that teacher?

Are you one?

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