

Developing a Team First Mentality Among Your Players

It's the question many coaches grapple with. How do I get my players to commit to the team ahead of the individual? As a player, this team-first mentality was instilled in me at Linfield College and carried into my professional career. My minor league manager would tell us repeatedly that if you want more individual recognition, commit to the team first and win. The more you win as a team, the more accolades the individuals receive. I certainly found that to be true, as I saw it first hand in New York. Hitting .300 for the Yankees gathered a lot more attention than hitting .300 in Oakland. Why, because I played on a World Championship team. You win, more people notice.

A more recent example was our 2013 National Championship team at Linfield. Prior to last year, we never had more than 1 player in a season earn All-American status. In 2013 we had three 1st team All-Americans, including the national pitcher of the year. Our players have to buy-in to the truth that when you win the individual awards follow. As coaches we understand this concept, but we also understand it contradicts what many players hear every day. In the world of Sports Center they are told that individual exploits are the path to the notoriety they are looking for. So how do we change that thinking and how do we develop a group of players who buy in the "team first".

I believe "team first" starts with the culture we as coaches create on and off the field. Coaching at the college level I understand I have more say in regards to my roster. I alone can decide if a player is a good fit for my program, I don't have parents and other outside political issues to contend with. But even at the high school level ultimately a coach decides who plays. We have to set a tone and a culture early that lets the players know the team comes first. Playing time is our greatest tool to achieve this. Those who aren't good teammates don't play. With that in mind, we have to be very consistent with our team. We have to treat every player the same, regardless of their role or year in school. No one gets treated differently than the other. So here are some "policies" I've learned and used in my program that I believe help build team unity.

No one individual is above the team: This is a very important concept and something that gets addressed day 1 of practice. If someone is not willing to be a good teammate, he will not play for me. I don't care who he is or what his role may be, he's either in or he's out.

Older players are more accountable: The easiest way to build dissension among the team is by allowing the older players an easier ride than the younger players. We make it very clear that more is expected of the older players. They lead in cleanup, they carry the gear, and they do the extra work as an example to the younger guys how to do things. The older guys are not entitled to take it easy, instead they have the responsibility to lead

by example. I expect our older players to lead stretch and be the first to finish conditioning. There are to be held to a higher standard.

No factions: This is also huge for me. So many times I see teams that have separation within the roster. There is the group of older players then the group of younger players. Or there are pitcher and position players. We make it clear to our guys that we are all one roster, one team, and everyone on our team are important to our success. We mix old and young players together in all of our drills and everything we do. Our expectation is that older players help raise up the younger players, to show them their importance to the program, and not to belittle them. We room pitchers and position players together on the road, as well as young and older players. We do things as a team, not as small groups. If we see factions developing, we deal with it head on and change that attitude.

Uniform and hair codes: This may be seen as old school, and I'm sure it is, but I believe this is very important. It may seem as a small thing, but it sends the message that we are all in this together, that we are a unified team. We wear our uniform the same way, with high stirrups. Our rule is that our hair has to look good in the hat, and I'm the judge! I want to see a willingness from my players that they will do whatever's asked of them to be a part of the team. These aren't crazy requests, just small things that send the message that when we walk onto the field we are one unit.

A couple years ago I had a situation come up as I was coaching the National 18U team. During the tryout process, players were given uniforms by USA Baseball to wear. The pants were, by design, not the floppy MLB pants but ones that had elastic in the bottoms. As I watched the first day of games, I noticed a number of players who were not wearing the pants we handed out. I had coaches go to them and ask them to wear the appropriate pants the next game. A number of guys refused to wear the pants, saying they were not comfortable. They didn't realize with that statement they had just cut themselves from the national team. If they are so individual in their thinking that they aren't willing to do something small like wear our pants, how could I believe they would commit to the bigger and more difficult things I would ask them to do while competing for a gold medal?

Friendly competitions: Every coach wants focus and hard work from all of their players at all times. But I've found that creating friendly competitions within the practice environment is a great team building exercise. The game of baseball is meant to be enjoyed, so I believe there is a place for playing games in practice. We promote competition, with reward for the winners versus penalties for the losers. It may be as simple as the winning team not having to clean up, but be creative with the competitions. Maybe a relay race one day, or a hitting challenge the next. We play a game after every

on-field batting practice where the winner gets to wear a championship belt. Let the guys have fun together on the field, it build cohesiveness with the group.

Only positive talk between players: This may seem unrealistic or cliché, but we do not allow our players to criticize each other. They will certainly hold each other accountable, but it's always done in a respectful way. Nothing negative, only positive. If we sense friction between the players, we bring them in privately to talk it through together. It only takes one negative attitude to start to drag the team down, and we don't want anything to hold us back. We had a player two years ago that had difficulty not being negative about his situation. He was a back-up player unhappy with his role, and despite multiple conversations he continued to display a negative attitude around the team. After the season was over I told him I thought it would be a good idea if he didn't play as a senior. His attitude and mindset was a detriment to the team and I didn't want him around.

Schedule off field activities: This is a great way to build team unity. Whether it's a public service project or fun things like talent shows, get your players together in non-baseball environments. We have team breakfast each weekend, and our players have movie nights and "take a senior to dinner" nights where the younger players go to dinner with the older guys.

Again, be creative and get the players together away from the field.

Consistency is crucial: I can't stress this enough. With regards to every one of these ideas or policies, consistency is a must. You cannot treat one player differently than the others. What's policy for your worst player is policy for the best. We can't treat our backup players differently than our starters or freshman different than seniors. When players see that rules don't apply to everyone, it leads to jealousy and dissention and pulls a team apart. I have meetings with my seniors every year and warn them I will be tougher on them than everyone else. I pull my best players aside and tell them I'm holding them to a higher standard. I tell my team from day one that I do play favorites. I favor guys who work hard, play for the team first, have a great attitude and bring it every day. I'll take great intangibles over talent and I let my players know that. Character matters, and we make that clear from day one. Being clear with your expectations then consistent in upholding them is crucial.

Our hope as coaches is each and every year we'll have a group of guys who believe the sum of the whole is greater than each of the individual parts. The truth is each team will be different. Players and personalities change from year to year. Some teams will just click while other teams may struggle with each other. Sometimes we inherit the character and personality of our players individually, but hopefully some of these thoughts and ideas will help them grow closer as a team.