

Developing the Player-Coach Relationship

By Scott Brosius

Over the course of my big league career, I played for 3 different managers, all with very different styles of coaching and very different relationships with their players. My first manager, Tony LaRussa, was a great manager, but stayed very cool and distant from his players. When Tony left for St. Louis, Art Howe became the manager and was very different in his style. As a former player, he was much more approachable and engaging, and wanted his player's input as he made decisions. With my trade to New York, I had the opportunity to play for Joe Torre. What made Joe special was he had the ability to manage in the most heated environment, but was able to relate to players on both a professional and person level. He always had the big picture in mind, a perspective that showed while baseball was very important, he also cared for each guy, and he was therefore able to cultivate strong relationships with his players.

Now as a coach myself, I think I draw from all the coaches who have influenced my career and my life. While every coach may have differing ways of relating to his players, I do believe there are important characteristics each coach must show with their players to develop a strong player-coach relationship.

Perspective: I find as the season gets underway, I can become so engrossed in the practice planning, preparation, and wins and losses, that I sometimes lose perspective of the big picture. Coaches have an amazing circle of influence with players. How many times have we heard a mom or dad ask a coach to talk to their son because they know the same message coming from a coach will be heard? We can speak into all areas of their life, and we need to hold this responsibility as the most important part of our job.

When we see a player acting up, or acting out of character, or having a terrible day, can we focus on the why? Can we take the time to ask our guys how classes are going, or how things are at home? Can we see our players as people who have to deal with a lot more than just sport? When players know that we care about them and not just their batting average, they will be much more open to hearing our voice.

I have 44 players on my roster, and I make a point of meeting with every player individually in my office at least twice in the offseason, and make sure I speak with every player individually at some level every week during the season.

Consistency: We must stay consistent in how we treat our players. We should not let performance change how we talk or treat our players. We should respond to our players on a personal level the same regardless of his role on the team or batting average. A player must feel the coach is in their corner, so a cold shoulder after a bad performance and a cheerful conversation after a good one sends the message that only performance, and not the person, counts.

Honesty: Nothing will break down a player-coach relationship faster than if a player feels like a coach is not being honest with him. We do our players a huge disservice if we tell them what they want to hear instead of the truth. Even if they don't like the answer, honesty will keep the relationship strong. We need to cultivate an "open door policy" that encourages players to come to us when they have questions. The last thing we want is a player going to other players grumbling about their situation. I would much rather they come straight to me to get their answer.

Fairness: A coach must treat every player on the roster the same. A starting player cannot have more privileges than a reserve. Every player on the roster must feel like he is valued as much as the best player. You must be willing to punish the best player the same way you would your worst, and you must have the same patience with a struggling player as you do your star. Everyone must be able to stand on equal ground. We lose credibility with our players as soon as they see preferred treatment within the program.

Trust: Players must be able to trust everything you say and do. We can't say one thing then turn around and do another. Your actions as a coach must back up what comes out of your mouth. We should never make promises with our players in regards to rolls and playing time. I believe it's very irresponsible as a coach to make a promise to a player. If I promise a player a starting position, then that player struggles, then I am forced to do one of two things.

I must either break that promise and play someone else, or not play the player who has earned the position. Either way I lose credibility with our players and break their trust.

The bottom line is we need to have the ability to communicate with our players what our expectations are, and then be responsible to uphold those expectations. But equally important, we need to communicate their expectations of us as coaches, and then we need to hold ourselves accountable to those as well. We should never ask our players to do something we're not willing to do ourselves.

We should never fool ourselves and think this aspect of coaching is not important. Once players have lost trust in a coach, his influence with the players will diminish. These relationships can turn a positive season into a sour experience for all involved. But a coach with great perspective, who is honest, fair and trustworthy, can have an amazing impact on a player's life and playing career.