

Teach Mental Toughness-Go Take a Hike

Mental toughness is a huge part of the success of a team, as you probably know. But what do coaches really do about making their team as tough mentally as they can be? Do they just talk about it or show the team what it really means to be mentally tough? Some players are naturally mentally tough but most are not or not to the extent they need to be in order to be the best they and the team can possibly be during the season.

Every day the coach needs to teach and preach mental toughness and one way to achieve that is to instill confidence in their players. Instead of tearing a player down with negative comments about their ability, build them up by encouraging them and be showing them the correct way.

Other ways of teaching teamwork and mental toughness are by doing team activities outside of practices. Here is one to try with your team. When I retired from coaching college softball, I started hiking with the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. The first year our goal was to hike the Grand Canyon and the second year was a hike in the Rocky Mountains. These are not the type of hikes that are easy. These are hikes you must train for to accomplish. Luckily, we had two really good trainers. Being from the St. Louis, we needed to do our practice hikes in this area before the trip. There are a lot of great trails around St. Louis as there probably are in a lot of areas of the country.

We started training in January for our hike to the Grand Canyon and went hiking every Saturday to prepare to hike the end of April. On our very first hike, the weather was eight degrees. Eight degrees and lasted a couple of hours through hilly terrain. The hikes went from two hours the first week to hikes that lasted 11 hours the week before our Grand Canyon hike. The terrain went from being hilly to trails that had a lot of rough terrain, big hills, rocks, ankle high mud, snow, pouring rain, heat and any other condition that you can imagine.

It was tough but so rewarding. If I was still coaching my college team, I would have take the team hiking as much as possible in the fall and also over the rest of the practice season in the winter. There are so many benefits to hiking as a group or alone and here are some of those benefits:

*Hiking is a great workout for the entire body especially the legs. The harder the terrain, the better the workout. This type of a workout stresses the entire body and makes the body stronger in all areas.

*Hiking as a team is great for team unity. The talks on the trail, working together to get across a rough area, sharing the hike in the cold, the rain, the snow and the heat keeps the team working together to achieve the goal of finishing.

*Hiking is a great way to learn to never quit or give up. Hard hiking is not as easy as some think. Some trails are very challenging and training is needed to do them. These trails are as much a challenge to the body but also to the mind. The never give up attitude is really tested on tough hikes.

*Teams WILL learn to be mentally tough.

*Teams WILL learn to rely on their teammates to achieve the goal.

*Teams WILL learn to trust themselves and their teammates in tough situations.

*Teams WILL learn to overcome tough obstacles and situations without breaking down.

*Teams WILL learn not to be intimidated by anything.

*Teams WILL learn to problem solve in tough situations.

*Teams WILL learn that each teammate can withstand pressure.

*Teams WILL learn to work as a unit.

*Teams WILL see their coaches in a different atmosphere and realize that the coach is also mentally tough and can be trusted.

*Teams and coaches WILL find out which players are the leaders on the team.

*Teams and coaches WILL also find out which players need to work on their mental toughness.

I strongly suggest finding someone who has done this type of hiking to teach and lead the group at least at the beginning. The items hikers need to take with them are specific and essential. Some of those things include: good hiking shoes, a backpack, trekking poles or walking stick (when I started I laughed at that idea-trust me though, they will help you in so many ways), lunch especially protein, lots of water is essential, not soda or drinks high in sugar. For long hikes or hikes in humid and hot conditions, mix Gatorade into your water. Other things needed are Kleenex, TP, first aid supplies, map of the trail, compass (you can tell by the sun if it is out and know how to tell), suntan lotion, a hat/visor, jacket/vest, comfortable pants or shorts, good socks to go higher than the ankle, protein bar and lots of water.

I cannot emphasize enough how hiking a long distance over rough terrain can stress the mind and the body. But I also cannot stress enough the benefits of those hikes on the mind and the body. Running and exercising are great but can be boring if done all of the time. I question the benefits of just doing running and exercising only when mentally the players dread doing it. Hiking in the woods can be refreshing especially when the scenery or areas are varied over the weeks.

Some teams are lucky to have warm and sunny weather throughout the season and that is great. But every coach in the Midwest and North knows that they are in a different situation. These coaches play in the cold, wind, rain, sleet, flurries and mud as well as heat and humidity. To me, the best way to prepare for those games is to train in those conditions either by practicing during those times or doing things like hiking in those conditions. It is a great alternative physically and a great way to teach mental toughness. Just give it a try.