

Building A Positive Relationship With Parents Promotes Winning

By Norm Hewitt

Head Baseball Coach, Hillsborough High School

What are the ingredients that transform tomatoes into a great sauce? Ask any good cook that question, and they'll all provide you with a different answer. Ask a coach, a teacher, an auto mechanic or any successful businessman what makes him or her successful, and they too, will offer different explanations. But there are several common elements that directly relate to the success of that sauce or any business, sports team, or group, who are targeting goals and objectives. After 40 years of teaching and coaching on the high school and college levels, I've suffered through the perils of disgruntled parents, abuse of fans, and over inflated egos of players who were little league All Stars but didn't make our cuts. I can speak from a businessman's view since my wife and I owned several businesses, and I can value the compassion and stress of being a parent of three married daughters. Hopefully the information provided in this article will assist in making others more tolerant and appreciative of the good things that can be enjoyed by coaches, players and best of all the parents. As we progress through this article, I will focus on the changes that I had to make in my coaching career to not only benefit the win loss category, but to allow myself more pleasurable coaching, strengthen the unity of my players, and encourage my parents to support all of the players in an unselfish manner. Let's go back to the tomato sauce and relate it to a team concept. It's not only the base of the tomatoes that make it so tasty, it's the combination of spices, harmonious additives, and the patience to simmer that makes it unique. Sports teams are no different. It's not just the base talent that enters the pot, it's the blend of extras and how they are nurtured that make it a success. Let's review some of the ingredients that we have found, that may create a more prosperous and rewarding atmosphere in your program.

COMMUNICATION

FALL REGISTRATION

To communicate, you must first develop a roster of those interested in playing for the season. We have an initial registration within the first week of school's opening in the fall. It includes the parents' and player's names, phone numbers, addresses, and emails. It also includes the player's academic schedule. Now you have the information to communicate with both the parents and players directly. Parents can now be updated through the coach or the Diamond Club of activities, announcements, or concerns that may be pertinent. This is a must for me since I am retired from teaching, but try to remain in constant contact.

ANNOUNCEMENT BOX

Communication is the most critical aspect in developing trust and awareness in your program. It is difficult to develop a long term program if there is no direction set forth well in advance. If parents and players are informed of objectives and goals, parameters of behavior, and academic expectations in advance, there is clarity for everyone. This eliminates the old excuse: "Oh, I wasn't informed about that." Parents and players will be less likely to criticize or complain due to the lack of guidance or direction. Communicating within Hillsborough's baseball program is done in a variety of ways. It requires a lot of effort on everyone's part, but inevitably must be the head coach's primary responsibility. Believe me; the rewards far outweigh the work. Some of the communicative methods that I have found to be very productive, and eliminate a lot of unnecessary time and aggravation, is our baseball announcement box. It's located outside of our gym area for not only the players to be informed, but for the entire school to read and digest. We keep our players updated on required duties, important dates and deadlines, and attempt to inspire everyone to stay current. We will post articles on health and wellness, inspirational quotes, and tips on becoming a better player. We also feature a weekly profile on every former player who is currently playing on the college level. Many of our non-athletes develop great respect and admiration for our thoroughness. It's a great way to praise your players or a player who had an

outstanding outing. We currently have 13 players on the collegiate level and anticipate 10 additional from this year's seniors. Players are inspired by this to excel, and the parents are eager to respect your program's methods even more. One important note, do not allow your information to become stagnant. Change your information regularly to avoid complacency. If it becomes stale, your players will lose interest, and become lax in checking the information posted.

HILLSBOROUGH DIAMOND CLUB

Our Diamond Club plays a major role for our parents to stay informed and to feel they play a vital role in promoting our program. We meet once a month and have a formal administration in place. The goal is to supply and support our players with the extras that make our teams special. Uniforms, field needs, food after the games, and a beautiful end of season banquet are some of the items provided to our players. Our parents are never asked to write a check or buy anything. We all work together and learn to function as a team. It is made clear that playing time or player performance is never a topic of discussion at meetings. The fundraisers are designed for all levels, and each player must hold up to the same commitments as his fellow team mates. Our players realize, along with the parents, that there are no free rides. It is imperative that every level is considered for the same perks. Parents are made aware that we recognize the freshmen, JV, and Varsity levels as a whole. They are all important to the harmony and success of the entire program, and our parents appreciate that form of thinking. Some of these are as follows:

UPDATED HANDBOOK

This is the most effective tool any sports team can implement. I am often asked by our younger coaches for a copy, so they may secure some beneficial ideas. It should include a review of the previous season, the head coach's philosophy, all of the coaches' backgrounds and resumes, the process of team selection, (we have 25 measurable criteria) rules, policies and repercussions, required equipment, inspirational and informative articles, helpful tips, a copy of evaluation cards, team schedules, and a list of all the previous players who have advanced to the collegiate

level. Our handbook leaves little doubt as to what our goals are, why we follow this path, and how we intend to get there. Each player receives a copy. The final page contains a form that must be signed by the parents and the player. It specifies that they are aware of our methods and are willing to conform to our rules and policies. This is then filed for future needs.

A MANDATED PARENT/ PLAYER PRESEASON MEETING

A parent must attend for the player to begin tryouts

We mandate a player/parent meeting two weeks prior to tryouts. At this time we introduce our Diamond Club administration, coaching staff and distribute our handbooks. We inform our parents of our expectations, and how the teams will be selected. We review the handbook and emphasize the academic standards, and behavior expected of our players. We discuss the importance of continuing our motto: PRIDE TRADITION RESPECT. Our players will address all adults and coaches as sir and ma'am from that point on. We even discuss how our players will dress and their daily duties. Our fundamental responsibility as coaches is to build character and respect and to develop these young men into solid citizens. Our parents appreciate that. At the conclusion of the meeting we welcome questions for any clarification about the contents. We believe our parents exit from this meeting well informed, and totally aware of what is expected.

BUILDING PARENT UNITY THROUGH FUNDRAISING

"I am a firm believer that shaking a can for money is a poor way to earn respect for yourself and your program. Nothing in life is handed to you. One's integrity and self-respect is far greater when you invest time and effort, for if you invest little, your value of the outcome is diminished."

RENT A RAIDER...Players serve our community by doing odd jobs and yard work. (Out of season in the fall) We advertise throughout the community and our players fill the requests for a fee. We have a central email, and our coordinator does the assigning. Senior citizens love this. Moving furniture, raking leaves, tearing up old carpeting, these are but a few of the tasks in which we participate. All proceeds go to the Diamond Club.

PANCAKE BREAKFAST...Parents, along with coaches, cook and plan, and our guests are served by our players, who are dressed in white shirts, ties and shoes. This year's breakfast was again a huge success. The compliments about our young men, their appearance and their courteous manner earned our program much respect. Our parents totally enjoyed their time as a coordinated team, and the dads had a terrific time flipping pancakes. It was loads of fun, and brought our parents together as a team.

DIAMOND DANCE...Parents only. Relatives of parents, friends, and coaches all spend a night together sharing friendship, food and drinks. It's a great way for parents to relax with coaches outside the arena of the game. It really strengthens the Coach/Parent relationship. Many of our previous parents attend regularly.

SPONSORSHIP ADVERTISING ON OUR OUTFIELD FENCE...For a fee, merchants advertise with banners on our outfield fence. Our Diamond Club has a committee that pursues these options.

CAR WASH...The final fundraiser of the year. (Usually upon completion of season. No seniors are involved)

DEALING WITH PROBLEMS and TEAM SELECTIONS

I have found that the most critical and difficult part of coaching, is selecting a team and penciling in a starting lineup. Coaches quickly discover that our choices are not always received with total support. However, if you set forth criteria in advance, and establish an informative relationship with the parents, your decisions and choices are accepted with a bit more tolerance. Here lies the critical reason for setting high standards, accompanied with a handbook and preseason meeting. Measureable evaluations also eliminate the common complaint of random and biased team selections. We emphasize the importance of a well-balanced player. He must be physically fit, coachable, and in good academic standing to first qualify for tryouts. I personally become involved with all the players' academic records, and forward a message to our guidance counselors and teachers. I forward a list of potential players, and request their indulgence if any players are in danger of not passing, or are delinquent in their assignments. If necessary, I will meet with the teachers and become involved with those who are not fulfilling their obligations in

the classroom. There are repercussions and penalties for delinquent or inferior academic standards. Our players are less likely to slack off, and the school's administration appreciates and respects our intervention. Needless to say, the parents place great confidence and respect for our methods. This sits well for future placement into the collegiate ranks.

MILE RUN...Mandated 2 weeks prior to tryout

With academics in place, we next move to several other facets that directly and instantly reduce the challenges of selecting a team. Our preseason mile run has become very popular with our other coaches and sports. We require our players to qualify for tryouts by first completing a mile on the track within 7 minutes or less. One of our Physical Education teachers administers this one day after school on the track. All times are recorded and filed. No player may try out without at least attempting the mile. Our policy also restricts a player from participating in a scrimmage or game until he qualifies. This policy encourages preseason training, sets the bar for excellence, and notifies every player that he is responsible for his performance. It also interprets to the parents that the coach is serious about his program, and that he has planned ahead for a fair selection.

STRENGTH CARD...Mandated 2 weeks prior to tryout

Along with our mile run, a strength card is to be completed by our strength coach, or a qualified teacher or coach. It measures the following attributes: bench press, squat, vertical leap, weighted wrist roll to a timed interval, sit ups and pushups within 10 seconds, agility run, and a 40 yard dash. All scores are recorded and filed. Once again, the focus is on measureable objectives that relate directly to on the field performance. Parents now have something to compare before approaching a coach with a complaint or concern.

TRYOUT FORMAT...25 Criteria of measureable skills

Tryouts sometimes pose a real problem at Hillsborough because our program has great tradition and a tenacious work ethic. Most of our players all possess outstanding skills due to their work ethics, and those that do not, seldom survive the cuts. Parents are fully aware of the challenges ahead and are usually

sympathetic to the coaches' decisions. Our talent is well balanced because of the expectations and the preset requirements and objectives.

I truly believe that serious competitors, regardless of their field or ambitions, desire real structure and challenges. This is the driving force that builds character and separates the ordinary, from the extraordinary. When developing your tryout system, be sure you treat all of your players equally and fairly. Parents seek the comfort of knowing that their son or daughter will receive a fair shot at making the team or the starting lineup. Offer as many measureable skills as possible to provide an accurate evaluation of everyone. You may even be surprised by the outcome when conducting these operations. Here are few areas that we use to evaluate and measure simple skills: Velocity and Accuracy: pitchers, infielders throw across the diamond, and outfielders to a base, Time: sprinting home to first and to second, Catcher's pop time to second, infielder's double play pop time, Range: forehand, backhand, slow rollers and accuracy, Hitting: ability to hit to opposite field, up the middle, pull, bunt to a designated area, and power, Hustling on and off the field and running at all times, displaying a positive attitude and team approach, the ability to make adjustments, and many more.

FRESHMEN TRYOUTS

Selecting a freshmen team may be the most challenging of all. For many, it is the first experience with competing for a spot on an interscholastic level. It is humbling and nerve racking at the same time. Parents are stressed and players are very nervous. It is imperative that impartiality must be the main factor, or all of the initial effort to establish credibility could be devaluated. At Hillsborough, we try to put our parents at ease by eliminating the often delicate term...POLITICS. We evaluate our freshmen as an entire group. We delegate a time when our entire coaching staff can be present. This is not a time to place the entire responsibility on one coach. Our numbers usually approach 40-50 candidates, making it nearly impossible to fairly judge talent. To balance the process, we bring in 6-8 evaluators who have either played on the college level or are former players of mine. They are provided an evaluation card and are assigned to an area of their expertise. Fielding, throwing, pitching, catching and hitting, agility and speed are evaluated. Two

sessions usually narrows the team to a manageable number for our two freshmen coaches. Our parents seldom complain after the team is established. They appreciate the thorough process and while disappointed at times, they understand our policy of fairness. It builds great respect for our reputation throughout the community.

PLAYING AN ACTIVE ROLL IN RECRUITING

Coaches are often criticized for not playing an active role in promoting their athletes. We advance approximately 70% of our players into the collegiate ranks. We do this by informing the parents of the process that will best suit their son. Many of our parents simply do not understand the process or channels to best facilitate their needs. Our plan is quite simple. I set up a convenient time for the parents, and invite them to my home for an informal meeting. This can also be done in the atmosphere of school or at the player's home as well. I have found that this effort builds tremendous respect and confidence for our efforts, and often sheds a new light on the relationship between the coach and the parents. When the meeting concludes, parents are usually more confident in their approach to pursuing college interests. I have a 5 point plan that helps narrow the college search, and assists the parents with their choices. It's important to remember that recruiting is no small feat for coaches. I am usually writing and phoning universities and coaches daily to create the best scenario and fit for that particular player.

ESTABLISH SUMMER CAMPS

We are entering our 19th season of instructional camps. We offer 5 camps for specific ages and positions. These camps are vital to improving our future, as well as our current players' skills. Our focus is on serious skill development for ages 6-17, and games play only a small role of the camp's time. Our coaching staff also provides clinics for little league coaches and parent/player seminars. Parents are totally familiar with the high school staff before their youngster even arrives at the high school. It builds great rapport, and enables our youth programs to strongly represent our town in tournaments.

SPECIAL INCENTIVES

PRESEASON SPRING TRIP

To increase parent/player interest and team effort, we implemented a preseason weekend trip to Virginia to strengthen our program's inner relationships. It's intended to bond parents, players and coaches, and provide an incentive for successfully executing our fundraisers. My staff and I have set forth a scrimmage schedule which enables us to better evaluate our candidates, as well as unite our group as a whole. Money raised from our fundraisers is utilized to pay for this trip in its entirety. Parents and players pay nothing, and hotel accommodations, travel fees and food expenses are all covered through the combined efforts of our players, parents and coaches working in the off season. This is a major boost for players to prepare in advance, and encourages our parents to become active in our Diamond Club. As previously mentioned, there are requirements set forth to become eligible for this trip. Some parents make the trip and appreciate the opportunity to share time and fellowship with each other.

END OF YEAR BANQUET

Our end of the year banquet is one in which the parents all come together and plan a beautiful farewell to our seniors, while doting over our underclassmen as well. Awards, food, special guests and recognition of special accomplishments are all part of this grand evening. Our seniors keep their home jerseys as a gift, and our club purchases new replacements. We recognize an All-Academic Team, as well as special awards and plaques for special accomplishments. All this occurs at no cost to our parents or players. Our parents take great pride in setting up this event.

FRIDAY NIGHT PASTA DINNERS AT THE COACH'S HOUSE

This has been a favorite of mine for many years, as well as the parents and players. Our guys really look forward to this and feel it an honor to attend, especially before or after a big game. My wife of 43 years loves our players and has played a vital role in connecting with my parents and players for many of these dinners. Parents feel the "family-like" atmosphere and recognize the importance of

off the field activities. It's fun and relaxing. It also helps a coach to view his players outside of competitive arena in a relaxed atmosphere.

Additional incentives include: after game sandwiches and snacks supplied from a local deli and delivered by a designated parent, purchasing equipment, uniforms, and announcing all home games via a PA system.

SETTING A POSITIVE EXAMPLE

I firmly believe that all coaches should make an attempt to set the example for players to follow as best we can. It's important for us to remember that if we require certain qualities from our players, we need to focus on the values that impact our parents' opinions and image of our staff and program. Maintaining a sound physical stature and the ability to keep reasonably fit should be part of our daily routine. Smoking is something we urge our players to avoid and is critical to their health. So if we smoke, what message does it send? We are also supportive of proper language. We insist upon our players speaking with proper grammar and eliminating cliché responses. Proper speech immediately conveys a message of intelligence, and we encourage our players to speak clearly with articulate responses. A clear yes and not yeah, please, thank you, yes sir and a courteous reply", reinforces respect and is conducive to communicating with the parents and players.

Dressing like a coach and conducting yourself like a coach during events is another vital component of the image you portray to your parents. Constant yelling at players or complaining to umpires sets a poor tone for an observation. Our players and coaches are required to wear baseball pants for practice as well as games. We try to set a tone for professionalism even during practice. This is required for all levels. Uniforms must be washed and clean for all official contests. Running on and off the field is a given, and our parents are impressed when our team opposes another team who does not share the same characteristics. Uniforms remain buttoned until we exit our locker room following a game, and hats being worn properly are also a firm position that strikes the parents as a positive feature.

HONORING YOUR WORD

Nothing is more confusing to parents or players than changing your course of action or failing to execute what has been promised. As coaches, we need to attempt to complete what we promise, even if it means a negative response or outcome at times. In other words, don't make promises you can't keep. What holds true for one should hold true for everyone. It's easy for less talented players to incur the wrath of a coach for their actions, while the more talented players are not held to the same standards. This is a guarantee that your parents will no longer maintain confidence in your decisions or faith in your plans and direction. Sometimes it's necessary to risk a win than to jeopardize the welfare of the team. It surely destroys credibility and trust within your entire program and community.

PASSION

THE LOVE FOR THE GAME...

Enthusiasm and spirit are the energy of life. Players and parents are easily excited by positive spirit and enthusiasm. If you want to be good at something you need to like what you're doing. But to be great at something, and endure success over a period of time, you need to be passionate. If I have any regrets in my earlier days of coaching, it is the fact that I didn't allow myself to enjoy my role as a coach. I constantly remind my younger coaches to enjoy the moments of coaching for it will eventually end one day. Demonstrate excitement and your love for the game. Laugh a lot, smile, and use humor as a tool for your players. It creates a relaxed atmosphere and relays the message of fun. We're pretty intense at times, so use your opportunities wisely. Be a cheerleader and use praise frequently, it encourages your players to keep improving through hard work. Let your players know that you care both on and off the field. And when one gets into trouble or makes an unwise choice, you can either abandon him, or help assist in finding a remedy to his dilemma. Find out what's causing your player distress. Teenagers are extremely sensitive and may have no one but you to confide in. The pressures to succeed, a girlfriend's bad news, or even the use of drugs, can end a bright future. I've counseled many players and parents from direct experiences. Talk to your players often and relate to your own experiences to assist in communicating. You

will be received much more humanly. Call the parents when an injury or concern occurs and let them know you're there even outside realm of the game.

THE FINAL WORD

There is no other occupation that has such a profound effect on so many lives as that of a teacher or coach. The greatest rewards in life are those that return to you from someone who credits you as a positive component of their success. We as coaches can be very influential in the development and relationship of our players and even their parents. Neither money nor material things can ever substitute for the satisfaction gained by these simple words: "Thanks coach, you made a difference in my life."