

# VIEWPOINT

## Coaching Last Bastion of Academic Excellence?

LAWRENCE BAINES and GREGORY STANLEY

At our old high school, the English teacher Mrs. Xavier waged a one-person war against the athletic department. Her animosity was partly derived from the fact that in our small school there was only one video camera, which seemed permanently to be in use in the coaches' office. In unobtrusive ways, Xavier characterized coaches as anti-intellectual, sports as superfluous, and student-athletes as "dumb jocks." She had a snooty disdain for a degree in physical education, which happened to be held by all twelve members of the coaching staff.

Like Xavier we used to be concerned about athletic departments' ascendancy over academics, but we have changed our minds. In today's education environment, we have come to believe that scholastic athletics is the last bastion of excellence in schools. Although legislators and the professoriate have engaged in heated debate about the precipitous decline of student achievement, coaches have managed to stay above the fray. Instead of arguing, they devote their efforts to making their teams increasingly sophisticated, well disciplined, and hardworking.

### Coaching to the Middle

One advantage of being a coach is that you are not required to "coach to the middle." Coaches do not dumb down their complicated offensive and defensive schemes to ensure that the slowest player can learn. Instead, they implement their system and expect all

their players to learn it. Players either learn the system, or they sit on the bench until they do.

On the other hand, the benchmark for excellence in most public schools has become the standardized exam. Most teachers teach to this test by order of their principal or out of a sense of obligation to students, especially if students' progress to the next grade is contingent on their performance. Either way, the goal is always getting the majority of students up to a minimal level of competence. In addition to curriculum guides that correlate explicit lists of objectives with subject matter, textbooks are now written from their inception with standardized tests in mind. Publishers have replaced the detailed textual narrative of their books with simplistic explanations, color-coded charts, and flashy sidebars to ensure that even the slowest learners can glean the important details, meaning those that are likely to show up on the exam. Information that does not appear on the test is considered extraneous.

To meet the underwhelming challenge of end-of-year minimal competency exams, teachers have been encouraged to jettison a great deal of material in favor of test-taking strategies and repetitive review activities. The pace of the curriculum usually reflects what the (barely) average student can tolerate within the span of the class period. The important thing to most teachers in this environment is "coverage of the basics."

Yet a hundred years of research provides ample evidence that "coverage" is not an effective way to go

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about instilling achievement and love of learning among students (Nash 1998). Wiggins and McTighe (1998) advocate "uncoverage"—having students dig deeply into topics to discover the truths, nuances, and misperceptions in a field of study. Uncovering a curriculum not only helps build independent thinkers, it gives the teacher the power to manage the curriculum based on students' needs, interests, and strengths.

To help with coverage, teachers often use advanced learners as tutors for their slower classmates. This "helper methodology" has become virtually ubiquitous. There is not an education textbook on the market that does not advocate putting the brightest students to work as unpaid assistants in the classroom.

Coaches are more attentive to their best players. They do not order the leading scorer on the basketball team to spend all her time teaching the fourth string guard how to shoot free throws. If they have a quarterback on the football team who can throw the ball 80 yards, they do not tell him, "The forward pass is not on the standardized test, so we are not going to practice it." Coaches do not try to cover everything. Unlike teachers, whose goal is the same year in and year out—getting the maximum number of students to pass the standardized exam—a coach's goals are predicated on the characteristics of members of the team. A coach develops a game plan based on the talents, strengths, and weaknesses of individual players.

### Coaches as Facilitators

Although trendy educational theories such as constructivism are sweeping America's schools of education, as yet they have failed to show up on the playing field. A team whose coach allowed players to "construct their own realities" would have grave difficulties simply keeping the ball in play. Because coaches prize excellence and precision, they believe that some outcomes are more desirable than others. A point is a point.

When a coach shows volleyball players the correct way to serve, no one criticizes her for squelching the creativity of her players. People assume that coaches, even those with losing records, are experts. But teachers? Even a teacher with rare depth of knowledge and the ability to communicate it enthusiastically would be lambasted by some constructivists for the tyrannical imposition of belief on the gullible minds of students. In certain circles, this technique is also known as the lecture. A newly minted Ph.D. from a research institution in the northeast recently told us, "Most new theories in education are based upon the premise that teachers should really teach nothing, but only hang around to facilitate student learning." A coach would never encourage a quarterback to throw into triple coverage even if the desire to do so was motivated by the quarterback's emerging view of the universe.

A history teacher at our former school used to proclaim proudly that he was a "dye-in-the-wool" constructivist. Once, we happened by his class when students were making presentations on alternative names for the Civil War. The student leader of one group announced that they had chosen the name, "The War Virginia Had No Business Fighting In." The student explained that because Virginia had no slaves, it had no business fighting on the side of the Confederacy. Instead of reminding the student that the first slaves in America landed in Virginia in 1619, the teacher nodded and congratulated the group for their creativity.

In contrast, coaches tend to be more direct when students err in their thinking. Coaches are not reticent about showing students exactly what needs to be done and how to do it. Paul "Bear" Bryant, Vince Lombardi, Phil Jackson, Roy Williams, Marsha Sharp, Jody Conradt, Bill Bowerman, George F. Haines, and Bela Karolyi are (or were) hard-driving, demanding taskmasters. What about their subjugated players? When asked, most of them will testify with teary-eyed sincerity that they learned more from their coach than any dozen teachers.

### Making Instruction Generic

Few athletic departments would hire a new swim coach who had never learned how to keep his head above water or a soccer coach who had never heard of a goalie. But professors of education engage in such alchemy all the time. One student teacher (now a successful teacher) in Georgia almost did not make it out of the teacher education program after his supervising professor observed him teaching a high school lesson on medieval warfare. The professor, a former elementary math teacher who had never taught a high school class, threatened to flunk him because he disapproved of the lesson's content. The professor told the student teacher that war was not a proper topic for the classroom. When the cooperating teacher asked how world history could be taught without mention of war, the professor stated that such lessons only incited students toward violence. He told her, "Lessons focusing on war have made Georgia and the South a cauldron of violence."

As with some teacher education programs in which all professors are supposed to teach everything, in some middle and secondary schools, teachers are expected to be interchangeable parts, able to pick up and teach whatever class needs covering. Such a policy is founded on the belief that every field of study shares some mystical theoretical underpinnings with every other field. As a result, the number of teachers instructing out of their fields continues to rise. The very idea that learned people would condone "out-of-field" teaching is alarming (Stanley 2001).

Certainly, the proliferation of alternative teacher certification programs is testament that lack of content-

area knowledge and experience in the classroom is no longer an obstacle for the job-hungry unemployed who seek a position with benefits and the summers off. Some of these programs only require fingerprinting, a bachelor's degree in any field, and two weeks of orientation in late July (Baines, McDowell, and Foulk 2001). No related education or experience is necessary for these individuals, though we endow them with the solemn responsibility of helping mold the thoughts and actions of our children.

Coaches tend to be a little more careful about whom they hire. As everyone knows, it is common for a football coach to teach history with absolutely no academic qualifications. But in the history of public education, never has a history teacher unfamiliar with the game been hired as a football coach.

### **Equal Playing Time for Everyone**

One of the most sinister forces undermining the academic achievement of students is the re-emergence of a skewed concept of egalitarianism. First, there was the mantra, "All children can learn." Now it has become, "No child left behind." Unfortunately, the prevailing interpretation of recent legislation has been that every child should get the same education. Although the one-size-fits-all approach is defended as being anti-elitist, its effects are purely anti-intellectual. Over the past decade, the chorus of critics attacking tracking has reached a crescendo. It is unfair, they chant, for gifted students to receive differentiated instruction. Yet what seems more unfair is the paltry funding support for America's brightest children. In most school districts, funding for gifted students constitutes less than one percent of the funds for instruction. In large, urban districts such as Chicago, funding for special education is at a rate approximately 200 times greater than that for the gifted (Stanley and Baines 2002).

In sports, no one complains when the first-team players get intensive coaching. Instead of mandating equal outcomes, coaches give each player an equal opportunity to maximize their potential. The most successful teams are notoriously unegalitarian. During the game, the best players and those who worked the hardest get to play the most minutes. It is only in public schools that the struggle for homogenized mediocrity is so loudly defended. Like athletic talent, academic ability is not evenly distributed. Egalitarian or not, that is a fact of life. Until educators recognize that all students are not alike, with uniform needs and strengths, coaches will continue to be far ahead of teachers in maximizing student potential.

### **Coaching on the Block**

School administrators meddle less with successful sports programs than they do with academic departments. The adage of "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" is

widely accepted in scholastic sports, but vigorously shunned when it comes to teaching. We do not mean to imply that all change is bad. After all, football teams do not run the single wing anymore, and the Internet has given teachers access to a bevy of resources never before available. It's just that administrators tend to trust coaches more than teachers to make curricular decisions.

Many schools are in the process of switching to block scheduling. At our former school, the edict came from above that block scheduling would become a reality beginning with the new academic year. When the faculty criticized the switch as potentially damaging to academic achievement, the principal responded by saying, "You simply must become better teachers."

Proponents of block scheduling contend that it is a great way to cover a lot of material within a single class period. Yet, the system makes teaching anything in depth much more difficult. More critically, it makes taking standardized exams, such as high school graduation tests, Advanced Placement Exams, and International Baccalaureate tests, more problematic as students do not study certain subjects for months at a time. What would happen if the basketball team stopped practicing in December but didn't start the playoffs until May? What would happen if college baseball coaches were told that they could continue to play 100-game seasons as long as they could cram them into one semester? We will never know because it just won't happen.

In sports contests, the team practices, they play games, and then the season is over. If sports were like academics, the state championship tennis team would require its players take a one-day high-stakes test in May to demonstrate skills in serving, volleying, and lobbing to qualify for a letter for the season. The minimum competency test for tennis, of course, would be devised by a state board of experts, many of whom had never actually played tennis.

### **Learning from Game Film**

Coaches spend endless hours watching game films. They do so to learn what works and what does not work against their opponents. If a coach sees that the nickel defense has not worked against Central High School all year, he won't use it when he plays Central. Unfortunately, our educational leaders have not caught on to this strategy. They continue to institute reforms based on whims rather than research. Theodore Sizer, former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, stated a few years ago that he could not name a single successful reform in the last fifteen years. But documented lack of success has not stopped administrators from mandating dubious reforms with unmitigated zeal.

Evan Keliher, a thirty-year teaching veteran, described how his local school district announced with

great fanfare that it was adopting a new model of instruction. As it turned out, the announcement coincided with another announcement from a school only a few miles away. The school down the road had announced that it had just abandoned the same model because it had proved cumbersome and ineffective (Keliher 2002).

### A New Game Plan for Teachers

Undeniably, scholastic athletic programs are far ahead of academic programs in terms of achievement, student success, student dispositions, and community public relations. Because the coaching profession has done a good job of policing its ranks and eliminating unqualified coaches, the phenomenon of out-of-field coaching does not exist. Coaches do not have to apologize for prizing excellence, and coaching strategies are advanced by people who have some familiarity with the sport. As a result, administrators, politicians, and the general public are more inclined to view coaches as experts in their fields than teachers.

Fifty years ago the new president of the University of Oklahoma promised the board of trustees that he would build a university the football team could be proud of (Hofstadter 1963). With apologies to Mrs. Xavier, maybe the entire teaching profession should embrace the same philosophy.

*Key words: coaching, academic excellence, standards, advanced learners, teacher education*

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SOURCE: Clearing House 76 no4 Mr/Ap 2003  
WN: 0306003859012

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