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The News & Observer (Raleigh, North Carolina)

September 19, 2006 Tuesday
Final Edition

SECTION: SPORTS; Pg. C5

HEADLINE: The best coaches inspire without punishing

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Thirty years ago, people would have wondered about a high school football coach seeking help from a mental health professional.

Back then, there were few sports psychologists.

In those days, a football coach might try to motivate his players by threatening more running in practice, more hitting drills, more of anything that caused pain or discomfort.

A coach might grab a player's face mask and curse him. One coach I knew would grab a player's stomach and twist until he drew blood.

And some coaches would kick rear ends -- literally.

"Yeah, and years ago most elementary school teachers had a paddle in the drawer," said Dr. Dorsey Edmundson, a sports psychologist who has worked with NASCAR drivers, professional golfers, the Carolina Panthers and several Olympic athletes.

"Coaches have learned to question whether some of the old methods were effective. Punishment generally isn't the most effective way to motivate someone."

One of a coach's roles is to motivate players to give a maximum effort. An emotional effort isn't always a maximum effort.

"Even in football, you don't want a player raving and ranting, screaming and yelling and in general being out of control," Edmundson said. "That would be counter-productive."

Emotional players might jump offsides, get penalties and miss assignments.

Motivation can be faked. A player can jump up and down and yell, talking a good game, but then wilt in times of trouble.

Yet another player might seem unmotivated but be quietly focused and is efficient.

But finding that level of effort is not easy, and emotion usually wears off pretty quickly in a game.

"If there was one answer to getting the maximum effort from each player, every coach would use that method," Edmundson said.

There are some general rules though:

- The most effective motivation is self-motivation.

If a player wants to get better, he goes to the weight room. He runs, eats properly, rests and doesn't abuse his body.

Former college coach Lou Holtz once said motivation is easy -- get rid of everyone who isn't motivated.

- Positive feedback feeds a self-motivated player.

A coach who sees a player in the weight room provides more motivation by giving positive feedback.

Former Millbrook football coach Buddy Stewart recalled that famed New Hanover football coach Leon Brogden often grabbed his players by the arm or shoulder when he talked to them.

Sometimes he would mention how much stronger the player seemed to be.

"That's motivation," Edmundson said. "The coach is reinforcing the behavior that he wants."

- Peer motivation can be effective.

"The team exerts a lot of influence on the individuals," Edmundson said.

Coaches can use that team motivation in different ways.

For example, a coach could make a rule that if a player is late, he sits out while the rest of the team runs extra sprints.

The team then becomes a motivating force for the player to be on time.

But an even stronger type of motivation is the bond among players. On the best teams, the players play for one another; they don't want to let their teammates down.

Punishment is not an effective form of motivation, but every team, every society, has rules and consequences for breaking rules. Teams have to have rules.

You're late, you run. You jump offsides, you run. You get a personal foul, you sit. You lip off at a coach, you miss a game.

"These aren't punishments. They are consequences," Edmundson said. "They are part of the rules. But punishments do not work. You can change a behavior in the short-term with punishment, but look at the recidivism with prisons."

But when a team is facing an uphill struggle late in the fourth quarter, a team in which the players are striving for one another probably will be more effective than a team that knows it will be cursed for losing.

"To sum it up, ... I'd say it is not so much what you do as it is the way you do it," Edmundson said.

"If the players think they are doing something to make them better, it is motivation. If they think it is punishment, then it is punishment. And punishment usually isn't a great motivator."