

“The X-Factor for Your Football Program”:

Finding ways to motivate your players and make your program One of a Kind By Jason Freed, Houston High School

Often we have football coaches get enthralled with game planning, diagramming plays and defensive schemes, and trying to find a way to put together the perfect offense and defense for the week. In my second year as head football coach at Houston High School, I found myself doing just those things and to be honest it wasn't working out like I thought it would. We just came off of a 0-8 campaign in 2004, and were off to a tough start in 2005. It was then one day in mid September that I noticed something that would change my focus and emphasis as a head football coach. While taking a break in practice, I noticed that the team was split up into cliques and there wasn't really any leadership taking place during this touch part of practice and the players just weren't motivated to be great. Each of these little groups was carrying on their own conversations. It was this moment that changed the way I think about coaching. As I started thinking, I needed to step back from the drills, schemes, and plays and spend more time finding ways to motivate these young men to be great players and men, but to also create a stronger team bond and a group of core leaders, which would help me carry out this plan. As one legendary coach stated:

“It isn't about the X's and O's but rather the Jimmy's and the Joes”

It is this quote I believe is the standard by which the fraternity of high school football coaches should live and coach by. It is the Jimmy's and Joe's who have to perform and execute on Friday night's, but if they are not motivated to do so and if they don't have the leaders to lead them into battle, it won't matter what plays we have designed and drawn up we ultimately won't be successful

with anything, because the players won't believe in what is trying to be accomplished. So it is the foundation of motivating players where this philosophy all starts.

The definition of motivation is “the act or process of providing a force, influence, or stimulus” and in this instance providing that for your football team and its athletes and coaches. In today's day and age, we as football coaches are dealing with what we can call the Generation Y athlete. This athlete is surrounded by being able to get immediate results and information at the click of a mouse, the dialing of a cell phone, the text messaging, and so on. Therefore often times they feel that they should get immediate results on the field and in the weightroom, which often times leads to frustration and a lack of effort. This is where we as coaches need to step in and find ways to not only motivate young men, but also give them achievable process goals that they can reach to help them continue to work towards those major individual and team goals and give them a sense of accomplishment. A process goal is a goal that is a smaller goal that can help you reach the larger goal. As many of you know you can't coach today's athlete like you were able to ten, twenty, or even thirty years ago. When looking at your football team you have to begin to break it down into four different types of players:

1.) Result Oriented Players – These are your natural born leaders. Don't get in their way, but rather be quick and to the point with them. They will get things done.

2.) People Oriented Players – These are the players who are goofy at times and light hearted. Be sure to ask them

what they think and flat out talk to these players. They want your attention. Every team needs these types of players to keep things relaxed.

3.) Security Oriented Players – These are your quiet and steady players. Make sure they know where they fit into the big picture and constantly keep an eye on them, because they will be very hard on themselves. Praise is key!

4.) Quality Oriented Players – These players are introverted and slow perfectionists. Give them a task to do and let them do it, because they will get it done right.

Our mission with our TEAM framework is to find a way to work with each of the four major groups of players and find a way to blend them into the TEAM Framework. We teach them the game of football, life lessons, and the idea of hard work and leadership and each week we will emphasize these things in practices, games, film sessions, weightroom, etc. It is incredibly important to identify these players. Take a minute to write them down somewhere, and maybe you will realize that you need to motivate them in a different way, because maybe you have not classified them properly. You might be surprised, also don't be surprised if you have players who fall into more than one category. This is the first step in the motivation and team building process.

When talking about the TEAM framework, often times you have heard the motto, Together Everyone Achieves More. We strongly believe in this, but we also believe that TEAM stands for Tradition, Energy and Effort, Achievement, and Motivation. When wanting to incorporate this framework you have to break it down into three components with those being coaches, players, and

players and coaches.

When setting up your coaching staff, you have to think of it has its own little team. Having a unified coaching staff is a major key to any football program. When setting up our coaching staff here in Houston, I made sure to find a wide variety of personalities, but also I felt it was incredibly important that the coaches were leaders in the school, but also community. I am a firm believer in the trickledown effect, in which if you have strong leadership at the top, in this case the coaches, those qualities will trickle down into the players, managers, and everyone else involved with the program. Our lines of communication are always open, and honesty is the foundation of our coaching staff, even though at times that may not be what people want to hear. It is important to emphasize spending time with your coaching staff outside of football. All of the coaching staffs in Minnesota spend a great deal of time working on football, game plans, setting up practice schedules, and other such things, but it can be the other things that can make a huge difference. At Houston, our staff has done a variety of things from attending clinics together, coaches meetings, but some of the best things we have done that have promoted unity and a tight bond are having a poker night once a month, golfing, fishing, and our annual Coaches Retreat weekend in April. Our retreat is where we hash out things for the upcoming football season at a local resort nearby Houston. We spend time evaluating the team, our program from top to bottom, evaluating each other as coaches, and every single little thing that we can think of. This has been the single most important event we do each year to not only plan and organize the football program from the youth to the high school, but to also spend time being together. The last thing I will stress with your coaching staff is to make sure you stress the importance of spending time with the family. I don't want my coaches to feel overworked to the point they neglect their families. As we know football season can be a long and strenuous season in which coaches put a lot of stress on themselves. I always

give the coaches Sunday off, and we have our film and breakdown meetings on Saturday morning once that is over they are off until Monday morning film to give them time to spend with their families. Having a coaching staff that wants to work and is motivated to coach and lead will only cause great results.

When dealing with the players we break things down into the in-season and off-season mentality. This is important to do this, but to also find the happy medium between the two seasons. We stress being active and being out for other sports. Competition is the best thing young men can do to become better athletes. Our off-season program is unique in the way that we have the seniors draft off-season teams. We will have a meeting where they are broken up into four teams and will draft the members of the team. The seniors will have a chance to name these teams and then compete throughout the off-season on a variety of things such as: weightlifting competition, weightroom and speed workout attendance, community service, etc. This has been a great tool, because it causes your seniors to have to step up and be the leaders of their individual teams. We will put a lot of rewards on the line with examples being t-shirts, meals, dog tags, or anything you think might motivate your athletes. We also make sure to recognize the players in the weightroom by having a 1,000LB and 800LB Club which they can strive to make during the weight competition and also receive T-shirts for achieving this goal. These teams will run all of the way through August camp. Throughout camp they will continue to compete against each other in a variety of games and activities. The culmination of August camp being our team building trip in which we take our team to a secret location to spend a day and a half being together. The rules are no cell phones or iPods. We want them to be living with their teammates and experiencing everything. We will do a wide variety of team building activities from skits, competitive games, team building activities, four way tug of war, conditioning test, and so on. We have found that this is a pivotal point in the year. Last year we made August

Camp like Boot Camp and at the end of our team trip we awarded each player who made it through camp a camouflage t-shirt with our motto and a wristband with the same thing to be worn each day and to each football event. I strongly feel this trip is where our team came together last year and formed that eternal bond. When I look back at our last minute drive and defensive stand in the Championship game, I think back to this experience on our team building trip and say it had to have played a role in getting through the adversity and sticking with each other through that tough time in the game. The core of my off-season program is my leadership council. This consists of my captains and seniors. We meet every other week starting in January and through the end of the year. These meetings are a great way for me to bond with the seniors but to also talk about various aspects of leadership themes and to set process goals for the next season. I strongly believe leadership is the ultimate key to any successful team, and these meetings are where we start that foundation of success. This implementation of a leadership council and classes I feel has been one of the major factors in turning around the Houston Football Program.

During the season, we obviously have to shift our focus somewhat, but we as a staff still make sure to make things unique and not monotonous. The players have a chance to set up the practice field each year the way they want it. The senior leaders will paint and put up signs on the practice field, often times of quotes and sayings, they will also assign certain areas of the practice fields to position groups, such as "Hawg Ally" for the lineman. Giving your seniors a sense of ownership will only allow them to be more motivated to not want to fail, but to rather be positive leaders for their teammates. It is also important to continue to preach the idea of leadership, so continue to hold those leadership meetings into the season as well.

When dealing with the relationship between coaches and players there can often be a fine line, but it is so important to make sure everyone is working

together. I constantly tell my seniors that it is "their" team and not mine. My job is to guide the ship, but it is their job to guide their teammates and to be leaders. We are constantly talking about not having any "weak links" on our team, and we will hold a link ceremony to emphasize this point as well.

The last and probably the most underlying aspect to the idea of motivating your players is to create tradition within your program. I am a firm believer you can't have too much tradition, but you can water down things if you try to do too much at once. Each year as a coaching staff we try to think of one or two new things to try each year and some of them have become tradition and others have failed, but that is ok. Building tradition in your football program is more than just winning football games. It is finding things that you do that other programs don't. This will promote extreme PRIDE in your football program and will be things that your players will never forget. We have a wide variety of traditions that we do within the Houston Football Program. One of the neat things we do since we are the Hurricanes, is raise

actual Hurricane Warning Flags before each home game and they follow us to each away game. This is something that our players and fans live for on home game nights and we will have different players, grade levels, community members, or past alumni raise the flags. If we didn't do this, I am afraid our players couldn't function, that is how important it is to them. We will also use what we call the Football Prayer before each game, look it up, it is an awesome way to build up to kickoff! Allow your players to come up with tradition ideas each year and most importantly create an identity for your program.

By creating an identity you are making your program unique. My goal as a coach is to want players to come back in ten years and talk about all of the things we did as a football program, besides winning games. I challenge you coaches to sit down and evaluate your program from top to bottom each year in regards to tradition, motivating your athletes, coaching staff comradity, and to see if you think your program is truly unique in all phases. The ultimate goal is to give your players and coaches the best

possible high school football experience in your school, conference, region, state, or even the country. Find your niche as a coach when coming up with these ideas and don't be afraid to try things. If you fail you fail, but don't give up on the idea. Once you find your niche that works with your program, you will start seeing the results on the field of play. I strongly believe that the September practice in 2005 was my turning point as a coach and the Houston Football program and by putting more time into the Jimmy's and the Joe's and finding out what types of players they are, what makes them tick day in and day out, and building a program that is unique and one of kind you will ultimately create a football program that your players will want to play for and your coaches will want to coach for.

Feel free to contact me with any questions or ideas. I am always looking for more things to add to my list of ideas and a great book that I have used as a reference for some of these motivational ideas is called the "Motivational Playbook" by Eddie Hill. Best of luck next fall and see you under the lights.

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