

## Coaching Articles

by Bret Johnson

Whether you coach little league baseball or NFL football, all coaches look to their team leaders for the same 6 essential qualities that can mean the difference between a good season and a undefeated record. While it is believed that some people are born leaders, leadership can be developed through practice and conscious effort.

Parents spend countless hours and thousands of dollars developing the physical skill of their children to excel in their chosen sport. Coaches know that physical skill is only one essential quality in selecting key players. It's the intangible, sometimes immeasurable qualities that make a player invaluable to an organization. Parents, players and coaches who work to develop these 6 essential qualities will see their efforts pay off.

- 1. Responsibility:** Leaders assume the responsibility of representing the coaching staff. During a game, players are often out of the earshot of the coaching staff. The team's leaders never lose control of the huddle. They take charge; remain positive, encouraging, aggressive and decisive. Leaders make good decisions on and off the field. They dissuade teammates from engaging in unsportsmanlike activities. They associate with other "good kids" and resist common temptations that others cannot.
- 2. Morale:** Leaders have insatiable morale. This doesn't mean just leading the team chant or keeping a smile on your face when the team is down by 10. Morale can be heard in the voice of a player who is determined not to give up. Morale is a tall, confident posture with actions to match. Morale is a "must win", cheerful, vigorous and passionate attitude that a player brings to every practice and every game.
- 3. Work Ethic:** It's not uncommon for a coach to be criticized for "playing favorites". The truth of the matter is hard work and the right attitude will gain players the opportunity to prove themselves that players of the same skill and lesser determination will never see. Team leaders should possess an amazing work ethic. The actions and behaviors of the team's leaders are contagious. A team leader who is complacent with his skill level is a malignancy. Leaders are the first to practice and last to leave. They seek assistance from the coaching staff on a regular basis. They ask what they can do to improve their ability. They are visible during the off-season. Leaders give it their all. They push themselves and others to do more.
- 4. Skill:** Skill is an undeniable trait of a leader. However, skill is broader than the general notion of physical talent. Leaders possess both physical talent and the mental edge for the game. An excellent player must also be a *smart* player. He must become a student of the game. His intimate knowledge will allow him to turn opponents' mistakes into opportunities to score. The smart player is able to pull off the unexpected without it being a gamble. The physically skilled player works on his craft constantly. He reads, attends camps, watches videos, practices and trains

specific to his sport. It is this passion and focus even in the off-season, which elevates his game. Some players are born with skill, but a leader works tirelessly to improve his skill and the skill of his teammates.

5. **Respect:** Respect must be earned. It's often said that it *takes time* to "earn" the respect of others. I don't believe that to be true. A player should look to earn the respect of his coaches and fellow teammates on the first day of practice. Showing up early, demonstrating an exemplary work ethic, a winning morale, exhibiting tremendous skill and a sense of responsibility are things that will win the respect of your teammates and coaches immediately. Maintaining this respect day after day, week after week, season after season separates the leaders from the other players. Respect is tenuous. A player can lose the respect of his teammates and coaches with one careless comment or one thoughtless activity. Earning and then maintaining respect is a difficult job that requires self-control, sincerity, confidence, and determination.

**Summary:** As a high school football coach I speak with many collegiate recruiters. It's not surprising that they often want to know more about a player's personality and leadership qualities than their skill. Physical skill speaks for itself. It shows up in the paper and in team stats. Leadership qualities are not as easily summarized but of equal importance to the success of an organization. To win the opportunity to prove yourself on the field and perhaps more importantly, in life, develop the art of leadership.