MANAGING THE SELECTION OF HIGHLY COMPETITIVE INTERSCHOLASTIC SPORT TEAMS: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM COACHES ON CUTTING PLAYERS

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Research Problem
This work serves to document the cutting processes and philosophies shared by highly competitive boys’ basketball programs through the use of collected organizational documents and semi-structured interviews. The manuscript produces several themes which centered on the purpose of interscholastic sport during the team selection process, methods to reduce the tryout field, and how to break the news to prospective student-athletes from middle school through high school about their elimination from a sports team to help them adequately cope with what they will most likely find to be a difficult experience. The following information and perspective is not intended to be seen as an ultimate solution but as a reflection of popular tactics and beliefs practiced and established by successful competitive varsity high school basketball coaches. The information provided here is also supported by discussions within coaching education organizations like the Positive Coaching Alliance.

Issue
Many schools districts in the United States, especially those with poor booster clubs or underdeveloped fund raising programs, frequently cite budgetary concerns as a major reason for keeping player numbers low on competitive interscholastic sport teams. The Citizenship through Sport Alliance (2005) and others similarly also acknowledged winning-centered coaching as a reality of varsity high school sport in America because winning is something coaches of highly competitive programs were hired to accomplish. Similar to previous information presented on high-performance coaches, U.S. interscholastic varsity coaches also seek to win so they can maintain a favorable status to retain their current job, secure a more favorable position (i.e. different job, more money, and/or better facilities), and/or defect criticisms offered by highly involved parents, school administrators, and local media outlets. One type of winning-centered coaching tactic frequently practiced by American coaches involves the cutting of players who they believe cannot help them win varsity contests.

The term "cut" as used in this discussion focuses on a coach removing an adolescent from a participation opportunity as a member of the team during the tryout process due to the player’s perceived lack of skill and/or potential as compared to other members trying out. Adolescents attempting to secure a position with an interscholastic sport team in the U.S. know they need to play well, show potential, and/or possess a solid skill set to earn a spot on a team which holds tryouts for a limited number of spots. Interestingly, despite the common practice of cutting, little research has been conducted on the process of cutting kids from interscholastic sport teams. Important coaching education works published from researchers representing every corner of the world (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009; Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2004; Jones, 2006; Schempp, 2003) provided
virtually no information to help coaches address and engage in the practice of cutting, which is an active custom in the United States. Coaches should pay more attention to removal of teenage and preteen participation opportunities. Furthermore, coaches and educators should examine the process of cutting particularly in light of the fact that kids generally expect to achieve success when they try. Another reason examining cutting in interscholastic sport is important focuses on the process of that activity and how it suggests to boys and girls their innate value or worthiness compared to their peers during an important time in their physical, mental, and emotional maturation process. Coaches should anticipate more negative emotions following an externally control withdrawal from sport versus a child deciding to quit. As an example, cutting may lead to problems in development of social relationships especially if coaches use a peer comparison method to explain why they cut someone.

**Summary**

The results of this investigation provided a selection matrix to help document the strengths and weaknesses of prospective student-athletes. It also revealed several themes which emerged from the organizational documents and interviews of the participants. These themes included comments on the purpose of interscholastic sport from the middle school to varsity level, various strategies to reduce potential tryout fields, and how to break disappointing news to prospective student-athletes about their elimination from a competitive sports team opportunity. The participants in this study asserted that creating teams which possess both talented and poor players could generate situations which increase the likelihood of injury. Next, several participants argued this arrangement could also prompt experienced players to become bored and irritated with slow learning participants at the highest levels (i.e. varsity) and possibly evoke embarrassment from beginners while encouraging intimidation by more experienced players.

All the participants advocated setting the numbers carried on teams to be at the maximum to provide appropriate developmental opportunities for as many athletes as possible, particularly at the lower interscholastic levels (i.e. middle school through freshman: up to 20). However, they cautiously advised this number to be set at a quantity which will not significantly impede the coach to teach and manage the team toward victory at the varsity level (i.e. 12-15). All coaches indicated it may be difficult to cut an upperclassman who invested a large amount of time into getting better but if they determined upperclassmen to be more “selfish” (i.e. not team oriented and unwilling to accept a non-playing role) than selfless, they did not hesitate to cut them. Collectively, the coaches advocated carefully selecting players based purely on athleticism or size and that a roster spot should be considered beyond the immediate season/year.

A common practice utilized by coaches of highly competitive interscholastic teams also centered on having kids voluntarily cut themselves before tryouts even begin. The creation of an off-season program which prompts the kids to demonstrate some minimal level of commitment to the sport served as one practice participants unanimously supported. Interestingly, some coaches promoted that they did not formally embrace the concept of the traditional tryout, especially at the varsity and junior varsity level due to scheduling challenges that their many extra-curricular after school programs and few facilities created. Thus, their tryout sessions took place during their first few days of real practices because “taking time for the traditional tryout would serve to eliminate the limited and valuable practice opportunities before their first game.” Coaches practicing this strategy suggested giving at least three to five practice opportunities to players and make some of those early a.m. workouts along with another after school (i.e. two-a-days).

The coaches recommended approaching each individual with sensitivity and empathy along with the information for the player’s removal because mishandled cuts by coaches can lead to harmful developmental effects on young people and a trail of negative events over their life. If possible, all coaches indicated they welcomed meeting all cut players individually and giving them important feedback about how they performed each practice session. Some programs, also utilized an evaluation matrix to help explain the thought process and
to highlight strengths and weaknesses of the non-selected player during the tryout period. The coaches practicing this tactic acknowledged the legal component and specifically suggested comments in the Team Selection Evaluation Chart should center on specific instances during tryout sessions which demonstrated a need for improvement. Additionally, specific suggestions should accompany identified weaknesses so each player can understand how to improve their future performances. Some schools asked our interviewees to provide this document along with requiring them to meet the individuals cut.

**Analysis**

This work served to document the cutting processes and philosophies used by coaches of highly competitive boys’ varsity basketball programs with a preference for the performance ethic. It also revealed several themes which emerged from the organizational documents and interviews of the participants. These themes included comments on the purpose of interscholastic sport from the middle school to varsity level, various strategies to reduce potential tryout fields, and how to break disappointing news to prospective student-athletes about their elimination from a competitive sports team opportunity.

The process of cutting described above should be viewed similarly to other situations because it appears to follow some of their prescribed selection procedures. For instance, many students must meet a predetermined specific criterion to enroll in higher academic level classes. Commonly this criterion is specific, measurable, posted in advance, and equally applied to all students. A similar position is advocated by members of the Positive Coaching Alliance and participants in this study as they suggested coaches can and should make their selection process less subjective or more measurable. Interestingly, failure to do so could open them to potential litigation. For instance, most cuts from sports teams may result from low skill level, self-esteem, and physical immaturity. Hall of Famers Michael Jordan (Basketball) and Orel Hershiser (Baseball) both were cut from their school teams based on their physical immaturity as compared to their peers or their skill level. This is a form of discrimination which may be illegal if programs receive government assistance or funding and the coaches do not document their decisions. Thus, because we live in a very litigious society, this work argues for the establishment of policy which requires the documentation of the non-selected athletes to safeguard the right of coaches to choose the players on their team and to perhaps help those cut better understand reasons for their removal.

Finally, this work demonstrated coaches should remain careful and mindful of the effect cutting has on kids and should make every effort to support as many kids as possible for that level of competition. Thus, this work makes a challenge to the scholarly community to scientifically evaluate the effects of various cutting practices on student-athletes, as this is an underreported area of study. Furthermore, we call to see if the claims and strategies offered by these participants are effective to help reduce the blow of trying out and being cut from a team. Also we could further examine poor coaching examples because little empirical information exists on how poor coaches cut players.

**Discussion**

The results of this investigation provided a selection matrix to help document the strengths and weaknesses of prospective student-athletes. Maintaining a good relationship to help “establish, maintain, and secure” greater interest in the team was desired by the coaches. The concept of the tryout evaluation form or matrix was offered as a tool to help coaches avoid potential litigation. The coaches practicing this tactic acknowledged the Team Selection Evaluation Chart should center on specific instances during tryout sessions which demonstrated a need for improvement. Additionally, specific suggestions should accompany identified weaknesses so each player can understand how to improve their future performances. The coaches recommended completing an evaluation form which remained soft but honest on weakness. For example, the participants suggested when writing a comment about the weakness of someone’s dribbling, instead of labeling someone as an “awful or
pathetic” check the “Poor” box and comment on specific technique problems, a lack of dribbling fundamentals, or the inability to use both hands. No coaches supported the comparison of athletes against current members of the team during the explanation process. Academic literature further supports this perspective of avoiding the comparing of athletes when explaining why a cut occurred because comparing athletes could negatively affect a person’s self-efficacy and confidence.