

Coach 'em for Life

By Doug Reese

Head Wrestling Coach, University of Minnesota-Morris



I have always believed that the best classroom in life was the wrestling room. I see it as not only my classroom, but also my lecture hall and lab. I always thought there were more important lessons being taught in this place than on any other room on campus. The teaching here goes far beyond the techniques, tactics and strategies of wrestling, but into life itself.

In a day and age dominated by selfish greed, we have produced the likes of Anderson Consulting, Enron, and WorldCom into society. Sadly the acts of few affect many. Fortunately, we can take a positive step forward if we chose not to coach just for victory on the mat, but for victory in life.

I learned long ago that athletics is a microcosm of life. Simply said, how an athlete reacts in the heat of competition

will be directly proportionate to how they respond to similar situations in life. How many times have you seen an athlete fling a plaque across the gym floor after taking second place? How many times have you seen an athlete punch the wall in anger or disappointment? How many times have you seen a wrestler refuse to shake hands, run off the mat swearing, then banging everything in sight as he heads towards sanctuary in the locker room?

Too many! It is our charge as coaches and educators to start coaching more than just technique and tactics and start coaching life.

If we allow our athletes to act this way, how are they going to respond when they lose a job? How are they going to handle a divorce? How are they going to respond in real adversity?

If they can't handle the little things now, how in the world are they going to survive during the tough times of the future?

I grew up in the days of Lombardi. Discipline was dealt out by loads of conditioning, by pain as a way to reinforce proper behavior. What I learned, I taught. I can remember disciplining a couple of collegiate freshman for sneaking a keg of beer into their dorm room. I brought them in for a condition session at four o'clock one morning. We ran and we ran until there was no one standing. At the time I thought I was doing the right thing. Now, I am more likely to sit down and talk man-to-man about the decisions one makes and the consequences of ones actions than I am to punish them physically.

A few years ago Bobby Bowden of Florida State and Tom Osborne of Nebraska were under the heat and scrutiny of the media for not throwing off a couple of athletes from the team who got in trouble in the community for breaking the law. Both Osborne and Bowden used suspensions and brought the athlete back on the field. Many people felt the action was totally based upon winning, and needing these athletes on the team. I saw it that way too. But now a little older and wiser I know that you cannot have an affect on an athlete if they are not on your team. I can't help or influence them if they are outside

the program, only if they are still with you on the inside.

When I was a young coach, full of testosterone and had my eyes on winning and success, I let a lot of stuff on the periphery slide. Now I jump on everything. Training, travel and competition have a lot of lessons in it, and it is best to be teaching, correcting, rebuking and encouraging throughout. Life is full of teachable moments. Coach, take the time to teach something that will impact your athletes for their lifetime.

I used to be all wrapped up in producing champions on the mat. We had a motto here at UM-Morris that we were "Producing All-Americans on and off the mat." I used to get pretty excited about every All-American and Academic All-American that we produced through our program, now I get more fired up when I see our graduates produce in life.

My goal today is to produce "All-Americans" who shine in business, education, medicine, and coaching. I want to produce "All-Americans" who are great spouses, great parents, great citizens, and great employees. You can only do this if you coach using each and every opportunity to form and mold a life.

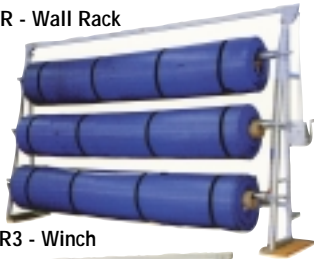
A great double leg takedown might earn your athlete a medal, or even a college scholarship. But a person of character, of integrity will go farther. Lessons of delayed gratification, self-discipline, how to handle disappointment, mental toughness training, and going head-on through the heat of adversity will sharpen an individual who will be able to cut through anything thrown in their path.

If you care enough to coach, care enough to coach 'em for life.

Editor's Note: Doug Reese is also the Executive Director of To The Next Level, a non-profit organization committed to helping athletes and coaches reach their true potential on and off the field of play. TTNL runs camps and clinics and has used Olympic Solidarity grants from the International Olympic Committee to teach sports management training, and to teach coaches how to coach effectively. Visit their website at www.tothenextlevel.org.

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