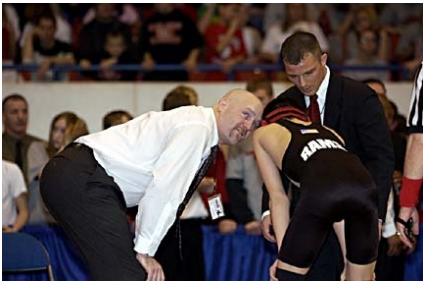


**Michigan High School Athletic Association Needs Assessment**

**Sport Coaches' Association Presidents  
Focus Groups Results\***

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**MICHIGAN STATE  
UNIVERSITY**



**INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF  
YOUTH SPORTS**

**\* Research conducted by the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports,  
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## **Study Purpose and Rationale**

This study is part of a larger project designed to identify the major issues, concerns, and challenges facing high school sports leaders and their athletes today. Particular emphasis is being placed on identifying the education needs of high school coaches and problems currently facing high school student athletes. Results will be used in several ways including: (1) to help guide curricular development efforts of the MHSAA Coach Advancement Program; (2) to identify the most pressing practical issues on which researchers from the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports should conduct research studies; and (3) to add to the body of scientific knowledge relative to promoting positive youth development through educational athletics.

## **How The Study Was Conducted?**

As Phase 1 of a larger project a series of focus group interviews are being held in an effort to map the range of major issues facing key stakeholders in Michigan high school sports today (e.g., high school coaches, principals, athletic directors, parents, student athletes). The purpose of these 5-8 person focus groups is to identify participants' views of issues and challenges involved in high school sports today and their perceptions of the problems facing student athletes.

This report describes what was learned from two focus groups conducted with Presidents of 14 High School Coaches Associations from the State of Michigan. In particular, prior to a regularly scheduled meeting that the MHSAA holds with these individuals, two focus groups of approximately one hour in duration were held.

Key questions asked in each group included:

1. What are the best or most rewarding things about being a high school coach today?
2. What are the worst or least rewarding things about being a high school coach today?
3. What are the biggest challenges coaches face when working with high school athletes today?
4. What are the biggest issues facing high school student athletes today?
5. What are the life skill needs of today's high school athletes?

## **Who Was Studied?**

On January 24, 2005, 14 coaching association presidents voluntarily took part in the two focus groups, although demographic data were obtained only on 12 coaches (9 males, 3 females). On average the 12 coaches were 49 years of age (ranging from 34 to 59 years) and all were Caucasian. The coaches had an average of 26 years of coaching experience (ranging from 11 to 37 years), with 5 currently coaching boys' teams, 2 coaching girls' teams, and 4 coaching both girls and boys (one individual did not respond to this item on the survey). Four of the coaches were certified through the MHSAA PACE program.

Educationally, the coaches had all completed a Masters Degree. Eleven of the 12 coaches were certified teachers, with 7 either majoring in physical education or minoring in coaching. Currently, these individuals were teaching a variety of high school subjects including math (n=1), science (n=1), physics (n=1), health (n=1), history (n=3), and physical education (n=1). One coach taught both science and social studies. An additional individual was a retired teacher, while another was serving as a high school athletic director.

## What Was Found?

The two focus groups were tape recorded and transcriptions were studied by the investigative team. The following key points were identified from the two focus groups.

### 1. What are the best (most rewarding) things about being a high school coach today?

#### *Developing Special Relationships*

- Working with a variety of kids
- The interaction with kids
- The relationships you have with the kids last for years.
- Developing close relationships with the kids
- Developing a different more personal type of contact with kids than classroom teachers can (The kids also get to know us as coaches more personally too).
- Get to know families well because of time between games.

#### *Unique Benefits of Sport Activity Context*

- You **get to know kids in a different non-academic setting**—you are with them more than their parents. It is a different setting than the academic one, but at the same time goes hand and hand with it.
- **Extracurricular activities are places where kids want to be** and you see them in these settings.

#### *Opportunities for Development*

- **Mentoring:** Coaches are in a unique opportunity to mentor (the natural emotional highs and lows that come with sport involvement allow you to help shape the character of the youngster. You can develop things in sport that you cannot in the classroom).
- Seeing the kids development and grow/mature.
- **Sport allows kids to develop lifelong friendships and a sense of belonging**—especially at a big school—sport gives the kids a group activity, sense of belonging and comfort zone.
- Helping kids develop confidence.

- Developing life skills – like cooperation, communication, leadership, commitment.
- Feeling we make a difference in kid’s lives—teach life skills, how to have good relationships (all things athletics should teach).
- As a coach **you get kids connected to lifetime activities**—some kids go on to officiate, coach, etc. for years to come. They develop a lifelong love of the sport and activity that you as a coach get to start.

## 2. What are the “least” rewarding things about coaching high school sports today?

### *Inadequate Program Funding*

- **The cost—you can’t run a program on money the school gives you.** You are not just a coach any more you are a fundraiser. So you must run camps, have a yearbook, etc. Coaches must be into fund raising. Why? Athletics are always cut first when there are budget problems.
- **Financial cutbacks** make it impossible to have adequate supervision (2 coaches cover 130 kids). You must find volunteer parents to help.

### *Parental Issues*

- Parents: they have **over inflated views of their children’s talent and feel college scholarships grow on trees.** Parents do not see sport as a place for fun and growth. This is causing young officials and coaches to leave sport.
- Coaches get out because of **interference from parents**—we hear that a lot.
- Parents and parents’ issues
- Parents view high school sport as a training ground for collegiate sport – not as a place for fun and development.
- **Need more sportsmanlike behaviors from parents.**

### *Increasing Off Field Coaching Demands*

- In some sports **the need for you to find people to coach who really understand the game** and also the need to have them understand dangers/liability.
- **You worry more about non-coaching stuff and have less time to coach because of that stuff**—e.g., supervision/liability and transportation concerns (how to handle liability of parents/others when no more buses to take kids home). This takes more time from coaching.

### *Time Commitment Coaching Requires*

- **Time commitment**—coaching is a year round endeavor (car wash in summer/gone on weekends) which is a sacrifice for the coach and his or her family.

### *Negative Influences of Non-school Club Coaches*

- **Club coaches tell child not to go out for high school sports** (because college scouts only look to clubs for talent).
- **High School coaches and non-school club coaches are not on the same page**, which can lead to over training and burnout of athletes.
- As High School coaches **there is a sense of losing control of how you can run your program** (you have to consider the other non-school programs in which the athletes are involved).

### *Unappreciative Kids*

- Kids you work really hard with don't show appreciation for all the time you are spending with them.

## **3. Are parent issues a big concern?**

- **Parents get the ear of some administrators who are unfamiliar with how athletics operate** and then the administrators make decisions without knowing where the coach is coming from or what the coach is trying to do. That goes against everything you are trying to do. The administration can make or break a coach. Parents need to check into things – go through the proper channels before criticizing the coach. They must strive to understand. Also, administrators must set up proper channels to sort out parent concerns.
- **In some new sports you have less parent problems** because they don't understand the game.

## **4. What are the biggest challenges coaches face when working with high school athletes today?**

### *Dealing With Funding Issues*

- **Fund raising:** Most coaches are **trying to figure out a way to raise money for their kids as already inadequate athletic budgets get cut.** There is not enough school money to run a program. Some try to solve this issue through pay for play programs, but this affects poor kids. Everyone fund raises for their sport and competes with one another versus having an overall fund raising effort for the entire program.
- **Financial pressures:** There is not enough money to run the programs.

- **If you initiate a pay for play program parents expect the kid to play.**

#### *Getting/Keeping Quality Coaches and Assistants*

- **Getting quality assistant coaches:** The turnover is high and not enough individuals are available.
- **Keeping coaches in the sport: Coaches don't coach as long as they once did.** For example, one association has a coaches hall of fame criteria of 15 years of coaching experience but gets few applicants anymore because most coaches do not coach that long.

#### *Dealing with Special Needs of Today's Student Athlete*

- **The home life of some of student athletes is taxing:** Some kids must be a caretaker at home, go to practice, study, etc.. This makes it really hard on the child and forces them to grow up too soon.
- **Kids are less active/motivated to participate in sport.** It is easier to watch television. Society in general is pulling kids away from activity-especially at younger age.
- **Teaching kids (getting them to understand) that the ends don't justify means—this is a challenge** because they see the 'ends justify the means' orientation in college and especially the pros. Just because you are a star does not mean you can break the rules.

#### *Other*

- **We have so many sports today we may be spread too thin** for the number of interested athletes available—it is tough to get some kids to come out.
- If you have a **no cut policy** you end up with student athletes who have varying levels of ability—this makes it difficult to improve everyone. **As a coach you get spread too thin.**
- The **media focuses attention on negative behaviors** (or sport-related mistakes) of student athletes more so than the general student population.

## **5. What are the biggest issues facing high school student athletes today?**

#### *Increased Expectations and Pressure*

- **Expectations and Pressure:** Parental pressure for the child to perform/they have unrealistic expectations.
- Parental **pressure to specialize.**
- Higher expectations not just on playing field – **expectations socially and in general.** This is a major environmental change.

- **High academic expectations:** There was some concern that it is difficult for children to keep grades up (meet today's high academic expectations) when they participate in multiple sports. However, most of the coaches felt kids get better grades when playing sports, often because coaches keep tabs on kids' academics and intervene before academic problems get major.
- **Pressure to get in college and the right college**—today there is more societal pressure on kids to achieve. So, some kids do not participate because they do not want to fail—they fade into the woodwork. We are losing a lot of the middle level ability kids in this regard. It is interesting that a youngster gets a Div. II scholarship and the parents are disappointed that it is not Div. I.

### *Substance Abuse Issues*

- **Substance Issues:** Alcohol, drugs, and peer pressure to use them. The performance enhancing drug situations are getting worse.
- The big difference today for substance use (drinking) is the **major sanctions that accompany infractions and the publicity that goes with those sanctions**—there is a harsher reality for kids who get caught experimenting and that puts even more pressure on kids.
- **Supplement use varies by sport:** Supplement use is bigger in sports where more is riding on them; where the rewards associated with participation (e.g., college scholarships) are bigger. There is less supplement use when there are no expectations for higher levels of play.
- **Steroids in high school**—One coach did not see it as a problem in his school, but nationally we see it as a problem. Other coaches in the group see it as a problem.
- It is **harder to scare kids with the sexual dysfunctioning side effects** because some substances may not have them.
- Seeing all **media attention on these issues makes some coaches think performance enhancement substances are a problem**, but they do not see it currently in their programs.

### *Overemphasized Outcome Focus*

- **The ends justifying the means orientation** characterizing today's society (e.g., pro baseball sanctions are not really that harsh—sort of a joke). We see this more today.
- **Outside coaches have one agenda (get the best team) and do not take an educational perspective.**
- **The media (ESPN) focuses on “winners” and just a select group of sports.** This result is a push to focus in on **specialization**. The media print kids' names in the paper when make life skill mistakes which does not make the situation better.

### *Inappropriate Behaviors and Attitudes*

- **Poor sportsmanship emphasized in media coverage.**
- **Pro athletes do not understand their influence** (the role modeling effects) on kids. This negative pro influence is trickling down to colleges and this then affects the high schools!
- **Hazing goes on**, but not as much as in band. Most coaches are aware of hazing problems. Kids are cutting back on what they do, but upper classmen still do things. Hazing also depends on coach or AD tolerance level for hazing—Coaches must deal with it even if don't see it.
- **Trash talking and taunting are not a big problem because the sanctions are very severe.** Coaches also deal with it and sometimes officials will give the coach a heads up before a kid does something that will not be sanctioned. Finally, some coaches explain to kids that these behaviors only tell your opponent that you are not strong.

### *Single and Early Sports Specialization*

- **Early sports specialization:** because many kids start out so early (ages 5 or 6) other kids get the impression that it is too late to pick up sports at a later age. **Many coaches are forcing kids to specialize.** This may be the biggest problem facing sports today.
- **Younger coaches do not see specialization as a problem** (this relates to the problem of a lack of coach training).
- **Some coaches and parents push children to specialize.** Most high school athletes do not get the scholarship despite the intensity of their involvement and this, in turn, causes them to lose out on the high school sport experience—a fun and growth experience.
- **Many of those involved in non-school sport don't seem to understand the value of cross-training.**

### *School/Non-school Sport Conflicts*

- **Kids are getting pulled in many directions** regarding scholarships—AAU. Not everyone is on the same page, so kids get pulled in many directions. This leads to burnout or kids not being interested in sports. Coaches of school and non-school programs give different input to the child. Sport is becoming a year-round activity so there are constant demands.

## **6. What are the life skills needs of today's high school athletes?**

- **Lack of commitment/determination** (to make things better). Kids don't want to play if a team is not good, versus an 'I can make this team better if I play' orientation. Often kids are not accurate (kid said won't be on team because it was not successful, and then the team went on to win state championship).

- **To help an athlete be proud of whatever skill set they achieve**—it is not just about the scholarship. It's about how to deal with people—show respect when running up a big score on other team.

## 7. How successful have you been at developing life skills in your players?

- **Depends on kids and the situation.** One coach gave a moving example of how he was ready to quit a few years ago until he had a certain group of 9<sup>th</sup> grade youth who made him want to keep coaching.
- **Need to take a long-term approach** to determine this
- **Kids might need some perspective to recognize the values of participation.**

## 8. Have things changed relative to teaching life skills to players?

- Today parents **more often expect coaches to take over the parental role.**
- **Parenting abilities today are less** than they were in the past.
- **Kids are basically the same, but the environment is different**—you might have more challenging kids because of the more challenging environment today.
- **Kids have more choices today** (given technology), **so they are not as committed to physically exerting themselves.**
- There are **more single parent families** today—more for kids to deal with.
- **Harder for kids who try to pick up sports later**—Its much harder for them to catch up.

## 9. Do you feel most coaches have the same kind of feelings that you do about teaching life skills to their athletes?

- Most do, but some are out for themselves.
- As presidents of coaching associations we try to get our coaches to be a positive influence.
- **Non-educator coaches do not have the educational background to realize the influence they are having on young people**, so they often focus only on win-loss issues.
- We can't say for sure that our members feel the same about life skills because it is never verbalized in meetings—we do not talk about it. However, **coaches who have been in it a long time believe in teaching life skills.**

## Recommendations that Emerged from the Discussions

- As a varsity coach of a sport new to the area and State, go to other games and help the parents understand what to cheer for in the game—**subtly train parents**
- In preseason meetings cover special transportation issues when schools no longer provide transportation.

- **Get older kids to pass on expectations** (can work really well or have a very negative influence). Peer leadership and modeling can be very powerful.
- **We cannot turn back the clock on specialization** or reduce today's pressure on kids to achieve, but **we must find ways to more effectively deal with these issues.**
- High schools should **hire full time fundraisers to help coaches.**
- Some coaches said “pay for play” options are okay, but they must be kept within reason (and develop a mechanism for poor kids to participate). Others felt that pay to play causes some kids to not come out—they are embarrassed to say they cannot afford the fee. Coaches learn about this from the kids' friends.
- As educators we need to **use positive propaganda to highlight the positive aspects of high school sports.**
- We need to do a better job of selling the values of multi-sport participation—it helps prevent burnout, overtraining, and injury.
- To combat specialization show the list of all-state kids and point out that most are two sport athletes. **Emphasize different but complimentary skill sets that come from multi-sport participation.**
- HS sport is the best game in town, but we do a lousy job of highlighting the positive aspects of high school sports. As educators we need to use positive propaganda to highlight the positive aspects of high school sports.
- **Educate coaches on the benefits of cross training** (to reduce injuries).

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