

## *Establishing and Maintaining an Athletic Chain of Command*

Coaching and parenting are both extremely difficult tasks. By attempting to reach an understanding of each position, we are better able to understand and accept the actions of each party. Endeavors in this commitment to communication will hopefully provide a better experience for the student athlete. We believe that every parent that becomes a part of any interscholastic athletic program deserves the right to be made fully aware of and understand the expectations being placed on his or her child. This begins with a clearly defined and established method of communication between the coach, athlete and parent. A well defined and maintained chain of command within an athletic program can achieve your goals and lessen the chance of misunderstandings and confrontations that could diminish the experience.

Our coaches are required to hold a pre-season meeting with parents and athletes prior to their beginning of each season. We hold face to face meetings as well as distribute written materials to our parents and athletes. Copies of our athletic code of conduct are also discussed in our pre-season meetings and made available to every parent and team member in both formats before the season begins.

We stress the need for our coaches to communicate with their players and parents early and often. Several items are stressed on our list of topics that all parents should expect from their child's coach. Those topics that parents should expect communication from the coach would include:

1. The philosophy, goals and beliefs of the coach and the school
2. What staff members will be working directly with your child
3. Expectations the coach has for the child as well as other team members
4. Locations and times of practices, contests, transportation and team functions
5. Team requirements (such as fees, special equipment, off-season programs and team rules)
6. Procedures to follow when the child is injured or ill at practice or at any contest
7. Disciplinary procedures that may result in the denial of the child's participation

Communication is a two way street. Just as parents should expect communication from the coach, the coach should also expect certain levels of communication from the parent. Typical topics for discussion and methods that should be expected by the coach from the parent should include:

1. Any concern about the welfare of a child should be made directly to the coach
2. Notification of any schedule conflicts should be addressed in advance (if possible)
3. Special concerns in regard to a coach's philosophy and/or expectations for the child
4. Family concerns that may have an impact on the child and subsequent participation

As the child becomes involved in interscholastic athletic programs, they will experience some of their greatest and most rewarding moments. Learning will occur outside the classroom that will last for a lifetime. But there will also be some moments that are less than pleasant for parents and athletes. At times when things do not go the way the child wishes, it might become necessary for meetings to occur away from the competitive environment. Our coaches encourage athletes to speak directly with members of the coaching staff when concerns arise. When meetings between the coach and athlete do not reach a satisfactory conclusion, it might become necessary for a meeting between the coach and parent. The guidelines we set for meetings between the parent and coach include certain discussion points that we feel are appropriate for discussion. These items typically include:

1. The treatment of the child physically and/or mentally
2. Ideas for improvement in the performance of the athlete
3. Concerns about behavior of the athlete (on and off the field)
4. Family concerns that could affect athletic participation

It is extremely difficult to accept a child not playing as much or as often as the parent wishes. Coaches are professionals. They make judgments and decisions based on what they believe to be in the very best interest of the team and the individual. As you have seen from the list above, certain areas are appropriate for discussion with the coach. Other items should never be discussed with a coach. They should be left to the discretion of the coaching staff. Topics that should not be discussed with the coach at any time would include:

1. Playing time
2. Team strategy
3. Play calling
4. Line-ups
5. Substitutions
6. Other team members
7. Other parents
8. Past teams and/or athletes

The timing of meetings between the parent and coach should be carefully controlled. There are some times and locations that are not appropriate for such meetings. Coaches should always control meeting times and locations. Parents do not set agendas or terms for conferences with members of the coaching staff. Times to avoid contacting the coach for a conference include:

1. Prior to and immediately after team practice
2. Prior to and immediately after any contest
3. Prior to and immediately after any official team function

These are typically either extremely busy times, or in the case of a contest, very emotional times for all parties involved. Often things are said in the heat of the moment and in anger that are hurtful and long-lasting in effect. Meetings of this nature do not assist in promoting resolution of problems or concerns. A cooling off period after emotional endeavors is highly recommended.

All coaches should be made aware of the dangers of response to parental inquiries using the internet. Once an e-mail response is made or a comment posted on website, it becomes part of the public domain. Responses that are deemed harmless can be construed as negative or personal and can be used against a coach by the parent and/or athlete. The use of e-mails to respond to simple questions is usually not a problem. But any discussion of players, parents, playing time or ability levels can often lead to hard feelings that are extremely volatile and long lasting.

There are areas of concern might that require a direct meeting between the coach and parent. Meetings of this nature are not to be discouraged. It is important that both parties develop a clear understanding of the position of the other. When such conferences are deemed necessary, certain parameters must always be established and maintained. We do not allow the student athlete to attend any conference between the coach and parent. The child should never be placed in the middle of any discussion between the coach and parent. Any coach, who wishes, should always have the option of having a school official present and involved in a parent conference. We attempt to avoid the presence of several of our staff at any such meeting to avoid the perception of “ganging up” on the concerned parent or parents. Any meeting with a parent should be controlled by the coach and or administrator and not by the parent.

We ask the parent to always make contact with the coach first. It is understandable that the parent wishes to talk with the athletic director or principal before speaking with the coach. Such a break in the chain of command is counter productive. Often the administrator is not fully aware of the all the facts pertaining to a situation and cannot render a sound and informed judgment without hearing both sides of a misunderstanding. We also make every attempt to educate upper level administrators and school board members of the procedures that have been established and employed. If upper level administration allows the chain of command to be compromised on a regular basis, the entire system is in jeopardy of failure.

If a parent requests a meeting to discuss concerns with a coach, a pre-determined protocol should be established and maintained. We ask that the parent call the coach first to set up an appointment. If the coach cannot be reached, the school athletic director should be contacted to set up a conference. In the event that a meeting with a coach does not reach a satisfactory conclusion, the parent should again contact the athletic director for a second meeting. It is usually desirable to include a building administrator in this second level meeting. If a meeting with the athletic director does not offer a satisfactory understanding, the next step in our system is a conference with the building principal. A meeting with the Principal that does not satisfy the concerns of the parents would then allow one more level of discussion. The final step in our chain of command is a conference with the district school superintendent. In some cases the athletic director and/or principal are included in this discussion.

Research indicates a student involved in extra curricular activities has a greater chance of success during later life. Our interscholastic athletic programs should be established for the direct and long-lasting development of the total child. Many of the lessons learned as a result of athletic participation are the same ones that will promote successful adult lives. It is hoped that the information in this document will help the athletic administrator improve the experience for both athletes and parents. The thoughtful establishment and maintenance of a solid athletic chain of command will not eliminate conflict, but will provide a tool for consistent management of communication between parents and coaches.

Submitted by: The Athletic Directors of the SIAC

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August 2011