Before discussing how to increase empowerment in any of my girls’ high school varsity players, I think it first needs to be defined. Empowerment includes taking ownership and shifting decision-making and responsibility from the coach to the players (Kriemadis & Papaioannou, 2006). It falls in line with taking an athlete-centered approach to coaching. As Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski (2007) states as it relates to ownership, “they feel inspired to take care of the program, uphold its standards, and defend its beliefs” (p. 118). Therefore, it is imperative for a coach to empower his or her athletes to sustain the success of the program over time. Additionally, as a coach, I should not concern myself too much with wins and losses. Of greater importance is teaching life skills so my players can succeed after their basketball careers are completed.

I can think of five ways in which I can increase empowerment in my athletes. First, would be by establishing relationships with each of them, which will lead to an increased level of trust. This can be accomplished by showing each one of them I genuinely care and through empathy. For example, taking the time to ask them questions about non-basketball things i.e. classes, clubs they are involved with, and possibly their job if they have one. Also by being there to listen if they need someone to talk to about a problem.

Second, by emphasizing teamwork. Every year, about a week before the season starts, all players go through Boot Camp together without the coaches. A third party comes in to run our rigorous conditioning program for five days. It is great to see all players helping and pushing one another to survive, especially when our seniors, who have been with us for four years, assist our freshmen during their first Boot Camp.

Third would be by continually creating a culture the girls are proud to be a part of. Culture is extremely crucial when it comes to empowerment, and ours has both static and dynamic components. From the static side, we have a program motto that will never change – 126.8. It is not talked about much outside of our program, but occasionally someone will ask. 126.8 are the number of miles from out school’s front door to the arena where the state finals are held. On the dynamic side, each year we write a team mission statement, with input from the girls, and have a word or saying every year. Last year was “Rise”, and the year before was “Conquer”. Additionally, before practice our players are known to start dynamic stretching on their own without a word from the staff. This responsibility falls upon a senior and goes undiscussed and picked up from one year to the next. Last week during skills and drills, our trainer commented how he had never seen anything like that at the high school level and commended us on the culture that we have established.

Fourth would be by an exercise known as a vision statement. We did this last year with our team and hope to do it again. We ask the girls to construct a chart or something similar of what their life goals are. It can include basketball, college, work, home ownership, marriage, career, etc. There are no rules and no right or wrong answers. By making them think long-term and sharing their vision with the entire team, we create responsibility.

Finally through creating leaders. At the beginning of the season, we tell the team there are different types of leaders, and all are equally important. Unfortunately, the only ones publicly recognized are the game captains. However, we also need locker room leaders (culture), social leaders (team chemistry), and outside organizational leaders (clubs) (Janssen, 2015). Over the last couple of years, our leaders have just emerged. At times, they come to the staff for advice or we may approach them if an issue needs addressing. There is no voting or essay writing and selections seem just to evolve on their own when filling the leadership positions. This may be a by-product of the culture that has been created; I’m not sure.

Overall, empowerment is a vital component in any athlete’s development. When a coach empowers a player, that player believes they can accomplish anything they set their mind to whether it be basketball related or otherwise. The four most important words a coach can tell an athlete is “I believe in you”.

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