

Coaching in Wisconsin, Worth it?

By Pearl Kiley, wishoops.net

Across Wisconsin, the same statements and questions were ringing in the collective ears of high school basketball coaches in 2004.

"With all this talent, why aren't we winning more games?"

"My kid averaged 20 points in summer league, why isn't he playing more?"

"Why are we walking the ball up the floor all the time?"

"I wish we had the old coach back."

These unfounded sentiments were also a major reason why over 80 coaches chose to resign, were relieved of duty or retired since last season.

There are coaches who point to AAU basketball and all its dramatically improving impact. Some blame school administrators for showing more allegiance to parents than them in disputes over individual roles and playing time. Still others say it takes too much time – and impossible patience – to deal with the increasingly overzealous parent.

"At the high school level, the rewards aren't tangible," said former Waupaca coach Tim Locum, who resigned after last season and is currently an assistant coach at UW-Oshkosh.

"There is no shoe deal, radio show, big contract, national TV exposure or endorsements. What keeps a coach going is the joy of watching young men mature, the pat on the back from an AD, a thank you from a parent. Instances such as those have continued to slowly dwindle, if not disappear altogether.

And what is left is over 80 Wisconsin Boys Varsity positions turning over in one year – almost 20% of the schools!"

Are parents and fans simply out of control?

I point to my hometown of Cuba City as an example, where longtime coach Jerry Petitgoue has won 654 games and is the all-time leader in coaching wins in Wisconsin history.

If two weeks from now they held a referendum on the boy's basketball job, and whether he should keep his job or be fired, I believe that vote would actually be very close.

What does this say about the state of high school athletics in Wisconsin?

(I'm not sure it's an altogether new thing, though. Hollywood captured the idea perfectly in Hoosiers; George, Milan High's interim coach before coach Norman Dale, summed it up perfectly:

"Look mister, there's two kinds of dumb ... the guy that gets naked and runs out in the snow and barks at the moon, and the guy who does the same thing in my living room. The first one don't matter, and the second one you're kinda forced to deal with."

How much money do we think George would be spending on his kid to play AAU basketball nowadays? How crazy would he have gotten when, after spending all this money, his kid wasn't playing significant minutes or getting scholarship offers? The issue today is that parents handle the problems much more subtly – and administrations aren't near as loyal as principal Cletus.

In the 1950s parents simply bought a basketball, in some cases a hoop, and kids became great players the old fashioned way, by working on their fundamentals and developing a jump shot -- yes, a jump shot (Jimmy Chitwood made 98% of his shots!). The point is, too many parents are spending too much money nowadays, and when results don't materialize, they cast their blame on the easiest and most visible target.

"It's human nature for parents to see the best in their own kids, said Cuba City coach and Executive Director of the WBCA Jerry Petitgoue.

"Kids are starting to play competitively in third and fourth grade nowadays and most of the time it's parents that are coaching. With this, parents start thinking they know the game as well as the high school coach and therein lies the problem."

All you have to do is sit in the crowd at any basketball game and you're guaranteed to learn more about the game from some parents and fans than you'd learn if you were listening to John Wooden himself.

Don't think so? Just go to your local pub and they'll tell 'ya.

Wisconsin Rapids coach Dan Witter was forewarned well before he got into coaching.

"An administrator who was also a former coach warned me that most of my friends that have kids will likely stop talking to me if I don't play, or cut, their kid, and as a coach you have to go into it knowing your not going to be friends with everyone and your going to upset some people."

Sound fun yet?

The Time Issue

In many castes, coaches have families of their own. How can they be expected to do all the work that goes into coaching in today's climate?

"As a head coach," Locum said, taking a deep breath, "you are expected to know the game, teach it to your players, relate to their adolescent minds and emotions, scout and break down your opponents, come early, stay late, watch film, track your players academic and behavioral progress, fund raise to get the "extras" everyone else has, help and inspire your youth coaches and programs, make sure the high school assistants are prepared, and oh yeah....win most if not all of your games."

Despite all these factors, most coaches truly enjoy their job, work hard, and want the best for the kids they coach. Problems arise when you factor in everything coaches simply don't have enough time to do, while still doing

the job the way they think it should be done.

““With the changing role of today's family, it is not uncommon for both spouses to work,” WIAA Associate Director Deb Hauser said. “Thus, the pressures and expectations at home require both parents to provide time for household duties. Many young coaches will try coaching for a short time, feel the pressures from parents and fans, and opt to spend more time with their own families instead.

“We all know that anyone who coaches at the high school doesn't do it for the money but rather for the love of the game. Thus, the transition back to spending time with one's own family has become the more popular choice.”

Choosing between your children and spouse and dealing with what some of these coaches do is simple, isn't it?

What's easy is criticizing an overworked and underpaid coach, getting pleasure from Monday morning quarterbacking every move he or she makes. This is becoming the reality for more and more coaches, who rarely get the great gratitude and respect from their communities that they deserve.

New game, new era

Then again, how can we expect kids to listen to a coach trying to teach them fundamentals of the game? Consider the influences on today's players: Michael Jordan and the glorification of the slam dunk, AAU's run-and-gun style, ESPN SportsCenter, and the And 1 Tour.

“Kids are no longer dedicated and willing to sacrifice to be the best they can be,” said Oshkosh North coach Frank Schade. “They simply have too many other outside influences and interests.”

A daily look at WisHoops offers confirmation. Threads on how to jump higher, the state's best dunker, people's favorite player on the AND 1 Tour. These posts are fun, but they are also strong statement about this generation of basketball players.

I'm still waiting for someone to ask how to shoot better, the best way to work on your ball skills, or how to best position yourself to become a better rebounder.

A big problem is that kids are playing over 50 games in the spring and summer nowadays and think that's good enough. Many are becoming more interested in playing during the summer with their AAU team and less in playing with their high school team during the school year, posing several problems for high school coaches.

What's a high school coach to do when they rightfully bench a kid for lack of hustle or insubordination, only to have an AAU coach swoop in after the game, consoling and assuring the player that things will be different when summer rolls around.

While most AAU coaches support their high school counterparts 100 percent, there are some out there who undermine the authority of the high school

coach. Worse, yet, they can potentially damage the attitude and work ethic of the player, which hurts them greatly if they continue to play at college level where things don't come so easily.

The bottom line is that while some parents and AAU coaches are busy enabling kids that aren't working as hard as they should be, the people getting hurt ever more are the varsity coaches.

Where's the support from the top?

If you hire a coach that wins games, treats all kids equally, and has respect from fellow coaches, that's all you ask for. Isn't it?

You would certainly think so, but what happened at Cedarburg High School this offseason tells a different story.

A few months after the season ended, Cedarburg coach Ben Siebert received a letter from school board President Jack Dobson. The letter indicated that the school was seeking a new coach but gave no reason as to why, saying only that the move wasn't inspired by the team's prior performance.

The letter asked Siebert to attend a school board meeting, where they would vote on whether or not to retain him as the head coach. The meeting took place behind closed doors, despite requests by Coach Siebert and the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel to open it to the public.

Coach Siebert read a prepared statement, which received not a single word response from anyone on the board. Three and a half hours later, Siebert was told he would not be returning.

The shadowy decision left him piecing together a complex puzzle without a picture.

The school board's position was that it retained the right to look for a new coach if it was an attempt to improve the high quality of service the district provided to its students.

Which begs the question: what, exactly, was it about Siebert's performance that wasn't high quality?

Siebert had a zero tolerance policy when it came to violating the rules, and when three of his players admitted their involvement in conduct against the athletic code they were dismissed from the team. The violations took place when the team and coaches stayed at the home of one of Siebert's relative in Sheboygan while participating in a Christmas tournament in 2003.

Two families filed a lawsuit against the school following Siebert's decision, citing their sons' emotional distress that came from being thrown off the team. The parents alleged a lack of supervision on the part of the coaches, but Siebert and others have refuted that claim.

Keep in mind, though, that both sets of parents signed contracts before the season agreeing to the zero tolerance policy. In addition, the school has since adopted a new policy that it sees as much stricter than the one formerly in place.

One can only assume that Cedarburg's new coach will think twice before enforcing these new rules, lest he face a similar fate as Siebert.

"What he brings to high school basketball is great respect," fellow North Shore Conference coach Paul Hepp told the Journal Sentinel in June about Siebert. "His players are always very respectful, and they play the game the way that it's supposed to be played. I think he's a great all-around coach and gets the most out of them and their potential, year in and year out."

Oh, and then there's Siebert's performance on the court: he coached his players to a 56-33 record in a tough North Shore conference before being dismissed.

Schools boards and administrators are asking for a revolving door of coaches if they continue this process. Precedents are being set for how to easily remove coaches, and this trend will only continue to hurt the game.

What can coaches do?

There are no definite answers to these problems. That said, here are a few words of caution and advice to anyone considering a high school coaching position.

Get support before taking job

Potential coaches need to demand backing from the administration when interviewing for jobs. Otherwise, they should simply walk away and say no thank you. Without the full support of Superintendent, Principal, and School Board, you simply won't survive in today's climate in most cities.

Have thicker skin and ignore the criticism.

If you work hard and can hit the pillow each night knowing you did your best, nothing any parent or fan should get under your skin. As one coach once said, "If I stay out of the bars I never hear a negative word about me."

Pretty good advice I think.

Communicate and have a dialogue with parents.

If you're truthful with parents before the season starts and let them know what you want from their son/daughter, I think it can help alleviate potential problems. If you appear to care and show them you want the best for their child, I think they will show you respect you deserve. The worst thing you can do is give them more ammo to use by ignoring them and showing them disrespect; after all, you are coaching their child and you have to expect them to see things differently and be blinded by emotion sometimes.

Have fun coaching.

Some coaches never seem to be enjoying themselves, and I think that translates to kids not having fun playing the game. Basketball is a great game and should be played and coached with enthusiasm. Sixteen- and

17-year-old kids don't like it when everything is negative and often take that negativity home with them, opening up the potential for parents to blame the coach.

Continue your hard work and you'll be successful.

The greatest coach of all-time, John Wooden, defines success better than anyone:

"Success is peace of mind that is the direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.

"Furthermore, only one person can ultimately judge the level of your success you. Think about that for a moment.

"I believe that is what true success is all about. Anything stemming from that success is simply a by-product, whether it be the score, the trophy, a national championship, fame, or fortune. They are all by-products of success, rather than success itself, indicators that you perhaps succeeded in the more important contest.

"That real contest, of course, is striving to reach your personal best, and that is totally under your control.

"When you achieve that, you have achieved success. Period! You are a winner and only you fully know if you won."

A great place to end I think.