

Marshmallows, Jellybeans, and Rocks

In the Fall of 1993 the New York Rangers lost at home to two then expansion teams, both the Tampa Bay Lightning and the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim. Coach Mike Keenan, often referred to as "Iron Mike" didn't like his team's effort and he felt they were under-performing. Prior to the next day's practice, he took a hockey stick, sawed it in half, then glued it back together. At the practice, he summoned his team into the corner for a tongue lashing where he broke the stick across the goal post. The Rangers responded with about a month-long winning streak, and went on to win their first Stanley Cup championship in 54 years in the Spring of 1994.

If a NJ high school coach today did what Keenan did- unmercifully scream at his team while shattering a stick in a rage filled tirade, they may be accused of using abusive tactics. Yet, Keenan, realizing the potential effectiveness this may have on his players actually staged them.

So how then can a coach push their players, really push them the way that they need to be pushed while also avoiding allegations that they are the next Attila the Hun? This has recently become the \$64,000 question and hopefully I can share a few tips within this column that may provide some insight on the topic.

Recently, I wrote a blog in response to an article on NJ.Com that reported a significant increase in the number of allegations of bullying that have been made toward coaches since the NJ passed new Anti-Bullying legislation as well as the national attention given to the Mike Rice scandal at Rutgers University. As I pointed out, many coaches believe such allegations to be unfounded, exaggerated, and consider the increased emphasis on bullying to be a new means for parents who are disgruntled over playing time decisions to attack them. Given the subject matter, the blog garnered quite a bit of attention including a week-long stint in the "Buzz" section of Sideline Chatter.com.

My intentions in the post were to increase awareness on the topic as our coaching profession is consequently losing some real quality people, and also warding off some talented young candidates who would ordinarily be destined for success, but have now become too weary to risk even getting involved.

As the volatility surrounding this issue is unlikely to disappear anytime soon, I would like to give some heartfelt advice to coaches, all coaches, regardless of level, regardless of sport, both veterans and newcomers alike.

It was 1997 that I nervously approached LSU baseball coach Skip Bertman in the lobby of the Cherry Hill Hilton hotel. Inside I had that awkward, "I don't know what to say when speaking to a living legend" feeling, but having seen him on ESPN in the College World Series, it was his insight that I was after and not even the worst case of shyness was going to stop me. One of the tips Coach Bertman gave me that evening stayed with me until today, has served me well, and could potentially keep a 2013 coach out of an administrator's office if not the inside of a courtroom.

How did Coach Bertman, a master motivator, and renowned motivational speaker, manage his players so well? How did he seem to blend all of the different personalities on his teams so effectively?

"*Marshmallows, Jellybeans, and Rocks*," said Bertman as my hand was trying to keep up jotting notes as he spoke. To the best of my dysgraphic recollection, he had borrowed this philosophy from former Pepperdine coach John Scolinos. Marshmallows and jellybeans to me were something that we ate at somebody's birthday party as kids so what was he talking about?

Marshmallows, jellybeans, and rocks were actually a metaphor for Bertman's system of communication that he used with his players. "*You don't treat every player the same*," explained Bertman. Some players needed to be pushed harder, some needed a certain kind of coddling. Some need a little of both. Then, Bertman broke it all down for me. I don't previously recall writing any faster.

If you hold a flame to a marshmallow, it instantly melts. If you hold a flame to a jelly bean, it will hold its shape for a short time but that too will eventually melt. But, when you hold a flame to a rock, no matter how much heat, no matter how much fire, no matter how much adversity, it remains unchanged.

"Each team is made up of a combination of marshmallows, jelly beans, and rocks," Bertman elaborated.

It's the coach's place to know which one each player on your team most closely resembles and then treat them accordingly. That's how you command their respect, that's how you get the most out of them. That is how you can help them to reach their potential.

In my earlier years, I coached a player who was incredibly tough- both mentally and physically. The funny thing was, if I wasn't constantly in his face riding him, pushing him, then he didn't have the same intensity or overall focus. The more I leaned on him, the better he performed. Had I treated another player I have in mind the same way, the boy may have quit as he undoubtedly would have melted. I once explained to the first player's father why I leaned on his son so much. He wrote me a letter a short while later thanking me and referred to his son as "our rock."

Bertman in his infinite wisdom knew not to treat a marshmallow like a rock. Doing so may have cost him a trip to Omaha and a chance to win another national championship. For a modern-day coach treating a marshmallow like he or she is a rock can have far more serious consequences that may cost a coach a lot more than just a game.

Coaches, as we continue to be under siege, my advice to you is adopt a marshmallow, jellybean, and rock philosophy while establishing your own system of communication with your players and within your management style. If passing Bertman's teachings along to others can help just one coach avoid an unfair or unfounded allegation directed at their personal integrity in the future, then I know I have done my best to be a good servant, and tried my best to be an ambassador of our great game.

The truth of the matter is that today's changing times may force some coaches to alter their style slightly. It may also be helpful to consider for a moment some advice that Trey Hillman, formerly of the NY Yankees gave to me. *"Your players will always be more receptive to criticism after a win. The time to pick them up is after a loss."*

The most timely opportunity you may have to jump all over them may be after a win in which they failed to make their best effort or to play as well as you'd like them to play.

Whatever adjustments a coach may deem necessary in order to survive with the changing times, most changes if any should really only be some subtle adjustments in one's coaching style as opposed to any wholesale or drastic changes. I feel strongly that one should not stray from who they are. If you are a coach and you are reading this- do not, I repeat, do not change who you are, and don't ever compromise yourself as a person. Being true to yourself is probably what has brought you to the level you are currently at in your profession.

Joe Paterno would often tell his players that ten years from now you will all come back for a reunion. At the reunion the subject of football would inevitably come up.

He explained to his players that there, at the reunion, they would say one of two things about him:

They would either say, *"He pushed us. He really pushed us!"* Or, they would say, *"He didn't really care about us. If he only pushed us harder. If he only knew how good we wanted to be."*

"Guys," Paterno said, *"I'll never sell you short!" I'm going to push you!"*

If you are currently a coach anywhere above the junior high level, your players too will presumably attend a class or team reunion someday. At the reunion, your name will come up as they recount the

days that they played for you. They will either talk about how you pushed them or complain that you didn't push them hard enough because you didn't really care.

Be smarter today than you were yesterday. Continue to be who you are. Most of all, don't ever sell them short!