

It's More Than Teaching Xs and Os

By Head Coach Mat Mahoney, Fairmont High School

I graduated from Fairmont High School in 1999, played quarterback for Jim Simser. I then graduated from Minnesota State, Mankato in 2004 with a degree in Physical Education. I also was a student assistant coach at MSU from 2001-03. I was hired at Fairmont at age 26 and just finished my fifth year as a head coach. We have won the South Central Conference 4 years running and have won 20 straight conference games. We lost to St. Croix Lutheran in the 2011 Class AAA state championship game, 34-32. I have been teaching health and physical education for the past seven years and this past year took over as Activities Director.

I would first like to start and say thank you to Terry Turek and the Minnesota Football Magazine for allowing me to speak on behalf of our football program. I grew up in Fairmont, Minn., getting all the hand-me down football coaching magazines from my grandfather Tom Mahoney. In this article, I am going to speak on what I know best and what works for us down here in Fairmont and that's creating an environment that people want to be a part of. The game of football has changed in so many ways and the little bit that I have learned as being a head coach comes down to a couple simple words: Loyalty, Dedication, Discipline, Toughness and Fun. These are the terms that have made us into a successful football program the past five years. I'm not convinced it's all about Xs and Os because if you don't have these five qualities, you will never be able to execute any play in football or be successful in life!

Loyalty:

I just finished my fifth year as a head coach and I have been very fortunate to have the core of my coaching staff with me the entire time. It doesn't matter what their playing experience is, knowledge of the game or coaching style — the biggest thing I have seen with my staff is its dedication to this program. I never have to ask them if they are going to attend any camps or meeting, or open the weight room — they do it because they know that they are making this program better. My grandfather always told me to be loyal, and I have a staff that is extremely loyal to me and this program, and we are seeing the pay-offs because of it. Every member of my staff has some responsibility within our program and they all take great pride in that. The more responsibility that I have given people on my staff, the harder they work toward reaching that goal. As a staff, we meet every Sunday night and discuss next week's opponent and it's because they put the time into something that they get to have a say in.

Dedication:

It's tough to be a high school athlete in today's society because they get pulled from every coach in the summer time, but our kids dedicate themselves to the football program

because we have not changed anything in five years during the summer and the kids know what to expect. We ask our kids for eight days of team activities during the summer. We attend SDSU team camp in June for three days, followed up by a five-day Fairmont Cardinal Football Camp in late July. We also attend a passing camp at Minnesota State University, Mankato in June, While the camp is not required, our participation is large because they know that they will get reps. We have won our first game every year the past five years because we are making progress during the summer months and their dedication is paying off. I am a big believer in three-sport athletes and we have a lot of kids playing different sports during the school year and the summer, but when it comes to the fall, they are dedicated to this program.

Discipline:

This is where we have taken giant strides as a coaching staff. We have all had those situations when it's third-and-2 and need a big stop and the opponent gets you to jump offside for another first down. We have been there many times, but have improved because we are more disciplined at practice, in the weight room, and in the classroom. If a player makes a mistake in the classroom, on the field or out in the community, there will be a consequence. These kids are growing up a lot different than we did with all the technology in their hands and have access to a lot of information that we never did at their age. We have gone through some tough situations in my tenure here and have had to make some tough decisions, but these kids have responded from that and have become better young men just because we hold them accountable. In the spring time, I open the weight room at 6 a.m. and the attendance has been outstanding because they have seen the results of what the weight room can do on Friday nights. They are also more disciplined on getting here on time, getting to class on time and it has carried over to the field. I can't wait for the next third-and-2!

TOUGHNESS:

All football coaches go to clinics and hear coaches speak on how physical they want their players to be on Friday nights. My first year at Fairmont we were not physical at all and it showed every Friday night. We wanted our kids to be more aggressive and tougher players. At the beginning of the next year, we changed the way we practiced. The players know that on Tuesday and Wednesday that it's going to be tough. At Fairmont we try and practice as fast as we can, we don't take many breaks and are not afraid to hit each other. We go full pads both days and we smack each other around. As coaches, we put them in a great position to be physical and without increasing the chance for injuries. We have been fortunate to have a lot of kids

in the program, so we have been able to do this, but it has made a huge difference. If you want your players to be tough football players, you can't just flip the switch on Friday nights; you have to preach it throughout the week of practice.

Fun:

Every spring season, I have a meeting with my 8-11th graders and I have them fill out some info on themselves, goals for the summer, weight room goals, Individual/Teams goals, etc. I had a player a couple years ago write down in caps FUN. This player was a three-year starter and didn't care about any personal achievements; he wanted to have his high school football experience be fun. After reading that, I really took a step back and placed myself in those players' shoes and realized as coaches we demand and expect a lot from our players and never really enjoy the moment. Since then we have changed some of the things that we do at practice. On Thursdays, we practice on our game field with music. I create the CD with new music, old music anything to get their mind off of whatever is bothering them. We always go through a special teams script on Thursday with all kinds of different situations, halfway through the script is halftime. During halftime, I always ask for some kind of entertainment. Kids will come up and dance, sing, tell a joke (I am usually at the back end of the joke), perform a skit, anything to have fun; but it always brings us together. Since then, I've realized that if kids know that they are going to have fun at practice, then they always come out to practice with a great attitude.

In five years, we haven't changed a whole lot of our Xs and Os because every play will work if you give it time and have the right players executing those plays. As a program we have

became better at the little things that most people overlook and it's a big reason in our success. There are a lot of qualities that makes a person successful and that's what we want our players to be on the field and in life. I hope you were able to take away something from this article and apply it to your program. I wish you best of luck in 2012 and hope to see you on the gridiron. ■

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