

Build Young Men – A Program Will Result

By Carl Lemke, Head Football Coach, St. Croix Lutheran High School



Take five minutes right now. Write down all the aspects of your football program that you would like to upgrade. Don't just emphasize the really low spots, but include any part with which you are not totally comfortable. Start at the top with the coaching staff, its organization and expertise. Evaluate the facilities and equipment. How about the weight program and the practice organization? Are you set with your offensive and defensive philosophies?

The typical next step is to list ways to improve each part of your program. However, this time try a different approach. Instead of focusing on the certain aspect of your program, ask the question: "How can I best build young men in this area?" Build young men and a program will result. Let's apply this philosophy to several vital areas.

Recruiting Players. When the game of football at a school has lost its glamour (This is referred to as a "weak" program.), you can bet that one reason cited is small numbers, the lack of talent and depth on the field. The athletes who could contribute are "walking the hallways," not interested. Why? They will quickly volunteer that it is because the team is so bad (0-9, lost the homecoming game 60-0, is an embarrassment, etc.). But do not believe these reasons. Kids do not have to win to be happy in a sport. Being treated firmly, fairly and with respect is a priority for them. They respond to a positive, caring approach applied to every aspect of their lives.

Do not feel that winning must precede getting kids out for your sport. Totally consume yourself with how the game of football can benefit each kid who plays it. Be convinced that kids are not vital to build a program, but that the game of football is vital to building young men. Each one of them needs what you have to offer. Make it a personal goal that you want to use football to be a part of each athlete's life.

Practices. What is your practice like? Evaluate the atmosphere. Is it a place where athletes can learn, gain confidence, get experience, develop enthusiasm – and take refuge! Disciplined, business-like practices where enthusiasm is high and tension is low accomplish much. Planning them well is a priority. There should be a definite purpose for every drill. Throw out even that favorite one if its application to game day is hazy.

Show respect to athletes while demanding hard work, discipline and perfection at all times. Cursing, foul language, derogatory remarks and constant tongue-lashings on the practice field cause a program to suffer because young men are not being built.

Assistant Coaches. Do you have great assistant coaches? Give your right arm to get some. It is a priority. No one is more important for your young men. Besides being fundamentally sound, they must be guys that your players respect and in whom they may confide.

Any success I have had as a head coach I owe to my assistant coaches.

I also firmly believe that each assistant should coach both sides of the line. Teach kids offense and defense; play them one way when possible. Many drills can be used to teach both offense and defense at the same time. Knowing both sides of the ball will develop more well-rounded players, and we owe this to our young men.

Weight Program. Do you want to see your kids develop self-confidence, a good work-ethic, discipline, pride? Get him into the weight room. Forget about football when selling the weight program. Focus on how the lessons learned in the weight room will positively affect an athlete for the rest of his life. How many so-called lazy, good-for-nothing kids do you know who are dedicated in the weight room?

But how do you get kids into the weight room consistently? It is an age-old problem made more frustrating every time we hear another one of those fantastic clinic speakers who have the entire football team in the weight room for two hours a day, five days a week, all year around, whether they play basketball or not!

A simple weight program works. We squat, bench and power clean. In our weight room are six stations of each so that kids can finish in a half-hour session three times a week. Every other lift is optional. Emphasis is placed on never missing a week. It is more beneficial to complete one lift every week than to do several lifts sporadically. Real success is realized in the weight room when athletes are sold on the benefits for themselves and find that the weight room is a great place to be.

Offensive and Defensive System. Do you have a system? Do you have written down in simple language what you will do offensively and defensively in every situation? Too many times we coaches turn from one system to another, until dizzy from our turning, we frustrate our athletes and accomplish nothing.

To develop a relationship with athletes that includes mutual respect and trust, decide on a system and stick with it. Refine it, improve execution, but do not change. A good practice is to adapt an existing successful high school or college system that appeals to you. This gives you a ready reference to contact for added information.

These five areas of a football program contribute greatly to the building of a young man. Other areas also are well-suited to this end, so we coaches must constantly be looking for avenues to better develop the athletes under our guidance. The goal of building a program and winning is attained in a more sound way and with a more sound foundation when our main focus at all times is that of building young men. ■