



INTENSITY AND SPORT

A GUIDE FOR ATHLETES & COACHES

During the 2006 season, Toronto Blue Jays manager John Gibbons and pitcher Ted Lilly provided an atrocious example of player-coach relations when a verbal altercation on the mound became physical in the hallway leading to the clubhouse. Gibbons asked for the ball and Lilly refused. Clearly, both men are intense competitors. Based on their post-game comments, both regret some of their actions.



This conflagration illustrates the emotional nature of sport. In September of the same season, the Kansas City Royals starting pitcher and catcher fought in the dugout before going out to finish the game. It seems to take very little to send a fierce competitor over the edge.

Michael Jordan is praised as much for his insatiable desire to win as his exceptional skill. Hard-working players and determined coaches are highly sought after. When does that intensity degenerate from a positive attribute to a negative influence? How do you foster that intensity without going too far?

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING REASONABLE

Successful teams are built on mutual respect and this is best achieved with a professional approach. Yelling like Lou Pinella is not acceptable in the business world. Sports are slightly different but a coach's meltdown should remain an exceptional case. Cito Gaston returned to Toronto for an appearance, days after manager Gibbons and Lilly scuffled in the tunnel to the clubhouse. Gaston was the epitome of a professional manager.

While managing, Gaston was often criticized because he seemed too quiet but he is now much more appreciated given the performance of the six managers who have succeeded him. Gaston gave younger players confidence (Juan Guzman, John Olerud), trusted veterans to do their job (Jack Morris, Paul Molitor), and helped others get results they never matched elsewhere (Devon White, Kelly Gruber). Much of Gaston's success was due to his patience and respect.

<<< Mike D'Antoni, Gary Williams, John Gibbons, and Jeff Van Gundy demonstrate different degrees of intensity on the playing field.



INTENSITY AND SPORT

PREPARED BY COACH BROCK BOURGASE

Cito Gaston brought an air of calm to the clubhouse. He let pitchers work out of jams and allowed his players to play through slumps. He never showed up those who played for him. Subtle encouragement created a positive, professional environment. At a basic level, challenging someone to a fight is not respectful behaviour.

Joe Torre was the right manager for the Yankees in 1996, just as Cito Gaston was for the Blue Jays in 1989. Both provided skilled athletes the room to perform and both won multiple titles. A highly skilled team needs a relaxed environment more than anything else.

These types of coaches are often chided by fans because they are seen as too passive and indecisive. Actually, once they make a decision they stick to it, because once you have talent you stand back and let it perform.

A positive approach does not burn players, coaches, and even assistant coaches out during the season. At times, high intensity volatile coaches succeed (Ozzie Guillen, Mike Keenan, Chuck Daly, and Bill Parcells have all won titles). But they also tend to blow up quicker and rarely succeed in the long-term.

Among fiery coaches, those with the most success are those who base their outbursts on a foundation of respect (Tony LaRussa Scotty Bowman, Gregg Poppovich, Bill Cowher). Like a bank account, the more positive deposits made during the season, the more effective withdrawals made at critical junctures become. Why would anyone listen to a coach's outburst if it were merely one track on a broken record?

TECHNICAL FOULS

In basketball, like the judicious use of intensity throughout the season, a technical foul has its time and place. Dialogue with officials is one of the most misunderstood elements of the game – especially at the high school level. Ts are largely political and tactical coaching strategies and rarely emotional outbursts.

A disclaimer: a coach can't apply their skills when they are sitting in the locker room. There is always a level of appropriate discourse when speaking to officials and getting two Ts for a Gunnery Sergeant Hartman-type outburst surpasses what is necessary. Coaches usually have four reasons to receive a technical foul:

4) DISCUSSING A MISCONCEPTION REGARDING THE RULES

Ideally, coaches and officials would discuss every issue politely with inside voices. There are many opportunities for head coaches, team captains, referees, umpires, and minor officials to resolve disagreements discreetly: before games, timeouts, free throw situations, halftime, and when the official passes the coaching box.

Based on personnel or systems, teams benefit from certain rules interpretations. The game's rules are carved in stone; the officials' interpretations are not. If a team is not receiving the benefit of the doubt, the coach should stand up and make their point.

3) INCREASING THE TEAM'S ENERGY LEVEL

When a team is flat, the coach must raise the intensity level. Coaching is often about adjustments and there may not be the luxury of waiting until halftime or after the game to take action. Sometimes, words during a timeout won't get the players' attention and – although it is no reflection of the referee or that particular call – a coach needs to show their emotions to help the team. Secondly, an impersonal outburst towards an official is preferable to a personal outburst targeting the team or a specific player.

CONTINUES...

INTENSITY AND SPORT

PREPARED BY COACH BROCK BOURGASE

CONCLUSION

Respect goes both ways but a player's disrespectful actions are not an excuse for a coach to reply in kind as did Gibbons. According to Kouzes and Posner, the first foundation of leadership is modeling the way. Words must correspond to actions to be meaningful to players. Larry Brown does not always practice what he preaches and this is why he has a short shelf life, despite all of his success.

Where does intensity fit in? Moderation may seem like a daft response but intensity and composure are two extremes separated by a wide grey area. Obviously, coaches should model the way as much as possible and remain above the fray. However, coaches have emotions and it is sometimes necessary to show some fire for long-term gain. So long as the coach's commitment and integrity are exemplary, they are entitled to make judicious use of their intensity.

Does this tactic work because coaches show players their intensity and encourage the team to match it or because it reminds players of the significance of that game? Coaches know the players that they coach the best and the team's personality is an important consideration; if a team freezes due to fear or surprise, the theatrics have backfired and the damage must be undone as soon as possible after the game.

I don't advocate scenes that were common in the early A.B.A. when player-coaches like Cliff Hagan or Doug Moe would be tossed for fighting thirty seconds into the game.

I find that I often need someone to yell at me to keep on the boards (even though I know very well the glass is where Bigs belong). Student-athletes need that motivation too and sport remains the exception to the rules. Neither a business office nor a Hollywood stereotype, yet elements of both persist. Intensity and fire have a place in sport that they don't have elsewhere. The trick is to employ those elements with consistency, respect, and integrity.

"I still break racquets, but now I do it in a positive way."

- Goran Ivanisevic

...TECHNICAL FOULS (CONT'D)

2) STANDING UP FOR PLAYERS

The better the coach-player relationship, the more success the team will experience (talent still being the most important factor). If players perceive that the officials or opposing team are taking advantage of them, the coach must be their advocate. Or if a player is working hard and doing their best yet losing their match-up, the coach should recognize this effort. The team's performance will improve during that game and throughout the season because the players know that the coach is on their side.

1) MAKING A LONG-TERM POINT

In the grand scheme of an entire a season or a student-athlete's career (and life), a game is nothing. In *Hoop Dreams*, Coach Gene Pingatore benches William Gates for arriving late to his last high school playoff game. Coaches are responsible for developing student-athletes and winning playoff games and should not worry about a technical foul if it is a step towards these goals.