NFHS/NIAAA CONFERENCE PREVIEW

Athletic Management

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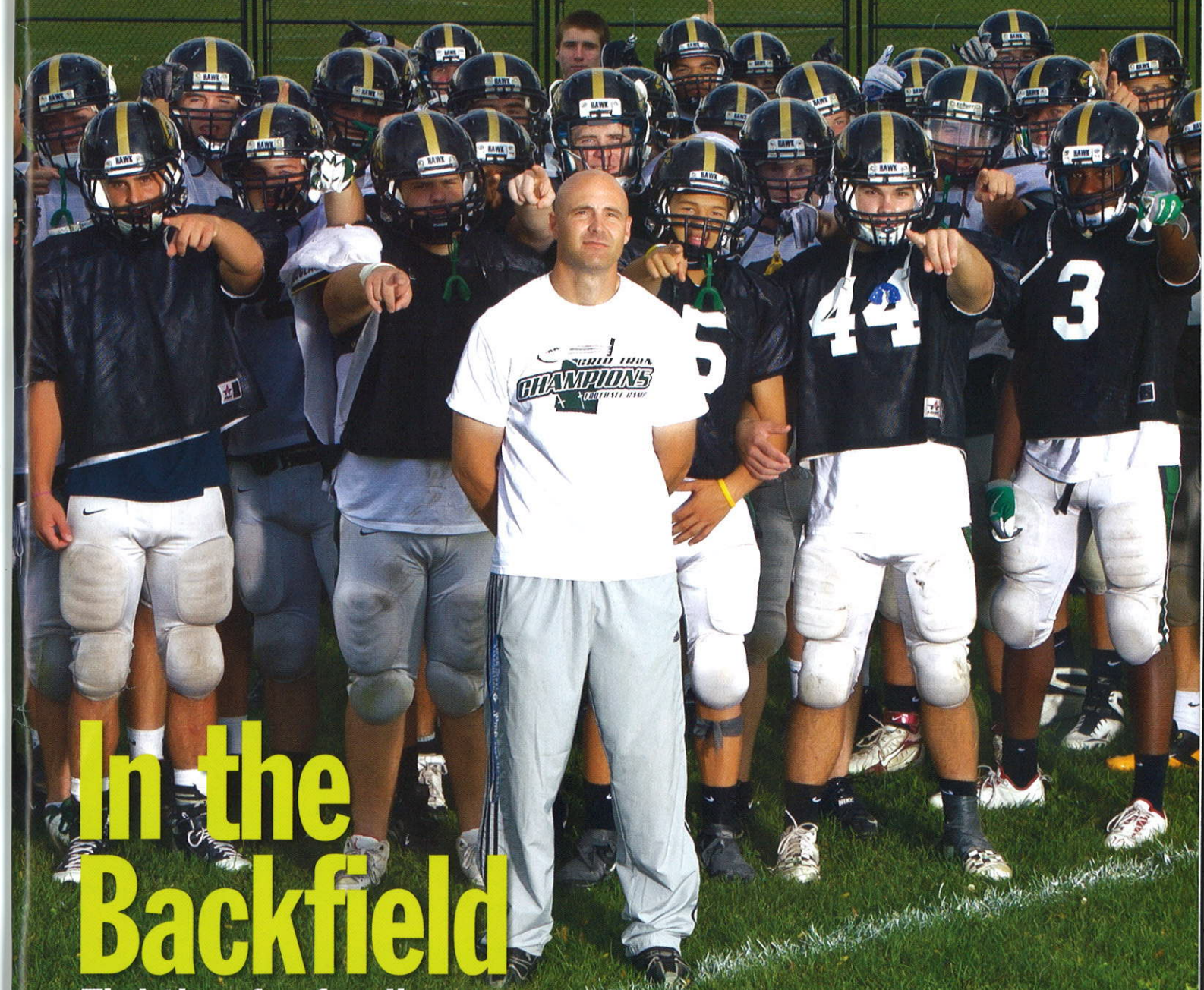
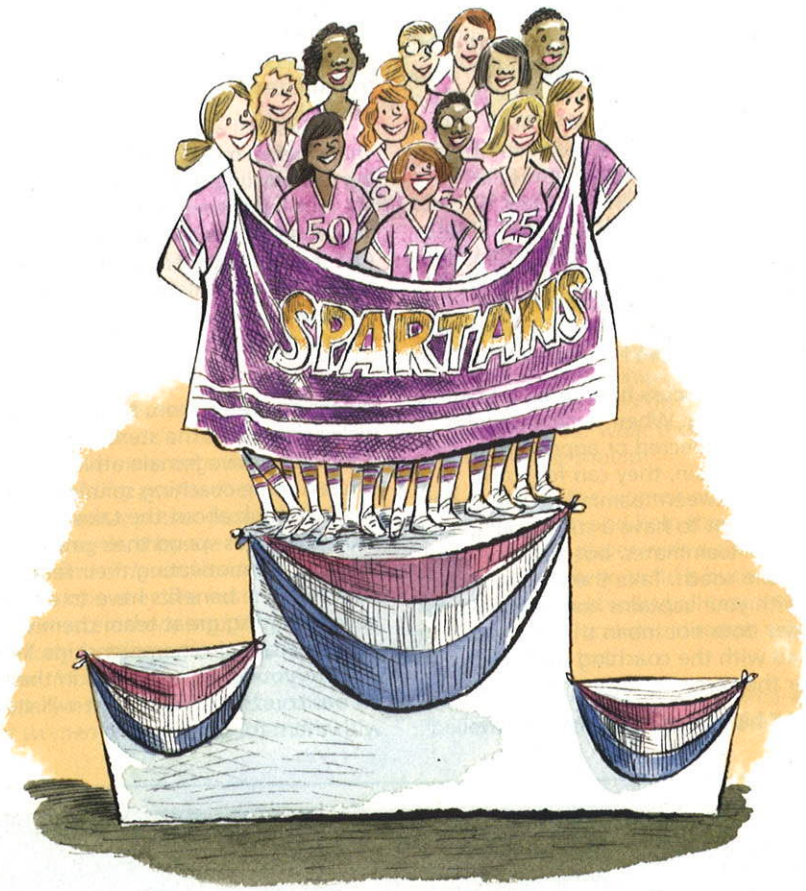


In the Backfield

Fighting for funding

- Student-Athlete Discipline
- Mentoring Coach-Leaders
- Legal Issues in Hiring
- Facility Solutions



GARY HOVLAND

Women Warriors

What is the secret to making female athletes competitive? All it takes is a little teamwork.

By Dawn Redd

We've all heard it before: "Girls just aren't as competitive as boys." It's a phrase usually muttered by a coach of a female team after a frustrating practice or close loss. I'm here to tell you that it's simply not true. What is true is that not all coaches understand how to motivate female athletes toward competitiveness.

Perhaps you have a coach who has struggled to find their voice and get buy-in from their team. Or maybe you have a staff of new coaches who can't figure out why the tactics they've used with male athletes won't work with their female teams.

The answer is not that the female athletes are less focused or motivated, but rather the coach needs to understand how to motivate young women. After many successful seasons of coaching females, I would like to share my thoughts and ideas on guiding female athletes to be the best they can be—in sports and life.

Part of the Crowd

My niece is an athlete with great potential. She's good at volleyball and basketball, and can high jump with the best of them. A couple of years ago, she got involved in a rather non-competitive volleyball league. I saw early on that she had the raw skills to be really good at the sport, but she wasn't surrounded by like-minded girls.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with playing a sport just to learn, have fun, and meet people, but that's not what my niece wanted to do. She wanted to compete, to contribute, and to win. As long as she was with those girls, though, she wouldn't. I suggested that her parents move her into a league where it would not only be okay, but expected, for her to excel, which worked out perfectly for her.

Why couldn't my niece simply assert her drive and skills on the initial team? Most girls don't want to stick out from the crowd—they want to be part of it. And that's the number one lesson in coaching female athletes. An outsider looking at that team would think the girls simply were not competitive. I would assert that these girls silently decided on a team identity of not working too hard at the sport.

Kathy DeBoer, current Executive Director of the American Volleyball Coaches Association and former Senior Associate Athletic Director at the University of Kentucky, has been studying this gender conundrum for many years. In her book, *Gender and Competition: How Men and Women Approach Work and Play Differently,* she says that girls and women "highly value attachment as a defining element of femaleness" and that a "web of relationships characterizes the female culture." Using my niece's team as an example, you can see how a highly competitive young girl would sacrifice her natural personality to fit in with the team culture of not putting forth too much effort.

DeBoer also says that "females fear rejection, isolation, and abandonment" and all of those things surely would have taken place if my niece had asserted herself and started dominating the non-competitive team. Sure, she would have shown her superior skill, but she also

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would have alienated herself from the rest of her teammates.

Even your best and most competitive female athletes want to fit in and have a sense of belonging. Coaches should work hard to create a safe place for their female athletes to be competitive and assertive, because as DeBoer says, "properly motivated women are just as competitive as properly motivated men. The difference is the motivation, not the competitiveness."

> After reading Pfeffer's article, I asked myself ... "How can I prepare young women to be leaders and inspire them to embrace power?"

Do's & Don'ts

How do you supply the right motivation for female athletes so they can be competitive? Here are some things that have become part of my playbook in coaching women:

Do NOT call out a player in front of her teammates. If coaches of female athletes make the mistake of creating a hierarchy of skills on their team, they're in trouble. I'm not talking starters vs. non-starters, but saying something like, "You're our best player, so we're relying on you to score this point." Even though those things may be true (and a nice compliment), that player doesn't want to be singled out—it will make her feel separated from her teammates.

Do discuss how to be a team leader. When female athletes are elected or appointed team captain, they can feel torn between teammates and coaches. They want to have a strong allegiance with their teammates, but also want to please the coach. Take the time to discuss with your captains how their role as a leader does not mean they are more aligned with the coaching staff, but rather they are the voice of the team.

Do NOT hide your emotions. Female athletes will not trust their coach if he or she does not open up to the team. They want to feel close and connected to their coach. They're not going to care about the coach until that coach shows that she or he cares for them. Once the coach does this, the team will run through walls for her or him.

That doesn't mean getting mad and yelling or revealing details of one's personal life. But it does mean sharing your feelings and the ups and downs of your life. And it definitely means making the time to listen to an athlete who has a concern or problem.

For the Future

Where do we go from here? Now that we've debunked the stereotype of the non-competitive female athlete and offered some coaching solutions, we need to think about the takeaway. Why should coaches spend their precious time strategically motivating their female athletes? The benefits have to extend beyond having great team chemistry so that you can win championships. What will our young women learn in their time on our courts and fields that will stay with them for a lifetime?

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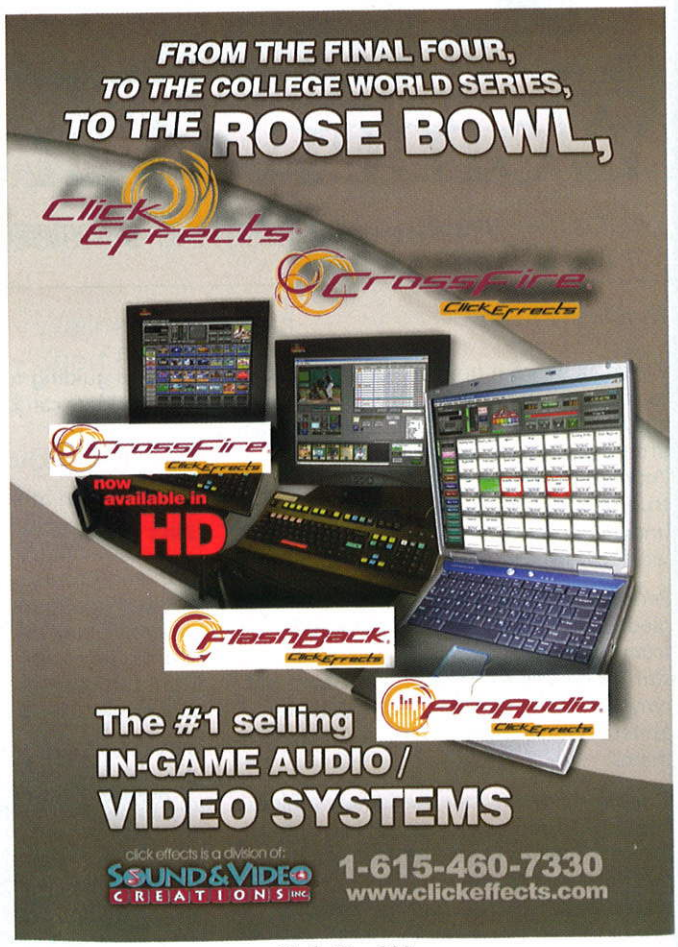

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I feel strongly that our athletic programs can help prepare girls to become independent women and successful leaders in their future endeavors. Teaching them how to be competitive in athletics can help them be competitive and confident in their lives and careers.

In August, *Harvard Business Review* posted an article on its Web site titled, "Women and the Uneasy Embrace of Power," by Jeffrey Pfeffer, Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University, and author of the forthcoming book, *Power: Why Some People Have It and Others Don't*. Here is a foundational quotation from that article:

> *The evidence shows that women are less power-oriented than men. Women have more negative attitudes toward holding power, they are less likely to pursue power-based influence strategies, they are more bothered by and disfavor hierarchical relationships, they are less motivated to dominate others, and they are less likely to take actions to attain power. Moreover, in situations such as salary negotiations, studies show that women often believe that they deserve less than similarly qualified men and are, as a consequence, likely to demand less and to press their salary demands with less vigor.*

After reading that, I asked myself, "How can I make sure that the athletes I coach go against this trend? How can I prepare young women to be leaders and inspire them to embrace power?" The article goes on to detail ways power is attained, which I think can relate to what we do as coaches. Here are four actions the article suggests for attaining power:

Build relationships with useful others: Not just others, but "useful" others. According to the article, women typically dislike hierarchical relationships, so they probably aren't super fired up to strategically target people for what they can do for them. But they should!

Find out what the women on your team are interested in and help them get connected. I had a player with a class project that required her to build a business plan for starting a club volleyball team. I happen to know a local club director, so I introduced the two.

Display confidence: This is one area where I believe athletes are ahead of the game. Think about the sprinter who has to believe that she has superior skills than her competitors. Our role is to continue to give our athletes the confidence they need to excel.

Engage in self-promotion: As leaders of women, we must get through to our athletes that promoting their team and themselves doesn't mean they are demeaning anyone else or their accomplishments.

Be willing to work long hours: Our athletes are already putting in many hours with their sport and sacrificing their personal time for the benefit of the team. As coaches we challenge them mentally and physically to push beyond their perceived limits. This should be considered great preparation for leadership in the future.

What is the take home message for coaches on motivating female athletes? Create an environment where competition reigns but cooperation is the culture. Let your players get to know you. Clearly explain your expectations of them and how such goals will bring the team together. Finally, look to the future. We have a tremendous opportunity to impact today's young women and make them confident leaders in whatever they choose to do.

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