

Lessons in Spirit

by Pam Carter

This letter I recently wrote to a new coach who was having a difficult season. I think we lose many new coaches in those first few years. They often get frustrated and don't know how to deal with the human side of coaching. Many know the skills but they don't know the personal aspects of making a team. Here are some of the things I learned along the way.

TO A NEW COACH:

I want to share with you a valuable lesson learned and hopefully put you on the right footing as a coach. You will either burn out from frustration quickly or you will learn that there are many aspects to coaching and discover that there is so much more to this than a trophy at region. There is never a year that goes by that I don't have an invitation to a baby shower, a wedding, a birthday, or some event! There is never a day that I don't venture out to pick up my grandchildren at nursery that I don't run into former cheerleaders with their children. There are few competitions that I go to that I do not see the teams of one of my former cheerleaders who is coaching now. I have set in church with some and, saddest of all, I have buried a few. Those are the big moments in coaching and the one's you learn to appreciate. It is sad to say but I don't know where the region trophies are and the state medal (we only won once in all those years) but I do know where the athletes are. They are forever a part of my life.

With almost thirty odd years of coaching and twenty years of judging I learned some lessons that I want to share with you. These were not easy lessons. Sometimes they came at a price but I learned them and it paid off in the long run.

LESSON ONE: Never blame one team member for a loss. Teach your team now that winning or losing is a team job. If a mistake is made all 16 accept that it was a bad day or an incident occurred. If a stunt comes down the entire stunt group has to accept that they need to work on the skill not just one member. Never point out individuals. Learn from mistakes because tomorrow it may be another group that makes that same mistake. If you did not teach your athletes to work together as a team and learn from every mistake, then you have lost before you take the floor.

LESSON TWO: Teach your athletes to analyze their routine and to realize when they have a good day and when they have a bad day. They will not always win and they need to focus on their routine and not someone else's routine. They need to know difficulty level and skill. They need to realize that neither you nor they can control every situation. There are many forces out there and every competition is a different one. Wake up tomorrow and move forward!

LESSON THREE: Teach your team to appreciate the efforts of the other team. When another team wins, teach them to applaud that team's efforts and to appreciate that this

day belongs to that team and that tomorrow could belong to them. If they learn to focus on the past, develop "get even" attitudes, and work on past performances they will never improve. Learning to appreciate the performance of another group is a major step toward developing a team's commitment to success.

LESSON FOUR: Explain the system to the parents. Be honest with them and encourage them to respect decisions. Teach them to analyze a routine, what to look for, how to judge difficulty. Set standards for sportsmanship. They are a part of your team. What they say to the athlete when the athlete goes home can make a huge difference. If they look for blame then it put doubts in the minds of the athletes. The athletes need your support and the positive support of the parents. Teach them to respect the decisions of the officials.

LESSON FIVE: Bottom line if blame needs to be placed then you accept the blame. You take the credit so why not step up and take the blame. Teach the athletes not to blame others, not to look for or make excuses. If they did the best job they could do, then they won that day. It doesn't always take a trophy to point to the winner. What you say to them when they come off that floor makes a difference in the "team" tomorrow.

LESSON SIX: Teach them to work hard and to strive to do their best. If they only put half effort into the practice then they will only give half a performance. If all sixteen do not commit to every practice and to being there when needed, then they will not perform as a team. Commitment and dedication can be taught!

At state I have a Special Needs Team that performs after one or two of the sessions. They will never win a trophy for excellence but they are the only team to receive a standing ovation. They compete with their hearts! The thrill for them is to step on the floor and to see the faces of their parents smiling at them. They walk off to hugs and to cheers and to people who don't care if they took a wrong step or if someone did better than them that day. If a stunt doesn't go up then they try again. We could all learn a lesson from them!