

Teachable Moments

by Pam Headridge

Cheerleading provides the opportunity to teach many life lessons that will help to develop these young athletes into productive, self-confident, caring adults. The sport of cheerleading teaches hard work, perseverance, competitiveness, sportsmanship and teamwork. But don't overlook the other life skills that they can gain: optimism, respectfulness, accountability, self-discipline, time management, responsibility, compassion, and leadership. Many obstacles are thrown in our paths as we coach cheerleading. How we handle them is a real life lesson in the making. Take the times at practice, games, and competitions to draw their attentions to these teachable moments and explain how they can be applied to their future. Everyday offers opportunities to teach these needed skills and, in the process, will help your cheerleaders to navigate their way through their life's challenges.

Here is a touching story about perseverance, compassion, and determination from Jan Halverson and Cheryl Priest, coaches at Jesuit High School in Oregon. *"The day before the 1997 State Championships, one of our senior leaders on the varsity team was hit by a car and her leg was badly broken. She was rushed to the hospital, and had a pin inserted in her leg. The first thing she said was "I'm so sorry I ruined State for all of you." Coach Cheryl told the team that they didn't have to go to State unless they wanted to, and that it would be a lot of work to redo the routine (Katie was a tumbler and main base). We told them it was up to them. The girls said, "We don't want Katie to think she ruined anything for us. We want to do it for Katie. They spent the afternoon reconfiguring the formations and stunts. The next morning, we met at Jesuit, and on little sleep, plenty of adrenaline and thinking of Katie in the hospital, we went to State. The girls were nervous and exhausted. The team only dropped one stunt, cheered their hearts out and finished 2nd in the difficult All-Girl division. We were so incredibly proud of them, for we knew how hard it had been on them to compete. Instead of going to a restaurant to celebrate, we took the trophy and the medals up to Katie in the hospital and celebrated with her. What a memorable moment."*

How often have you seen teams cancel at the last minute because of an injury, illness or academically ineligible student? Some coaches would have said, "What's the point, we cannot win." What would these Oregon coaches have taught the cheerleaders if they told their cheerleaders to not go to State?

- That one person is more important than the team
- That when things get tough to give up
- That winning is the only thing that is important

Instead, this Oregon team learned that perseverance through a challenge brings new success. The team gained pride in themselves because they did not give up. They also showed compassion to a fellow cheerleader who thought she had dashed their hopes to compete at the state championship. These are the life

learning memories that the team will remember, not the second place trophy they brought home. Life throws roadblocks in our journey through time. This story showed that determination and never giving up will help lead to triumph.

Other teachable moments are taught through your actions to everyday challenges and problems. Coaches play a big part in influencing the attitude and behavior of their team and teach lessons through their reactions to situations. Here are a few situations. What would you do?

The team performs well at a competition but does not win a trophy. How do you explain to your team why they do not win? Coaches want to let their cheerleaders know that they did a great job and often our first instinct is to blame the judges. This first response blames others and teaches the cheerleaders to always find excuses for not getting what they want. Everyone walks away sad and frustrated. This is not the lasting impression that good coaches want to teach their athletes. A different option is to explain that scoring is subjective as are many decisions in life. Teach them to appreciate their hard work and efforts by generously reaffirming and praising their effort and attitude. You are now teaching them sportsmanship and placing the emphasis on teamwork, mental toughness, integrity and a job well done not that winning is the only goal.

Situation #2... Your state has a strict policy of no jewelry when cheering. It is the big Homecoming game and the cheerleaders beg you to let them wear hoop earrings. Do you give in to make them happy or do you stick to the rules? First response in your head is, "Oh why not? They will not be stunting." If you think again, you realize that you are not holding them accountable to the rules. So when one of them breaks a team rule like not coming to practice, she can say but you let us not follow the rules at the Homecoming game. Also as coaches, we need to look at the bigger picture. What message would your team be sending to the visiting cheerleaders when they see your cheerleaders with jewelry on?

How you handle these situations does impact the squad, their beliefs, their character development and their attitude. Coaches need to set a clear picture of what is expected and model these desired traits. You have the power to influence and teach your athletes life lessons that they can use.

Bruce E. Brown wrote a booklet called, *Teach Attitude First. Developing an "Attitude of Gratitude" in Your Athletes.* It is an easy, inspirational read that helped me define my coaching philosophy. As he says, "Having a good athletic attitude means having positive belief and action about the game, the team and themselves. Attitude is a choice, but often one that has to be taught and molded... An athletic attitude must be clearly defined, taught, expected, and assessed." He believes that developing core covenants is key to a great program. In his booklet, he gives examples of challenges and how to work through them. This is a must-read for all coaches: www.proactivecoaching.info. He also has many other books.

To coach is to teach. You impact your athletes for years to come. Have them focus on values, a strong belief in oneself and accountability. This is your legacy to your cheerleaders.