

CAN YOUR PREGAME TALK WIN OR LOSE THE GAME?

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When your son or daughter earned their license to drive and were ready for that first solo, did you spend several painstaking minutes outlining every incident that could happen and what they should do? Was it for you or them? Did they look at you with confidence, knowing you had prepared them for this day, saying, "Mom and Dad, it's okay. I'm ready to do this." Or did their body language suggest they had locked you out and weren't paying attention?

What about as a coach when you give your team a pregame talk? Do you spend endless minutes trying to go over every concern? Is it for you or them? By the end, are they all paying attention, looking you in the eye? Are they engaged, or have they locked you out? How can this be avoided?

Here are a few guidelines for the pregame talk:

- 1. Plan:** Outline what you want to cover on a card, phone or tablet beforehand.
- 2. Brief:** Highlight three or four major points in a sentence each or less.
- 3. Positive:** Highlight what's possible, leaving negatives out.
- 4. Vision:** Reaffirm their hard work. (They earned the right to be here!)
- 5. Avoid meaningless information:** This can run on forever.
- 6. Ask Questions/Engage:** Involve your players to keep them focused.
- 7. One Voice:** That voice should be the head coach. Too much input from others can cloud the picture. Ask for your assistants' input on what your major points should be before the game, and then at the half.

Most games are won or lost well after our pregame motivation techniques have worn off. Players need information that will help them in key situations, and that is what we need to spend time highlighting before the game and at the half. We often forget that treating our players with respect, caring about them as individuals, and involving them in team decisions truly gives them the motivation to play their best. Quality practices will cover your concerns.

What about when you see your team warming up in a casual, unfocused manner? While this may be out of character for your team, it does happen. How and when should you act? What about the players' non-focused behavior traveling to and from the game. How should you handle that?

We were traveling to our District Championship game facing our biggest rival. The tension was high, with our starting goalkeeper out with a broken ankle. As the ride continued I tried to blame my uneasiness on myself while the talking and loudness of our players continued. When the bus pulled up at the

stadium, I was furious because I felt the players had not prepared themselves mentally for this game on the ride. As they got up, I told them to sit down. For the next three or four minutes I let them have it with how upset I was. I wouldn't realize how big this mistake was until the game started. When the whistle blew the other team played the ball wide to an outside midfielder who played a diagonal ball into space to their striker who made a great run for a goal in the span of twenty seconds. We would lose, for the most part, because I mishandled a situation.

How can these situations be avoided or handled?

- 1. Expectations:** Players have to know what is expected and what will or won't be tolerated before an incident happens. A simple reminder, in my case, before we left the school could have alleviated this situation.
- 2. Timing:** There will be incidents that happen at key times. Understanding whether these need immediate attention or can be handled at practice or the next day is critical.
- 3. Emotions:** Do your best to take your emotions out of play. Staying positive and explaining the situation from your viewpoint may be all that's needed.
- 4. Control:** Your control of the situation is not necessarily defined by acting immediately. Take a moment and think it through. By controlling your reaction you may find a solution that benefits everyone.
- 5. Target:** We often punish the whole team for an incident that only involves one player or a small group of players. Keep the situation confined to whoever is responsible.
- 6. Winning:** As coaches we don't have to win every battle. In trying to do so we may lose the war as witnessed in my previous story. Ask yourself, "Is this really important, and is it urgent that I address it at this time?"

Coaches, like players, make mistakes over their careers. I made my share of them. Often we learn best through experience, but preparation may be its equal in helping us avoid situations that should never have happened. Through careful planning, players have the structure they need to act and perform to the best of their ability on and off the field. Personally, my moments of greatest frustration were when I had not clearly explained what I expected.

Take the time, along with the players, to formulate a set of expectations, and remind them every day. It will allow you to enjoy the ride to your next game and free you to concentrate on what you'll say before the game.

I wish you and your team the best!