



How to Handle the Season-ending Loss

By Peter V. Tonsoline

There comes that day in every high school coach's career when he or she will have to face the inevitable — a season-ending loss and elimination from the playoffs. Unlike a regular-season loss, the most difficult aspect of postseason competition is the reality that the next game could be the last game. A coach must be prepared for the outcome, whether his or her team is the highly ranked favorite or a long-shot dark horse.

Victory is certainly a sweet and easy fruit to share, but the bitter taste of a disappointing loss can be emotionally devastating. Most coaches approach a playoff game with positive thoughts and radiate those feelings to their players. It is not a matter of discussing with the team the possibility of losing before the game is played. Too often, coaches fail to help their players through this post-game quandary if they, themselves, are not mentally prepared.

The Differences of Losing

A loss is a loss, but the psychological components of a defeat are inherently different. Losing to a vastly superior, talented team is probably the easiest for a coach to explain to his or her team. Adages such as, "We did our best, but came up short" or "We were out-played or out-sized," are not excuses for losing, but are truthful, believable reasons to lose to a superior opponent. In these cases, a coach needs to give credit where credit is due — "they were better than us!" The players might not want to openly admit to this because of ego or attitude, but don't you think they know? So, why blame a bad field, poor officiating or lucky breaks when your team

was beaten for no reason other than the opponent was the better team.

The most difficult loss is the one where a team plays its hearts out, leaves everything on the field, but loses the game by a narrow margin. A last-minute shot off the rim, a line drive down the line that curves foul, a dropped touchdown pass, a ball deflecting off a post — the list is endless in each specific sport, but they can and will happen.

Is it luck, the bounce of the ball, the way an official saw it, or a bad break? Coaches preach the belief, "A team makes its own breaks, creates its own luck." While this is true, there comes a time that there is no explanation for a loss. This is perhaps the essence of sports and competition. Until the final second of a contest, there is no outcome that anyone can predict, so the coach must be cognizant of what comes next.

The Truth of the Matter

Whether it was on the field grouped around a bench, huddled underneath a goal post or gathered in the locker room, the coach must give the most difficult type of speech. The pre-game spirited, motivating words of victory must now be replaced by the soberness and disappointment of a season-ending loss. What the coach says next might define everything that has happened to this point, the course of the following season and even his or her career. The players simply need the truth spoken from the coach as the recognized figure of authority — no excuses, no what should have been or could have been. The game is over, the season is completed, and for the seniors, their high school careers are finished.

It is now the coach's painful responsibility to put almost non-definable and unimaginable words to a loss and season



finale. Truly, there are no preconceived speeches. It is now left to the coach's personality, demeanor and character to appraise the situation. Coaches should keep in mind these words: "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."

With those close heart-wrenching losses, the team should know that it exited the playoffs with pride, dignity and respect from its opponent as well as everyone watching the performance. The coach should emphasize that the team played with heart, determination and sheer desire. This is a time for truthful, positive and uplifting words. This could be a coach's greatest and most revered moment.

Avoid the Locker-room Eulogy

As inspiring and comforting as the words may be, the coach must be alert to the length of the season-ending speech. Three to five minutes is all that should be used to initiate a positive and consoling atmosphere with the team. A coach should say what is needed to be said and then leave the players to comfort, support and encourage each other. Building a team is all about when and where teammates help each other, and this difficult time should not be any different. The long, drawn-out postgame analysis may be therapeutic for some, including the coaches, but most players realize the score and outcome will be unaffected.

Perhaps the most beneficial technique is for the coach to wait outside the locker room and speak to individuals or groups of players as they leave. A few kind words of encouragement, a remembered highlight from the season and acknowledgement of a tremendous individual effort through the playoffs might be more remembered by a player than a

disparaging loss from postseason competition.

Other thoughtful suggestions include a pat on the back, a handshake or a soothing smile as a personal acknowledgment of the individual's effort. Once that player walks out of the locker room, the healing process should be full-speed ahead.

For the departing seniors, the season-ending speech should be meaningful and leave them with a positive recollection of the things they worked so hard to accomplish. However, what is sometimes overlooked is the critical importance the closing speech will have on returning players. Those departing words will instill in next year's team members the encouragement, hope and desire to believe they can return to the playoffs and succeed.

There is never an easy solution to overcome the emotional flood from a hard-fought, well-played playoff loss. Every individual coach must find the measure and means to bounce back from the overwhelming disappointment from these losses. Experiencing one will not make the next one any easier; however, it will make a coach more effective in helping his or her players understand and cope with the flipside of winning. **CQ**

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