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WHEN PLAYERS NEED YOU THE MOST

Have you ever wondered if you were supposed to be a coach?

Sacramento, California... ARCO Arena... March 29th, 2010... NCAA Elite 8... Stanford (34-1) vs. Xavier (30-3) Winner advances to the Final Four... Stanford had won their first three tourney games by a combined 98 points... Xavier attempting to be first non-BCS school to advance to Final Four in 11 years...

20.6 seconds to play... 51-51 tie game... Xavier ball on the side coming out of a timeout... Shot clock is off... Ball inbounded safely... All-American Amber Harris cuts off a high cross screen and draws a double team from Stanford All-Americans, Nneka Ogwumike and Kayla Pedersen... Harris finds a wide open Dee Dee Jernigan behind the defense... Amber fires a bullet pass to block... Dee Dee can't convert the wide open two footer... Harris alertly scrambles for the rebound which she secures... As she dribbles to get space, she finds Dee Dee again even more open and closer to bucket than the first time with 9.5 to play...she misses again... and this time Stanford's Kayla Pedersen rebounds...

This was the moment I knew I was supposed to be a coach.

If you don't remember the play or have never seen it, check out this link to hear Stuart Scott's ESPN call of the action and also what followed in the final 4.4 seconds before you read on.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5Je0ludNqA&feature=related>



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So much of our daily routine as a coach is spent doing things in an office. We are on the computer researching opponents or recruits. We are manning a remote control watching film in preparation for an upcoming game or one of our own games/practices. We are on our phone chatting with other coaches about the latest gossip or news of the day. We are filing out paper work for an upcoming road trip. On top of that high school coaches are grading papers, filling out absentee forms, doing lunch duty, or meeting with a parent about a student's generally poor attitude in your math class.

While vital to execution of our jobs, it is NOT what our players really need from us. If you as a coach can't perform the necessary duties of your job without tiring out or burning out, you will never be there when your players truly need you.

I learned this one the hard way over the years. I found myself so wrapped up in "doing my job" that most times I wasn't there to do my real job. Sure, I had some highlights. I was there at times, but wow did I miss out on so many more.

Over the last two years since that Stanford game, I have been trying to collect all the times I was there when a player needed me as well as the times I wasn't. With help from other Newsletter group members and coaching colleagues input, I hope we can share a piece that will help young coaches from having to learn these lessons the hard way.

I can assure that your boss will never be upset if "your TPS reports are late" if you are tending to the welfare of one of your players. (Office Space reference for you non-movie buff basketball heads)

As with some previous Newsletter pieces, these are in no particular order of importance... just ramblings...

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When they miss the game winning shot... We have all seen videos of coaches reacting to game winning shots running wildly around the floor looking for someone to high five or jump on. Most of the times there is no one there. You know why? It's because the players don't need you then!! They are mobbing each other and many times the cheerleaders and fans too.

Your player needs you the most, when they miss the game winning free throw and other people are afraid to be around them. They need you when they dribble the ball off their foot when they are driving for the winning basket. They need you when they get back-door cut on defense for the winning basket even though you told them during the timeout it was coming.

When they don't play well...this is similar to the first one but not the same. This can be after a win or a loss. But your players need you when they don't have a career night. Sure it's fun and necessary to high five those kids and congratulate them on their success, but every coach does that. If you want to be different than most, seek out that player that didn't play well and make sure they go home that night just as important to your team as the Player of Game. It's a pet peeve of mine to especially to see a player who played poorly sulking after a team win and hope it is one of yours too. It's always tempting to call that person out in front of team but only in certain situations would I recommend it. Be there for that player before they put themselves in that situation in front of their teammates... "shout praise/whisper criticism method"

When they don't play at all... Here I am speaking to that player who has played in all your pre-season scrimmages. They had a role in some early non-conference games. But invariably, there comes a game, that for whatever the circumstance, their number isn't called. This player needs you after the game. There certainly probably wasn't a plan to NOT play them. It just happened. There surely wasn't time to explain it as it was happening. But your player needs to hear from you before they leave the locker room that night. Maybe even before they go into the locker room. Even your "best team player" will need you. Apart from their own questions, they know they are going to be explaining it to family, friends, and others. Give them a few minutes of your time and help them through this situation.

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When they are in a shooting slump... the very best shooters in the world have these. Your shooter needs you when they are in one. My experience that just the slightest mention of something technical whether it is true or not helps snap them out of it. A reminder of their overall shooting % sometimes put a short slump in perspective too. One thing, I have rarely seen work is ignoring it. Sure we want our shooters to have A.D.D. when it comes to misses in a game, when that slump continues, they need you. You know your player better than anyone and you can sense the proper time to approach them. Your ability to take players “out of the moment” will separate you from coaches who don’t have relationships with their players.

When they foul out...this is a situational one. We all have that player that fouls out routinely. Those kids probably can be handled with a tap on the head or a high five. But when that player that “never fouls out” does, she needs you. Most likely she has seldom not been on the floor late in games. She doesn’t even know where to sit much less how to act. Grab them and sit them with you. Don’t let them sit on the end with their head draped in a towel covering their frustration (or tears if it’s a tourney game). The players who are used to being on the bench at that time of a game don’t want them there anyway. It changes the way they act too. So, keep them with you. You still need them. If the game is still in question, they can still be a positive. If you are there when they need you most, they will at least not be a distraction.

When they are thrust into a leadership role... This isn’t necessarily something that happens during a game although it could be at times. It could be the day a senior leader graduates. It could be the day after a star player/leader quits because you took the “fun” out of the game. Whenever the time comes, your player needs you to be there. It’s not easy to be a leader on a team. It causes you to lose people you thought were your friends due to jealousy. It invests you deeper than ever. It is NOT easy. Your player needs your help. They need resources to help them navigate in the locker room. They need your support when they are forced to be a leader on the back of the bus. They need your time to talk because they don’t have as many people to talk to as they did before they became a leader. Check out Jeff Janssen’s book **THE TEAM CAPTAIN’S LEADERSHIP MANUAL** if you want to put a resource in their hand. Good for every coach to have in the arsenal as well.

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When they call/text to ask you to shoot with them... this was one I failed at many times in my years. I can't tell you how many times I made up excuses to open the gym. It was inconvenient and almost never failed the call came when I was in the middle of an urgent project. It wasn't long before players stopped asking me...mission accomplished!! Wrong...mission failure. What I learned was that 99.9% of players who ask you to shoot with them are actually saying "hey coach, I just want to talk to you about something and I am using getting some shots up as a way to break the ice." They can shoot with anyone. In fact, what they are really saying is they want you to REBOUND/PASS for them. Some do it to prove to you that they are working extra. Fine. DO IT!! Get off your butt and work later on your project. I never miss a chance to "shoot" with players now. This request could also be disguised as "watch film", "work on Free throws", "improve ballhandling".

When they lose a loved one ...if this list were in order, this one would/should be #1. No basketball related situation trumps being there for a player when they lose someone they love. Outside of their loved one they just lost, there is a solid chance that you spend more time with them than anyone. And if they just lost that person, they need YOU!!

When they have a relationship go bad... This one can be touchy. Depending on the relationship you might be the LAST person they want to talk to. You don't need details. You don't need to offer a bunch of unsolicited advice. But, you do need them to let you know you are there for them IF they need you. Simply recognizing the situation is enough with this situation in most instances.

When they screw up...This is a broad encompassing one. It covers miss class, fail a test, late for bus, bomb a project, forget their shoes, pack the wrong uniform, break a team rule, get in trouble with law for being in wrong place at wrong time...etc. Again, your role is not necessarily to fix their problem. We tell our players all the time there is NOTHING we can do if you break the law or school policy. It doesn't mean that we can't be there for them though.

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When they are injured... if a player plays this game long enough they will miss some time from practice or some games. It could be a sprained ankle that they need a couple of days to recover or an ACL that sidelines them for a year. They need you. They need to hear that you have a plan for them to recover and still contribute to the team while they are out. They need a role. They need to hear success stories about injured players returning better than ever. They also need to hear the reality of what happens to some players upon return that don't properly rehab. Be there if they have surgery. Be there when they do some rehab. Be there when they can't practice or play.

When they rehab...this is a goes with above. But needs to be said. Injured players want a plan to win their rehab just like a healthy player wants a plan to win the game. You need to get them with a trusted physician and a trusted athletic trainer to develop that plan. Not only will this help their rehab, it will strengthen your connection to that player when they return to the court. Go with them to a scheduled re-hab appointment. That small effort will have a ripple effect on your relationship with that player that will spread throughout your entire team/program.

When they are sitting out in red-shirt ... This one probably pertains more to college players but more and more states are also forcing players to sit if they transfer districts. These players need you. While they are practicing with you daily, they can't dress out and play in the games. On game days, we work our red-shirts out before the game. They come in 30 minutes before rest of players report and we get after em on the game court. The opponents are usually making their way to the court. There they are busting it!! I've seen opposing players literally stop their routine and watch our kid being worked out. While the purpose really isn't to intimidate or distract an opponent, it is kinda fun. After they workout, then they have time to clean up while rest of team is warming up and join them for the game if allowed by rules. They need you throughout the year to keep them posted as they have no real way to gauge their improvement. They don't have the chance to compete nightly, so you need to give them that outlet to keep them motivated.

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When they have car trouble... Even though I am from Arkansas, I know NOTHING about cars. NOTHING!! But you can make a huge impact on players when you are there for them when they break down. I always hope for a flat tire because I do know how to change those. I can usually pull off a dead battery jump too. But after that, just being there is about all I can do. I can get them calmed down and pointed in the right direction. I have more “thank you” cards in my file for this one than any other. Just showing up is 95%!!

When they graduate...So many coaches lose contact with players after they are “done with them”. Rationalizers will say they “have a new group of players to be there for”. Wrong. You just have more. You must continue to be there for your players after they are “gone”. They might not reach out to you as often, so you actually have to do more work. You have to initiate the contact. You have to reach out. They will need you for recommendation letters. They will want to use you as a reference. I always write in our players graduation cards that they had better keep me posted so I CAN write those for them. Yes, you will spend more money on baby showers, wedding gifts, and the such. But for all they sacrificed for you, it’s a small price.

When they have a rumor going around about them... This one WILL happen, so be ready. It could be from inside the team or just a general rumor going around. It might also involve a facebook stalker!! Don’t laugh, with social media like it is these days you better be prepared for the “someone posted a pic of me on facebook” dilemma.

When they visit a new place... I just added this one today because a player just left my office. She came in and said “coach, I know you travel a lot. My family is going to _____” what should we do? If your player comes to for non-basketball stuff/regular human being stuff, take the time to share your experiences. They may or may not even hear your feedback but them talking to you about LIFE stuff is a big step for many young people.

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This is certainly not an inclusive list. Just like on the court, try to be prepared for as many situations as you can so you can properly handle the ones you haven't prepared for.

Ideally this list sparked memories of times you have been there for your players. But if all you do is pat yourself on the back for those times, you are only getting half the benefit. You should also try to think about the opportunities you have missed out on. This is where true growth will occur. I caught myself feeling sorry for some of the players I had coached in the past. If you do to, reach out to them now. Explain that you weren't a very good coach back then. They may not respond but they will appreciate it.

We can't be there every time. Circumstances just don't allow it. But the goal is to minimize the times we can't be and maximize the times we can be. You and your program will experience a compounding effect for every time you can be.

Hopefully you'll never have to be there for a player who misses critical shots. If you are, make her a video of all the plays she made in the game that helped put your team in a position to be there. Make a video of the critical plays she made in the Sweet 16 game to get you to that game. Have her team mates list ways her play got them to that point. Talk to her. Don't let her go through it alone. Let her absorb the situation. NOTHING will seem like it helps at that very moment. NOTHING. You will feel helpless. But in time, it will help her. In time, she will see the team going 1-17 from the three point line when they normally shot 35% from the arc or missing 5 free throws in last two minutes was a bigger reason for the loss.

And it will help YOU be prepared for when you get a text saying your top recruit was just diagnosed with Leukemia on your campus during her official visit.

That's another future Newsletter mail out.