

# Superintendent-Athletic Director Relationship Vital to Program's Success

BY BILL BRUNO, CMAA

History teachers attempt to draw parallels of life for their students. The examples of Lewis and Clark, Grant and Lee, Crazy Horse and Custer quickly come to mind. To that extent, it may also be apparent that the relationship between the superintendent and the athletic director is so intertwined that their roles cannot be overstated.

The working relationship that an athletic director shares with his or her superintendent may be similar to that of Lewis and Clark, whose journey to the unknown forged the concept "Manifest Destiny." Or is it more like the relationship between Custer and Crazy Horse that ended the career of one on a windswept hilltop in southern Montana known as the "Battle of the Little Big Horn."

The athletic administrator has a significant role in not only shaping the school's athletic department policy, but also the district policy. The value of participation is noted in a variety of studies, and it is clear that students who participate have greater success academically, emotionally and physically. It is, therefore, the responsibility of athletic administrators to develop a program that will benefit their students, and this can only be done with a close and positive relationship with the superintendent.

According to Dr. Walter Uszenski, superintendent of the Brick Township Public Schools in Ocean County, New Jersey, "This is, perhaps, one of the closest relationships in the district because the superintendent must have a clear awareness of the athletic program and the students in that program. There is a continuous exchange of information between the athletic administrator and the superintendent regarding budget, program successes and losses, as well as individual issues."

When something goes wrong, there must be a cooperative effort so that policy and procedures are followed. Ultimately, the two must work closely and positively so that what is done is in the best interest of the students and families in the district.

The constant involvement that the athletic administrator has with parents and the community can be the most difficult part of the position.



"The athletic director – very much like the superintendent – must please all people, at all times, in all places, in all situations, no matter what is happening ... while juggling an unimaginable amount of variables on any given day," Uszenski said. "I have found that many of the parents in my community feel that I and the athletic director should be available 24/7 for their questions and concerns."

Furthermore, there is a great similarity between the characteristics and qualities that superintendents believe are necessary and vital for the athletic administrator's position.

"Athletic administrators must be organized and detail-oriented," said Charles Sampson, superintendent of the Freehold Regional High School District in Englishtown, New Jersey. "Interpersonal skills are critical as the athletic director is the school district's face to the community at numerous events throughout the

school year. The athletic director must be able to articulate well, interact in a positive manner and bear the flag of the district."

Superintendents value the professional development for the athletic administrator and members of the coaching staff. This continuing education keeps everyone informed as to the legal liabilities that surround administrative and coaching jobs, and these efforts provide student-athletes with the best possible educational environment, which is ultimately the No. 1 goal in education-based activities.

Considering the role that athletics plays in the school district, Uszenski said, "Athletics are essential to the development of the whole child." In some cases, achieving on the athletic field can facilitate success in the classroom.

"The opportunity to participate in team and individual sports allows for the development of leadership skills, team-building, collaboration and physical exercise that nurtures the whole student," Sampson said.

"The athletic director is the leader of this highly visible component of education and sets the tone," said Thomas Gialanella, superintendent of the Jackson (New Jersey) School District. "I stress with my coaches and parents that athletics round out the academic experience and help to prepare our students for life beyond high school – should it be the workforce, military or college and post-secondary education."

Considering the importance, visibility and role that athletics plays in the school district, Uszenski, Samson and Gialanella unanimously agreed that the best advice for new superintendents and athletic administrators is to communicate effectively. They said it will maintain clear expectations, and people are more effective if they understand exactly what is expected of them to perform their jobs well.

No superintendent, building principal or athletic director wants to be blindsided. It is a good practice to apprise everyone in the chain of command of any possible issue or concern that may arise. In this manner, everyone can be proactive and deal with the situation in a timely, competent and professional manner.

The superintendent and athletic administrator should have one of the closest-working relationships in the school district. Both need to be on the same page. Like Lewis and Clark, the superintendent and athletic director should be sharing a wonderful journey. How they navigate the waters of 21st century high school athletics will determine the functionality of their relationship and ultimately the success of the educational experience of the student-athletes. ☉

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