



Using Veteran Athletes as Mentors

Why Do This?

The most effective teams are those in which team members embrace and “own” the team’s culture. Teams in which the coach does all the culture-shaping are not as effective at creating an expectation of excellence and supporting each other.

A mentor program empowers veterans, creates opportunities for stronger relationships among players, and can help prevent issues that erode team chemistry such as cliques, individual agendas, and status gaps between “stars” and substitutes.

Having veteran players act as mentors to younger players coming into the team can be a powerful tool for creating an effective team culture.

The One Right Way...

Experience has shown that there is no one right way to establish a mentor program on an athletic team. However, there are some lessons that have been learned by highly successful college and high school coaches who have done this. This paper contains some of those tips.

In a Nutshell

- 1 Get your veteran players on board to serve as mentors who explain to younger players “how this team does things” and what is expected of them as team members.**
- 2 Develop a clear and simple set of expectations for mentors to fulfill.**
- 3 Assign a mentor to each younger player.**
- 4 Provide time within and outside practice for mentors & mentees to get together and give them structured activities as well as time to talk informally.**
- 5 Check in with both mentors and mentees from time to time to ensure it is working well and to refresh the process.**

1 GETTING VETERAN PLAYERS ON BOARD

Think about which veteran players (perhaps all of them) you want to serve as mentors. The best mentors are those who both embrace and embody the team culture, whether or not they are the most talented athletes.

Younger players (e.g., a mature sophomore who was on the team as a first-year) may be effective mentors as well as juniors and seniors. At the same time, a senior who is new to the team or who has not embraced the culture may not be a good choice.

Here are some characteristics of good mentor candidates:

Embrace your coaching philosophy and your tactical & technical system

Team player; puts the team ahead of self

Integrity; will go against peer pressure to do the right thing

Strong work ethic; leads by example

Teachable spirit; is coachable and “thirsty” to learn and improve

Explain to your veteran players what it means to be a mentor (see #2 below) and ask them if they would be willing to play this role. Emphasize that you need their help to instill a winning team culture. Discuss how you expect veterans to actively look for opportunities to welcome and integrate younger players onto the team.

However you choose the mentors, make known your rationale for selecting mentors to guard against veteran players feeling excluded without reason. It also is a way of letting your players who will be back next year know

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the kind of behavior and attitude you are looking for from mentors. It may cause them to try harder to be the kind of veteran player that you will want to serve as a mentor next year.

2 DEVELOP SET OF EXPECTATIONS

Having a clear and simple set of guidelines for what you expect mentors to do is essential. Here are some examples:

Keep the Emotional Tank of your mentee filled

- > "Pick up" a mentee when he/she seems down or discouraged
- > Share Honoring-the-Game rituals
- > Explain what is expected of them in practice
- > Give them tips about what to expect before big competitions
- > Talk with them about academic questions they may have

Also mention things they are not to do, such as boss their mentee around or be their personal coach. Make it clear to your mentors that they can always come to you if something comes up with their mentee that they don't know how to handle. They should not feel that they have to know everything, and that they can simply say "I don't know" if their mentee raises a question they can't or don't feel comfortable answering.

3 ASSIGN A MENTOR TO EACH YOUNGER PLAYER

It will rarely work out for you to have an exactly matching number of mentors and mentees. In some cases you may need to ask one or more veteran players to take two mentees. In other cases you may have enough veteran players that all of them may not have a mentee, or you may decide to give a new player two mentors.

example: You have 4 seniors, 3 juniors and 5 sophomores on your team. You may choose to have only seniors as mentors and have one senior mentor 2 sophomores. Or you may choose the most respected and appropriate junior to join the 4 seniors as a mentor so that each sophomore will have one mentor.

At some point, you may find yourself with a younger mentee who is likely to surpass the more veteran mentor in terms of playing time or success on the field. Here it will be important to stress with the veterans that their role is to help the mentee so the TEAM can be successful. You might even ask the veteran players ahead of time whether they would be able to be a mentor to a mentee who takes their starting position. You also can try to minimize this issue by assigning mentors to mentees who play different positions so they would not be likely to be in competition for playing time.

Ultimately you may decide to go further and have a mentor program between the varsity and the junior varsity (assuming the junior varsity coach shares your philosophy and desire to do this). You are more likely to have success with this if you start with your own team and build from that success with the junior varsity in succeeding years.

4 PROVIDE TIME & STRUCTURE FOR MENTORING

It is important to start out, ideally at the first team meeting or practice, with an explanation to the entire team – new members and veterans – what the team culture is and how the mentor program helps develop a strong culture that will allow the team to be as successful as it can be.

First Meeting

A team-bonding event, such as a pizza party, before or at the beginning of the season, can be a good way to explain the purpose of establishing mentor roles and to announce the mentor pairings.

This meeting is also a good time for you to reinforce your team culture by introducing your definition of Competitor as someone who is committed to making him/herself better, making teammates better, and making the game better.

You can then talk about making oneself better with the ELM Tree of Mastery, making Teammates better through filling each other's Emotional Tanks and "Looking through a Window rather than a Mirror," and making the game better by Honoring the Game.

If you have veteran players who embrace and embody any or all of these three aspects of being a Competitor, it can be powerful to have one or more of the veterans talk to the newcomers about what it means to them and perhaps share a story from their own experience.

You might give players a chance to pair up with their mentor/mentee and some time to consider a specific question or topic, for example,

MENTOR: *Share with mentee "An important thing I learned last season that I wish I had known at the beginning."*

MENTEE: *Share with mentor "A goal I want to set for myself this season."*

After the pairs have had a chance to talk with each other, you might bring the group back together and give people a chance to share what they learned about each other.

On-Going Opportunities for Mentoring

It is also important to provide time and structure at practice for the mentoring to take place. You might regularly prompt them with questions or an activity, such as

Give players 3 x 5 cards and have them write words or phrases that characterize a "winning" culture.

Expect players to write things like "cohesive," "determined," "passion for the game," "110% effort," and so on. Collect and share what's been written, particularly reinforcing those descriptions that best fit your culture.

You can keep the cards and periodically revisit them at post-practice or post-game meetings as a "check."

- > *Simple team-building activities such as blind walks and trust falls.*
- > *Having mentor-mentee pairs compete in fun activities like a three-legged race, etc.*
- > *Prompt them with topics such as*
 - The biggest thing I need to work on to help the team is...
 - What can I do to help you improve...
 - My biggest priority in schoolwork right now is...

You can also use mentors to help you with communications such as having them call their mentees to tell them of something you want them to focus on or to remind them of a team meeting or a special activity that is coming up.

You can also involve mentors with helping explain new drills or tactics and strategy that you want newcomers to become familiar with. For example, you might begin a "chalk talk" in which you are going to introduce something that is unfamiliar to mentees but well understood by mentors, by providing time for mentors to explain the material to their mentees as a way to give them a taste of it before you review it with the entire team.

You can also have mentors share how to prepare for and what to expect during big games or competitions.

Before playing a rival on their home court/field, have mentors share what to expect from and how to respond to the opponents' fans, or how the court/field plays differently than your home court/field.

Have mentors share their pre-game ritual for calming nerves and getting their "game face" on.

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5 CHECK IN REGULARLY WITH MENTORS AND MENTEES

Regularly during the season, check in with both mentors and younger players to monitor how things are going. You can ask both mentors and mentees separately questions like

Tell me something new about your mentee/mentor that you've learned recently.

What do you have in common?

How are you different?

What's been the best/most fun part about the relationship?

What's been the hardest?

Remind mentors to "look out" for their mentees by helping them rebound quickly from mistakes, urging maximum effort during practices and games, filling Emotional Tanks whenever possible, and encouraging them to Honor the Game.

Ask mentees for an example of how their mentor has helped them, as well as suggestions for other information they might like to get from their mentor.

End of Season

At the end of the season, have a simple ritual (perhaps at the season-ending awards dinner or at a post-season team meeting) that "passes the torch" to the upcoming veteran group to continue and improve the mentoring tradition. Graduating mentors might share:

- > Their top three wishes for what aspects of the team culture they hope will carry on in their absence.
- > The things they'll remember most about being on the team
- > What they've learned that will help them in the rest of their life
- > What they wished they'd known when they started on the team
- > What they'd do differently as mentors if they could do it all over again
- > Those who were mentored might share:
- > Things their mentor did that were effective and helped them
- > Advice for you about how to improve the mentor system, although this might be better shared when the graduating veterans are not present

Make sure publicly to thank the veteran players who are moving on for all they have done for the team and for the time they spent mentoring the younger players. Let the players who are returning know that you will be talking with them about the mentoring program for next season.

Final Thoughts

Expect glitches. You may find your players uncomfortable with mentoring at first. That's okay. They'll get used to it if you keep positive about it.

You may also find that you need to make some adjustments. Perhaps a mentor and a mentee just don't click. You may need to reassign mentors and mentees. But it will work if you stay with it.

The pay-off may be immediate, but you will see the biggest pay-off when the system becomes self-sustaining with the players driving it, which may take a year or two. Coaches who have implemented a mentoring system are the biggest advocates of it because they have seen how it has contributed to the creation and renewal of a winning team culture.