



The NFHS Voice



High School Coaches Have Different Measuring Stick for Greatness

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As we noted in last week's "Voice," the NFHS recognized more than 650 individuals for their efforts as high school coaches during the 2020-21 school year, including 23 as National Coaches of the Year.

When people are recognized with national awards, often the term "great" is tossed around. Certainly, the 23 national recipients all had resumes filled with impressive accomplishments, but what really makes a "great" coach?

At the college and professional levels, usually the measuring stick for "greatness" is associated with victories and championships. However, two of the best college basketball coaches – John Wooden and Pat Summitt – were highly influential in their players lives. In addition to his multiple NCAA basketball championships at UCLA, Wooden was one of the top teacher-coaches of all time

with his Pyramid of Success. Summitt was one of the top women's basketball coaches in history at Tennessee, but her influence on her players literally saved lives. More often than not, however, "greatness" at the college and professional levels, understandably, is linked to victories and championships.

While that measuring stick is appropriate at those levels of competition, high school coaching success cannot be measured simply by an individual's win-loss record. "Great" high school coaches are individuals who, along with achieving success on the field or court, make a positive impact on the lives of their student-athletes.

The records, awards and accomplishments of this year's 23 National Coaches of the Year are extraordinary, but comments about their roles as education-based coaches are even more telling as to why they were selected.

Christopher Verity, boys and girls swimming and diving coach at Maine-Endwell High School in New York, has led his teams to five state championships, but his concept of "greatness" is evident through his coaching philosophy.

"At the core of everything in coaching is building relationships with the athletes," Verity said. "Our swim program at Maine-Endwell follows a simple philosophy – Dream Big, Word Hard, Stay Humble . . . This phrase carries over for athletes into other facets of their lives extending far beyond the pool. We don't just build a team of champions – we build a swim family and champions for life."

Often, one of the keys to becoming a "great" coach is having outstanding athletes on the squad. At the high school level, "greatness" can be measured by involving as many students as possible in a sport or activity, thereby allowing more individuals to achieve success.

Mike Simons, the NFHS Boys Wrestling National Coach of the Year, leads the boys and girls wrestling teams at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon.

He has made a push to increase participation numbers, and there are now about 80 wrestlers – 45 boys and 35 girls – attending practice every day. And the girls team has won four consecutive state championships.

“Athletics are truly the tool that keeps many students from dropping out of school,” Simons said. “Athletes learn how to work hard in the classroom from being pushed hard on the mat, court or field.”

Dori Whitford, the NFHS National Girls Track and Field Coach of the Year from Spokane, Washington, has achieved “greatness” through a simple motto: “Focus on working hard, doing our best and having fun, and the winning will take care of itself.”

While Whitford’s 2010 girls track and field team at Mead High School won the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association Class 4A state championship, her success has not been achieved by focusing on winning.

“Sport is a vehicle to learn and practice life lessons,” Whitford said. “. . . It is also a place where kids can learn that there is a place for them, and they can learn what it means to be a good team member. When things go awry, they can learn how to deal with conflict – and they deal with consequences if they make a mistake. These are things we focus on – we never focus on winning.”

And then there are those “great” high school coaches who have devoted their entire lives to the profession, coaching multiple sports and programs and impacting the lives of hundreds of students.

Such is the case of Holly Lester, the boys golf coach at Gilbert High School in Iowa and the only female to be named a National Coach of the Year for a boys sport. Lester started the boys and girls golf program at Gilbert 34 years ago and, this past year, led the boys team to its first Iowa High School Class 3A state championship.

“I want my athletes to know they are an important part of the team no matter their ability,” Lester said. “I encourage them to be respectful of the game, respect the course, and to feel good when that one great shot in a round keeps them coming back to play another day.”

We appreciate the great work of this year’s award recipients – and thousands of others who are making a difference every day in our nation’s schools.

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in her fourth year as chief executive officer of the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) in Indianapolis, Indiana. She is the first female to head the national leadership organization for high school athletics and performing arts activities and the sixth full-time executive director of the NFHS. She previously was executive director of the Connecticut Association of Schools-Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference for seven years.