Middle School to High School Sports—Ways to Ease the Transition

Many high schools across the country offer a freshman orientation for all rising ninth graders to acclimate these students to the high school building as well as introducing them to building administrators. Ultimately, it is done to help prepare the students for academic success. As a district- wide activities director, it is my job to help prepare these students for the change from middle school athletics to high school athletics. I have spoken with many athletic directors from around the country and feel like these tips will be helpful for all athletic directors. First, let’s take a look at the differences between high school and middle school athletics.

There are obvious differences between the focus of middle school athletics and high school athletics. Even if a school district does not sponsor middle school sports, the focus of student athletes between the ages of 11-14 will be the same. This age group should be focusing on skill acquisition, not winning. This is also the age group that should begin introduction to strength and conditioning. Coaches for this age group should work on making sure all participants are receiving playing time, and coaches should begin to introduce playing systems. Most importantly kids need to develop proper skill technique so it does not need to be emphasized or retaught at the high school level.

The focus changes as student athletes progress into high school athletics. There is more of an emphasis placed on winning. Skills are taught, but more time is spent on developing systems, whether it is a particular style of offense, or a certain way to play defense. Many coaches spend a great deal of time on individual game strategy. Off season conditioning tends to be more important at the high school level, and the overall commitment to the program increases at each level: freshman, JV and varsity. Lastly, depending on if your district has middle school sports, high school sports may be the first time athletes are playing for and representing a school.

During this transition there are three main groups that need to be educated: coaches, parents and the student athletes. One group is not more important than any other. As the athletic director, it is essential to reach out to all three groups.

Quality coaches are vital to the success of any program. Coaching education is a strategy that most high schools use to ensure coaches’ training. Many other high school coaches attend sport specific clinics or workshops to grow professionally. It is then the job of the varsity coaches to train their staffs as well as reach out to the community coaches to offer clinics or workshops. It is important to educate coaches at all levels including the local youth leagues as well as middle school coaches. There are a few easy ways to do this. First, have the varsity coaches sponsor coaching clinics for the community coaches. These clinics can be offered throughout the year, and the local youth league may help with advertising for these clinics. Second, invite youth, middle school and travel coaches to attend varsity, JV and freshman practices. Extend the invitation to coaches and their teams. Many youth coaches may not know how to organize a practice efficiently, and athletes may not understand how hard they should be working in practice. Reach out to these coaches. Third, try recognizing a youth coach of the week or month in the local paper or on the school’s athletic website. Award coaches with a framed certificate at an appropriate high school sporting event. A local business may help sponsor this award by covering the cost of the advertisement in the paper or by offering a gift card to go with the certificate.

Parents need to be educated as well. Whether kids are playing organized middle school sports, or AAU or travel league, it seems all of the athletes entering high school are all-stars in their respective sports. So, there is a need to educate parents prior to any tryout process to educate them on the process, what criteria are being used to determine if athletes make the team, what time commitment there is for the parents and athletes and what booster club responsibilities are also expected of each parent. Most activity/athletic directors have required parent meetings prior to each sport season. Try having a rising freshman sport meeting for all athletes and parents each spring. This meeting can be coordinated with a coaches meeting so it would be one less night out for the coaches. The athletic director should spend some time discussing the mission of the athletic program. Booster clubs and athletic trainers should be present at this meeting and should be given ample time to present to parents and athletes. Tables can be spread out around the cafeteria or gym and each sport represented with a coach and possible senior athletes. Required paperwork should be handed out as well as a summer schedule, and out of season expectations should be discussed. Parents should sign up with each sport their son or daughter is interested in so that each coach would have an email list to send out additional information.

Prospective student athletes also need information. As mentioned previously, the rising freshman sport meeting is a good place for coaches to meet and educate future members of their teams. Another common strategy is to set up an activity fair at feeder middle schools. This can be done in a variety of ways. One possibility is to coordinate through the health and physical education teachers to set up a day in the spring where coaches, club sponsors, varsity athletes, and club members set up tables in the middle school gym and each physical education class is permitted to walk around and ask questions. It is important to make sure all sports and activities are represented. This fair can be done during the school day or possibly even set up after school. It provides another opportunity for coaches to start building relationships with their student athletes. With most kids having a cell phone, having kids sign up with coaches will allow coaches to send out information via texts, twitter or email. Reminders about tryout dates, forms that are required, and off-season conditioning times and dates can be sent as short messages. Make sure to follow your district’s established technology guidelines when communicating with student athletes.

One of the most important strategies is how to help the student athletes transition academically. A freshman athlete will have to learn time management. As coaches will expect each student athlete to lift weights, condition and practice, they will also need to demand that each student athlete is successful academically. The first step is for athletic directors to contact the feeder middle schools’ administration and discuss if there are any at-risk student athletes. After identifying these student athletes, attempt to set up a meeting with the athlete and possibly his/her parents as well. Building this relationship early in the middle school setting is critical. It will demonstrate to the student as well as the parents the importance of academics within the athletic department. Many times students who are at-risk at the middle school level won’t bother to participate at the high school level. Intervention at the middle school level is important. Once these student athletes arrive on campus as freshmen, there are a variety of support strategies to assist them.

Many coaches will set up monitored study halls prior to practice. This will also allow student athletes to spend time after school working with teachers in classes where they may be struggling. Many school districts require a 30-45 minute window immediately following the last bell before a practice can officially begin to encourage struggling student athletes to seek help. Grade reports every three weeks are also another common practice. Praise the student athletes who are excelling in the classroom. Award certificates, plaques or medals for those students earning a pre-determined grade average like a 3.5GPA. Recognize these students publicly. This can be done in the local paper, at an awards assembly or end of the season banquet and even on the school website. Some school districts even set up mentoring programs for their freshman athletes. Varsity student athletes are paired up with freshmen. The mentoring can take place during study hall, in the locker room and around school. The idea is to give the varsity team members a sense of leadership by mentoring younger student athletes. It also gives the freshmen athletes a valuable resource to help them make it through their freshman year. The mentoring program is designed to benefit all who are involved.

The transition from middle school to high school can be difficult for all students. Student athletes certainly face a tough adjustment as much of their time will be spent at practice and games, and they will be expected to excel academically as well. We need to support them as much as possible. The strategies presented should assist in making the transition from middle school athletics to high school athletics smooth.