

## **From Amateur to Expert**

**By: Mallory Opiela**

Three years ago, I was a newly elected athletic director who had a once in a lifetime opportunity to develop a program for athletes with learning differences. I had great ideas on what I wanted our program to include, but had no idea on how to develop and implement my plan. I knew I wanted a program that was nurturing and accepting of all of my athletes' differences and I wanted them to feel like they belonged to something bigger. I wanted my athletes to be able to participate in an athletics program that enabled them to express themselves physically and emotionally, while in a safe environment. Most of all, I wanted them to enjoy sports and all of the benefits that come from being physically active.

Growing up, I was a little awkward. I was shy and kept to myself, but once I started playing softball, soccer and basketball, a whole other world opened up to me. I was able to develop friendships, be part of a team and feel accepted. I found my strengths and affinities through sport and they have directly led me to my current path of being a physical education teacher, coach, and athletic director. Every day my students/athletes struggle to feel accepted and feel success both in and out of the classroom. My goal is to have them experience some success and belonging while being a part of our athletics program.

Reflecting on my own athletic experiences, it has been intimidating to incorporate all of the positive impacts that sport and athletics have had on me. Through the help of the MAED program at Michigan State University, however, I have developed the knowledge, resources, and confidence that I need to be the best teacher, coach, and

athletic director for my students/athletes. It was through the knowledge that I gained in my classes in sport leadership and coaching and educational administration that have made me into the teacher, coach, and athletic director that I am today. These classes included KIN 854, Legal and Administrative Issues of Coaching, KIN 857, Promoting Positive Youth Development in Sport, EAD 801, Leadership and Organizational Development, and EAD 824, Leading Teacher Learning. I can honestly say each one of my graduate courses that I have taken these past three years have helped me in some way, but the above courses really made an impact on my coaching, teaching, and leadership, making my transformation from an amateur to an expert in my field.

### **Sports Leadership and Coaching**

The first class that made a huge impact on me was KIN 854, Legal and Administrative Issues of Coaching. In this course, legal issues ranging from mandatory reporting, facilities inspection, and pedagogical planning for athletes were some of the ideas and principles covered in this class. From information that I learned in this course, I created a risk management plan and an anti-hazing policy for our athletes. Both of these key pieces of material have become vital resources for me as an athletic director and coach and have made our program safer, both physically and emotionally, for our athletes.

The risk management plan, which focused on making sure our athletics' program is safe and secure for our athletes and coaches, focused heavily on building and facilities management and informing and training coaches on key safety aspects. Key components that were included in the risk management plan were reviewing emergency action plans, creating a sport safety committee, and training coaches for AED use and CPR training.

Prior to creating this risk management plan, I had no idea that it was my responsibility to inspect our facilities and to make sure our coaches were up to date on specific safety and emergency procedures, however, I now realize the importance of being prepared and our program has greatly benefited from it.

Another key policy that I was able to create, in KIN 854, was our anti-hazing policy for our athletes. Hazing is sometimes thought of as a tradition and some people just push it aside, ignoring the damage that can be done through its actions. In actuality, hazing cannot be ignored, especially when you consider different learners. So many of the different learners at my school have felt ostracized or excluded from a group, and I did not want them to experience that when it came to athletics. After researching various websites, articles and testimonials, I wrote an anti-hazing policy for our athletes that explained its purpose, what was acceptable and unacceptable, and the Bulldog Creed that our athletes have to take. This Bulldog Creed is signed by our athletes each year and is built around the acronym of "PRIDE"- Participation, Respect, Independence, Discipline, and Effort. These five words have been embedded into our athletic community and have enabled both myself and all of my coaches to set clear expectations for our athletes. As a community, we have really embraced our Bulldog Creed of "PRIDE" and it has become the motto of our program.

Another class that made a huge impact on my sport leadership abilities was KIN 857, Promoting Positive Youth Development in Sport. This class transformed my coaching pedagogy and examined the dangerous implications of youth specialization at a younger age. We read the book, "Game On: The All American Race to Make Champions of our Children," by Tom Farrey, which examined the lives of child athletes

and the consequences of sorting the strong from the weak at ever earlier ages. Those consequences, such as, fewer active kids, rising obesity rates, and U.S. national teams that rarely win world titles, opened my eyes to what was going on in the youth athletic community and solidified our philosophy of having a “no-cut policy” for our athletes. Every student has the ability to participate in our athletics program and our main focuses include, equitable playing time for our athletes and offering them as many sports as possible to stay active. Although we don’t belong to any fancy leagues, and most of our sports are inter-mural, we still have around 65% of our entire student population participating in some type of sport throughout the year. This makes me feel as though we must be doing something right.

Another addition in this class was our culminating project that helped transform my varsity girl’s basketball team. This project was to design a program which enhanced positive youth development in young people involved in sport and physical activity environments. I decided to create a program to help to increase self-esteem in my varsity girl’s basketball team. Again, all of my athletes have some type of learning disability and, because of this, many have issues in regards to their self-esteem. To enhance this area, I decided to use the sport they loved, basketball, and develop a program called, "The Paw Pride Program." In this program I focused on improving their self-esteem by having them participate in activities that focused on developing their leadership skills and becoming sport mentors to our younger athletes.

Since implementing this program, I have witnessed my basketball players develop into more confident, strong, and powerful young women both in and out of the classroom. The idea for this program is something that I would have never thought of if I

wasn't in the MAED program and, thanks to my sport leadership classes, I have developed new material, policies and programs that have changed me and my athletes for the better.

### **Educational Administration/Teacher Leadership**

When I started this journey, I was originally focusing on my skills as a leader in athletics, but I soon noticed that there were also opportunities in educational administration. This realization came to me when I was taking two courses, EAD 801 and EAD 824, both taught by Dr. Nancy Colflesh. During these courses, Dr. Colflesh helped me realize educational and athletic administration responsibilities were very similar and I was able to weave the two together and make myself a better leader.

In the first course, EAD 801- Leadership and Organizational Development, we explored leadership in the capacity of helping members of organizations learn, gain new capabilities, and reach improved outcomes. It was a collaborative course and a major component of the class was cooperative work with my classmates. Through the coursework, we learned specific strategies to work on group cohesiveness and created materials that we could directly implement in our current programs. Dr. Colflesh knew I was the athletic director for my school so, for our culminating research project, she let me create a mission statement for our athletics' program.

Mission statements are a requirement for every business or school. People look at mission statements to understand the purpose of certain businesses or schools, and to gain understanding of goals and potential missions for the future. Unfortunately, most businesses and schools do not have missions that provide others with the aforementioned knowledge. Many missions are lengthy, some are very general and predictable, and most

are usually forgotten about. Keeping this all in mind, I created a mission statement that was quickly adopted by our athletics department and was the first ever of its kind. The mission statement that was created focuses heavily on the importance of our philosophy and the development of life skills. Below you will find part of our athletic program's mission statement:

“Through the use of athletics, explicit instruction and the guidance and support of our coaches, our athletes will participate in activities that foster teamwork, sportsmanship, and develop life skills that are essential to young athletes. These life skills include the concepts of leadership, developing essential social skills, and an appreciation of lifelong physical activity.”

Again, I didn't believe mission statements could have such an impact and be used as a tool for guidance but, thankfully, Dr. Colflesh allowed me to focus on something I had a passion for and it has directly helped my athletes.

The other course that I took from Dr. Colflesh was EAD 824- Leading Teacher Learning. In this course I was provided with the basic knowledge, skills, strategies, and awareness of resources to serve in a wide variety of leadership roles. Being an athletic director, I wanted to further develop my leadership skills and this course allowed me to do that. Even though it wasn't specifically related to athletics, the ideas of leadership and qualities of being a supportive leader directly affected my leadership skills to make our athletics program a cooperative and supportive one.

For our culminating project in this course, we had to organize a year-long teachers' learning project. The plan was to create professional development experiences for our teachers and provide specific examples on how this plan was going to unfold and

what it would eventually look like when implemented. As an already practicing athletic director, Dr. Colflesh, again, let me turn the plan into something that I could actually implement directly into our program. I was able to create a coaches' learning program, based off of the ideas of one of the most respected coaches of all time, Mr. John Wooden. The plan focused on educating my coaches more about leadership so the idea could be more developed in our athletes. Components of the plan included reading Wooden's book, *The Essential John Wooden*, going to coaches' conferences and clinics to become educated about the topic, and conducting monthly meetings where we review the book and talk about how we can emphasize more leadership qualities in our athletes. Currently I am waiting for approval from our Head of School to implement this program and, if it gets approved, it will be another huge positive impact on our athletics program that was made possible by the MAED program.

### **Final Thoughts**

When I was trying to develop a unique program for my athletes, I knew it would be a difficult task and that I needed to have more knowledge on how to begin. To this, I am glad that I found the MAED program. The program let me focus on my true passion of sport leadership and coaching and has helped me find another passion, educational administration. From each of my classes in the MAED program, I have been able to create invaluable resources for our athletics program that I have directly implemented. I want my athletes to become more confident individuals but, at the same time, I have found myself doing the same. I started as a naive, young, amateur athletic director, but now I am a confident, knowledgeable expert in my field. I have been exposed to a number of invaluable resources and I have created new pieces of material that have

directly benefited my athletic community. Thanks to the MAED program I am have moved from an amateur to an expert.