

## Politics in High School Sports?

Occasionally we hear people complain about politics involved in youth or high school athletics. Even grown men sometimes look back on their athletic careers and claim that their opportunities were limited because of politics.

Now, I am not much of a political person to begin with, but I have posed questions to those who point to politics as a reason for their kids sitting on the bench, being moved to another position, or getting cut from athletic teams. Just what is it these people mean when they say ‘politics’?

I imagine a group of people sitting around a boardroom table, one of them a head coach. The discussion consists of this group of people (I don’t even know who they would be, perhaps local business leaders, teachers, probation officers, and a few busy-body parents?) trying to determine who is going to get playing time and at what positions. Perhaps the coach isn’t even involved; his role is to listen to the panel discussion, accept their conclusions, and execute the game plan that they establish for him.

That sounds about right. Maybe the coach walks away from the meeting not just with lineups and recommendations, but also with several gift certificates, promises of donations and new uniforms, new toys for his children, and some cash so he can take his wife on a nice trip at the conclusion of the season to a cabin in the mountains—a cabin owned by a prominent local business man. Oh yeah, he also drives away in a brand new car from a local automobile dealer.

Is that what people mean? Isn’t politics a sort of game that some people like to play? I suppose a general perception can be had that influential people are going to get their way by using whatever methods they have at their disposal.

Folks, I don’t think it is happening like some of you think it is. Blaming politics as a reason that our loved ones have been ‘shafted’ as an athlete is one way to ignore the facts. Simply, the fact may be that when we sat the bench in high school it was because we weren’t as talented as the starters. Perhaps if our children aren’t playing as much as the other players it is because of their poor attitudes or practice habits.

Don’t get me wrong; coaches may have their favorites. Most coaches love the players who are always on time for practice and give a 100% during practices and games, who receive glowing reports from their teachers, who accept responsibility for their mistakes on and off the field, who are happy to make sacrifices for their teammates, and who are happy when their teammates shine.

I highly doubt that coaches are influenced by social status, race, family prestige, or which side of the tracks a kid lives on. It is unlikely that coaches determine

starting lineups based on a family's name or their involvement in the local booster club.

If you doubt what I am saying, just take a look around at your child's teams without thinking of your own kids.

I remember several years ago, while attending a local high school athletic event, a parent complaining to me that his kid wasn't playing because of what he thought were political reasons. I was relatively familiar with most of the members of the team and also with some of their families. On the field through most of the season was a kid whose family members never attended games or booster club meetings, who had no ties to influential persons. On the bench quite often were a couple kids whose parents were active in school activities, coaching in the school system, and in booster club activities.

It was apparent to me that there was no 'politics' going on with that team. The kid that played a lot was simply a better player and the coach obviously felt that having him in the lineup regularly gave the team a better chance to compete and win. That is pretty simple.

I don't know of any coaches out there who don't want to win and who don't want to win the right way. Some coaches have strengths as strategists, others as mentors, and others as teachers of skills. No matter what their strengths are, they seem to have one thing in common: they all want to treat kids fairly and win. Most coaches do not want sacrifice their values for pats on the back from the people of influence.

Most of the coaches I know are trying to help their players develop into better athletes and better people while striving to win championships. They don't really care who the parents of their players are. When they are trying to determine a starting lineup, they base it on what is best for the team, and consider things like athletic ability and specific sport skills, attitude and commitment to the team.

I would be remiss if I didn't say that there are some coaches out there who may have motives other than doing what is best for their teams and the team members. But that doesn't mean that politics plays a role in putting our little Johnny on the bench.