

Perspectives of Two First-year Athletic Directors

By Dr. David Hoch, CMAA on October 05, 2016^{hst}

Editor's Note: The following is an interview with Mark Orszula, athletic director at Streamwood (Illinois) High School, and Chris Ross, athletic director at Delaware Valley High School in Milford, Pennsylvania, regarding some of the challenges they faced as new athletic directors.

Question 1: While you probably served as a coach somewhere in your background and have been around athletics, what surprised you most in your position as an athletic administrator?

Orszula: Before becoming the athletic administrator, I was the head football coach for two years as well as an assistant wrestling coach for a season. Having been involved in athletics my entire life, I have had a lot of experiences that have prepared me for this position. However, the biggest surprise for me was the variety of people and personalities that I deal with, whether coaches, athletes, parents, administrators or fans. In this job you are constantly communicating and trying to get a message out about your programs. You have to be adaptable to solve the variety of issues that arise daily.

Ross: The amount of time spent at my desk was much more than anticipated. The picture of an athletic director is one of being out with the teams and interacting with the players, coaches and parents. However, I would often find myself working long days in the office and, before I knew it, the day had slipped away from me. My perception of the job versus the reality of the job wasn't quite accurate.

Question 2: Where do you go for information and advice when a new situation arises in your setting concerning the athletic program and the responsibilities that are involved?

Orszula: Our former retired athletic director, Pat Ryan, has been a great resource. I was offered the position in December, and I was able to do a semi-internship with him during my planning periods. Also, attending conference meetings and the Illinois Athletic Directors Association Conference allowed me the opportunity to meet and learn from other athletic administrators. Within the building, our assistant principal, Brian Moran, has been a great resource regarding general administration questions. Also, my administrative assistant, Lee Beattie, has been in her position longer than I have been in education and has been another fantastic resource.

Ross: In my first year on the job, I had a tremendous support system. Our retired athletic director has been invaluable with advice and reminders. He modeled how one should handle himself in any and all situations and I owe him a great deal. Also, I had the support of the administration within the school and from the central office.

Question 3: What have been the two or three greatest challenges that you have had to deal with as an athletic administrator?

Orszula: The biggest challenge for me has been going from a teacher and coach to athletic director. Now I am in charge. Fortunately, my staff has made the transition smoothly and we have been able to improve our athletic department.

As a former football coach, I needed to make sure that all of my coaches felt I was fair across the board and didn't favor football. It is a constant effort to provide all my coaches with the resources and support that they need while being balanced for all sports.

Ross: Time management was the biggest hurdle. I knew coming in that there would be some long hours, but I had no idea how to balance my time at work with my personal and family time. This is an area in which I need to work on and, hopefully, I will grow and develop.

Also, the number of hours spent with the position is unending. With technology and cell phones, the job of an athletic director is a 24/7 position. You have to deal with issues that arise with scheduling or transportation, and situations that arise with officials or fans at games. It is vital to deal with all of these issues and let the coaches only worry about coaching their student-athletes.

Question 4: Is there anything that you would change or do differently, in hindsight, that you had to handle during your first year or two in your new position?

Orszula: There is not much that I would handle differently. I have been very open and transparent with our administration and other athletic directors particularly about the different situations that arise that I do not know how to handle. If I have made a mistake, I make sure not to make it a second time. There are changes I am going to make as I move to year two, but the tweaks will be made to clean up some of our processes.

Ross: One thing that I am working on improving is the communication piece with parents. Many parents are pleased with the communication they receive from the athletic office as a whole, but we still need to improve with our efforts on game day. With so many sports teams (high school and two middle schools) and various playing sites, we are working on putting systems into place that have the parents feeling comfortable about where they are going when they get in the car to drive to their child's game. These procedures will decrease the amount of calls that we receive on a daily basis.

Question 5: What have been the most enjoyable and rewarding aspects of being an athletic administrator?

Orszula: One of the most rewarding aspects of being an athletic administrator is providing for our teams and seeing our athletes and coaches improve and have success. And it's not about winning. Some of our young athletes may struggle at the beginning of the season and blossom at the end and seeing the life lessons that young people learn from athletics is priceless. In my position as an athletic administrator, I love helping guide and mentor our coaches. This means providing a sounding board while giving feedback.

Ross: Being in education for 18 years in the classroom and administration, I thought that I would have to change my mindset a bit. Surprisingly, I did not. The most rewarding aspect of the position is seeing student-athletes reap the benefits of education-based athletics. The value and impact of athletics reaches well beyond the courts or fields. For a few, athletics may be an avenue that leads to college and for the majority it offers mentoring and guidance from a coach and the friendships built within the team.

Question 6: What advice would you offer to anyone entering his first athletic administrative position?

Orszula: Get to know the other athletic directors. As a coach, you don't share information with your opponents. As an athletic administrator, you can't be afraid to pick up the phone and ask questions or seek advice on how to handle an array of situations. Most administrators in the position have been willing to help and share information. You can't be afraid to ask questions, and if you make a mistake, own it and move forward.

Ross: It is important to lean on the veteran coaches. These coaches know what has been working and what has to be tweaked. Use the experience of these coaches so that you are not re-inventing the wheel or wasting time trying to fix a perceived problem.

Make sure that you get out and circulate around the fields and courts as often as possible. My first year, I spent too much time behind my desk. Visiting and observing practice sessions provides insight into the organization and instruction of your teams and adds a little balance to your day. This effort also helps you develop the relationships that are crucial to your position.