

What Makes A Good Coach?

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By Andrew Cataldo

Here at Byram Hills we find our community greatly involved in athletics, both as competitors and spectators, but what makes our program such a success are the coaches. There are three coaches at our high school that I decided to interview. Each one has made a tremendous impact on the district's athletics program: Gregory Govan (Varsity Cross Country & Track and Field), Matthew Allen (Varsity Soccer), and Thomas Andriello (Varsity Cross Country & Track and Field). These men have demonstrated that they know what it takes to maintain and transform teams into strong, cohesive units. Both Coach Andriello and Coach Govan have led relay teams to become All-American athletes, while Coach Allen has helped the boys soccer team become New York State Champions - they are as good as they come.

With so many accolades to their credit, I wanted to know what made them so successful. I began by speaking to Coach Andriello about what he thought made a good coach. He was able to break it down into distinct qualities by saying, "I think a good coach has to be three main factors:

1. He has to understand the sport he is coaching.
2. He has to understand the level and the age of the kids he is working with.
3. He has to have a passion and an intensity that can inspire kids. A good coach might be one or two of these, but a great coach is all three."

When I asked the other two coaches the same question, their answers differed minimally from Coach Andriello's response. The only addition was expressed by Coach Govan when he said, "The most important ingredient is the willingness to put in as much time with the slowest kid on the team as you do with the star."

Once I was able to determine the basics of what makes a good coach, it was important for me to understand how they measured their own successes. Ironically enough, the two coaches who work side-by-side, Andriello and Govan, differed in their responses to the question. "Can the success of a coach be measured by wins?" Andriello believes, "It also depends on the expectations that go along with a team; if you're coaching a varsity sport or at the collegiate level, then winning is part of the game. Yes, you want to teach, yes you want the kids to get a positive experience, but at the end of the day if you are successful, you should be winning."

On the other side of the spectrum, Coach Govan responded to this question by saying, "No, definitely not. Number one, it's not a recruiting game; it's not like college where you go out to recruit top athletes. You basically accept what you're given and the objective in my mind is how far you bring each individual relative to where they started, and how close they reach in terms of their god given limits."

Coach Allen responded with an in-between answer of, "Yes and no. I think that success cures problems, I think victory cures problems. It is very easy for me as the Byram Hills Soccer coach to say you need to work harder because I can put someone else in, and to draw upon success. On the other hand,

when I evaluate my program, I try and evaluate looking at if my players have emerged as men, if they have developed from immature ninth graders to upstanding citizens”

Although all the coaches may not have agreed on the value of victory, they all concurred that it was not essential to have been a successful student athlete, in order to be a good coach. I asked this question in response to Coach Govan’s remarks in particular. He was an NCAA All-American at Villanova, who competed at some of the highest levels track and field has to offer; still, he denied any major correlation between athletic achievements and being a good coach later in life. Coach Andriello went on to say, “It goes back to the idea of understanding the sport; you can understand a sport and not be good at a sport.” He compared it to the NFL and the multitude of coaches and commentators that have never played professionally, but can give insight and advice on many aspects of the game.

All of these coaches have had enough successes and failures to understand what it takes to run a team effectively, so I wanted to take advantage of their expertise, in offering guidance to struggling coaches. Coach Allen has learned over the years, “The best way to salvage your season is to get to know your players off the field.” Whenever he meets with his athletes, he makes sure to ask how they are doing outside of the realm of soccer. That interaction creates a bond greater than just coach and athlete.

The advice Coach Andriello had to offer was, “To identify why you struggle, if you are too hard on them and they are not having any fun, then lighten up and let them have fun. If you have no organization and its haphazard, then create order.” There is no way to make adjustments, if you cannot recognize what needs to be adjusted.

Finally, Coach Govan left us with his words of wisdom by simply saying, “Try and establish individual goals for each person on the team, have that person establish the goals that they want to achieve, and then help them modify them, if they are unrealistic. When people are shooting for something, they work harder.”

These three coaches have discovered the keys to success and were kind enough to share them with us. The efforts they have put forth have made a notable impact on the Byram Hills Athletic program and especially on the athletes themselves. As a student athlete of both Coach Andriello and Coach Govan for four years, I can honestly say that I have learned not only how to be successful in my track endeavors, but in my day- to -day life as well. That is what makes a good coach: someone who takes their sport and uses it as a means to enlighten the people around them. If there are any coaches looking to increase the effectiveness of their programs, they can learn a lot from Coaches Matthew Allen, Gregory Govan, and Thomas Andriello.

