

CHAMPIONSHIP PERFORMANCE

Coaches Corner

■ Recognize Team Spirit with Award

A great way to motivate the players on your team is to annually give a "team spirit" award to the player who best embodies the essence of teamwork. You can have coaches and teammates nominate players who they believe is the most reliable teammate, who pitches in to help others for the betterment of the team, exhibits flexibility and grace under pressure, shows commitment to team over self and treats teammates with respect. The winner of the award doesn't have to be a star. In fact, giving the award to an unheralded player can often serve as a motivating factor for starters. Celebrate at a team dinner by giving the player a plaque.

■ Soothe Freshman Worries

Stepping on to a college campus can be a major life adjustment – athletes have even greater pressure. Keep tabs on your freshman players by meeting with them once a week and discussing a worry list.

Ask the player to come to your office prepared to discuss any issue – school or athletic related that he or she finds troubling, confusing or overwhelming. New players are more willing to open up about "worries or concerns" than "problems", so avoid that word.

George Horton Success Strategies Part 1

This article is a feature interview with Cal State Fullerton Baseball Coach George Horton. Horton led the Titans to the 2004 NCAA National Championship and was named the 2003 and 2004 American Baseball Coaches Association National Coach of The Year.

Could you describe your working relationship with sport psychologist Ken Ravizza? Ken and I have worked closely on the Mental Game for a long time now. What he brings to our program is a load of experience in teaching the Mental Game and the ability to relate that part of the game to our players in a classroom type environment.

Ken brings another voice to the team and does a tremendous job in relating to our players what they have to do from a Mental Game perspective to be successful.

The guys in the program really enjoy his presence. He was as much a part of the 2004 National Championship as anyone else.

What mental toughness techniques or exercises had the most impact on the players during the 04 season? The biggest thing was to change their perspective. In the middle of the season we had gone to Austin, Texas and got swept by the Longhorns and it was not even close. The energy on the team was as low as I have ever seen it; I think that the staff and players were thinking that this was a rebuilding year and that we were going to struggle.

Ken came in and talked to the team and the first thing he asked was: "What were we doing well?" We were playing good defense, and up to that point, I think to a man, we were all focusing on the negatives. The next thing he told us was that we had an opportunity to do what no Titans team had ever done before.

Most of our guys were thinking, 'Yeah, be the first Titans team to go unranked

for a long time,' but what he said was, 'be the first Titan team to go from under 500 at the middle of the season, to being National Champions.' That really caught our guys attention.

He then asked our guys to 'Think how good it is going to feel' when you get to Omaha. From that point, you could really see a weight lifted off of our guy's backs. P.J. Pillitere, one of our veteran players would write that saying 'Think how good it is going to feel' on the dugout wall. Our guys rallied around that saying.

At the middle point of our season we were all caught up in the results and since we were not getting the results we wanted, we started to press. In baseball you have no control over the results; all you can do is play one pitch at a time and work the process. We all got back to the process, quality at-bats, quality pitches and playing the game one pitch at a time. I think that helped turn it around for us.

Talk about the year you made the amazing comeback to win the NCAA 2 years ago. What factors do you attribute to the turn around that season? I think a lot of the stuff that we talked about before, changing the collective perspective, getting back to the process and focusing more on one pitch at a time and controlling what we could control. I think another factor was that our guys continued to work hard everyday. Our staff, Dave Serrano, Rick Vanderhook and Chad Baum did a great job of staying on top of the fundamental work that needed to happen everyday with our guys for them to continue to get better.

We also changed our coaching perspective and instead of catching our guys doing things wrong, we began catching our players doing things right.

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Horton interview, continued

I think the whole atmosphere at practice and games was changed because of that subtle change in the way we were dealing with the players.

We had a very special group of Titans that year and I think that their chemistry on and off the field also helped us to turn it around. They were as close a knit group of guys as I have coached, they all pulled for each other, it did not matter who was at the plate or on the mound, we had all 25 guys pulling in the same direction and when you get that going, special things will happen.

How did you as a coaching staff re-enforce those techniques? Our staff had been intact for a long time and we had always been big believers in the Mental Game, but often got caught up in the day to day operations of a baseball program and sometimes did not re-enforce or talk about the Mental Game as much as we probably could or should have. In 2004, we really made a conscious effort to re-enforce the techniques that Ken was talking about.

We would spend more time talking about each of our player's routines and the importance of taking that good deep breath as the pitcher gets set, or as the hitter gets into the batters box. I think as a staff we also did a better job of letting go of the negatives and getting back to the next pitch. As a coach you need to model what you want your players to be doing, I think that is the best type of reinforcement.

The will to win. Is it inherent in a player or are there things you can do as a coach to bring that desire out of an individual? That is a great question, a question that I often think about and discuss with my colleagues. For the majority of guys playing Division I Baseball,

motivation is not a problem because they have had to work very hard to get to that level. I think that the will to win is important, but the will to prepare is VITAL.

I think that our guys prepare and practice so hard that they feel they deserve to win every time they step on the field. I think that the previous Titans were able to establish a level of competitiveness and excellence that brings out the best in our current guys.

We are constantly looking for ways to motivate our guys, but we have found that the best way is pure competition. Whether it is in the weight room or an intra-squad scrimmage, our guys want to win and want to compete.

What advice would you give to the young coaches reading Championship Performance?

I think the best place to start is to find a person who can be a mentor for you, a person who is in a position or a place that you would like to go. I have been blessed to have worked with and alongside some of the best minds in baseball, Augie Garrido, Dave Snow, Wally Kincaid, Ben Hines, Rick Vanderhook, Dave Serrano and Ken Ravizza are just a few.

Attend coaching clinics and become a student of the game. I learn something new about the game or about a way to run my program each and everyday. That is what makes baseball and coaching so much fun. You will never know everything about the game and the profession. That is what keeps me motivated, the chance that I will learn something new and the pursuit of getting better each and everyday. (Part 2 next month).

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Winning/Losing Ways

NBA Coaching Wisdom

According to former NBA star Charles Barkley, the key to motivating professional athletes is simple: "We want to be treated fairly and respected. Once you have those two things in place, everything else falls into place."

Here are some bullet points that various NBA coaches use to help motivate their players.

- Phil Jackson of the Los Angeles Lakers takes a sincere interest in each of his players. One of the ways he tries to connect is by assigning each player a book to read during the longer road trips during the season. He wants the books to inspire that individual gearing them to the player's personality. The books include novels, non-fiction, classics along with sports related titles.

- Charlotte Bobcats coach Bernie Bickerstaff says, "You have to understand that people are different and players respond to things in different ways. You have to use whatever works to get your point across. If you know a guy doesn't respond to yelling, you have to take a calmer approach."

Bickerstaff has an assistant coach on staff named John Outlaw who is there mainly to deal with players personal issues - both on and off the court. Outlaw serves as the role of mediator between players and other coaches on the staff.

- Former coach Lenny Wilkens retired as the NBA's winningest coach. His philosophy was summed up in the following quote:

"Show people how to have success and then you can push their expectations up. If you aren't prepared and you're not honest, players will see right through you"

CHAMPIONSHIP PERFORMANCE

Coaches Corner

George Horton Success Strategies Part 2

This is the conclusion of our interview with Cal State Fullerton baseball coach George Horton. Horton led the Titans to the 2004 NCAA National Championship and was named the 2003 and 2004 American Baseball Coaches Association National Coach of The Year.

What factors do you attribute to the consistent level of success at your program?

I think there are a lot of factors that contribute to the levels of success that Cal State Fullerton Baseball has been able to achieve. It all started well before I got here with the previous Titans setting the bar for excellence. There is a lot of pride and tradition in being able to wear Titans across your chest.

Every time our guys suit up to go play, we remind them that they represent not only themselves and the team, but all the former Titans that have gone through our program.

I think our guys work as hard day in and day out as anyone in the country. We take a lot of pride in getting better everyday. We also work very hard on the fundamentals. We emphasize the little things everyday. Bunting, base running, execution, those types of things that we rely so heavily on in games, we must do in practice everyday.

We also try to make our practices as game like as possible. When we scrimmage, we often start with runners on base and use the scoreboard to make the game more realistic.

We also are able to recruit great talent and that helps to make our intra-squads all that much more competitive because you have to compete everyday to win a position.

Once you have climbed to the peak, how do you challenge a team to maintain that level of excellence?

We challenge our guys the same way whether we are coming off a National Championship season or a season in which we came up short of our goals. The challenge is to get better everyday and to have quality at-bats and throw quality pitches. That is all you can control in baseball and that is what we want our players to strive for.

In baseball there is a lot of failure, if you focus on the results and loose sight of the process you will find yourself carrying the weight of the world and not playing up to your potential.

The challenge is to play the game the right way each pitch. That is a lot harder said than done, but it is something that we work on every single day. The team that wins the most pitches is usually the team that wins the game.

We focus on the details and doing the little things - that is the level of excellence that the previous Titans have set and the level that we strive for every season.

Do you ever change the way you are preparing a team during the season if things aren't going as planned?

We spend a lot of time preparing for the unexpected. We will often have umpires make bad calls on purpose in scrimmages so that we can see how our guys will respond, but most importantly, so that we can teach our guys how we want them to respond.

If things are not going as planned, we will make some changes. The key to peak performance and sustaining success

is being able to compensate and adjust; it is not about being perfect. Perfection is like a double edged sword, while it motivates you to do better, it is also the constant critic and no matter what you do, it is never good enough.

A lot of the guys that we get have never really failed before, there were all the best players in high school and when they get here they realize that the game has speeded up for them, that they are now playing at a different level.

We often have to slow things down a bit if we have a younger team vs. getting more into the intricate details of the game if we have more veteran players who have been a part of the system at Fullerton for a few years.

What common traits did your NCAA championship teams possess that helped them become champions?

The common traits that our NCAA Championship teams have had is a discipline and a desire to get better everyday and to work on the fundamentals of the game. Our championship teams, like many of our teams that fall short of that goal get after it everyday and compete with each other to get better.

I think there was a confidence and a belief that they could be champions. Our championship teams also played the game one pitch at a time and focused on the things that they could control. There was not a lot of talk about the draft and things that were out of their control, simply getting better everyday and controlling what we can control.

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Horton interview, continued

Is there any benefit to a pep talk speech before a game?

I am not a big believer in big pep talks before games because I think it can get guys overly emotional and too excited. At our level, success is all about consistency and doing what you do on a daily basis in practice in games. That is why our practice time is so important.

We want our guys to play at their pace and to treat every game like a practice, and every practice like a game so that nothing changes. Our goal is to play Titan Baseball and let everything else take care of itself. We are going to throw strikes, play catch and put the ball in play. If we can do that with a focus on the process, in the present moment with a positive mindset, we are giving ourselves the best chance to be successful.

If anything, I think I try to get our guys to relax before a game because they are often excited for the game and can easily get too excited and play out of character if they get caught up in the results and the pressures of playing in a big game vs. doing what they do on a daily basis.

What is your recruiting philosophy?

Our recruiting philosophy is that we are looking for a mix of the player with the best talent, but also a player that plays the game the right way and has character. There are a lot of players out there that have great talent but can become a cancer to the team because they are all about themselves. We have been successful because we have had Titans, not because we have had individuals.

We are as up front and honest as we can be with the young men we

recruit. There are a lot of stories about kids who are told one thing and then get to college and the staff and players are totally different than they were in the recruiting process. We try to put it all out there so that the player and his family know exactly what to expect if they decide to become a Titan.

We emphasize the importance of getting an education and taking advantage of what the university has to offer as well as the time commitment and expectations that come with being a Titan Baseball player. Although we spend a great deal of time developing them as human beings, we would like for our new recruits to have positive character traits when they first arrive on campus. We don't believe you can win with talented young men that have poor character.

We have our current Titans spend as much time with the recruit as possible so that they can get a feel for each other. Our players have often given us as a staff an indication about a recruit that helps us to make a decision. We take what our current Titans say very seriously because they are the ones that will be spending the next year or more with that player and they know the tradition and expectations that come with wearing Titans across your chest. They know the privilege and honor that comes with that distinction and take that very seriously.

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■ Winning Ways

Super Bowl bound Indianapolis Colts coach Tony Dungy has a well deserved reputation as an even tempered Christian. That doesn't mean he is any less demanding than some of his more hard-nosed peers.

His grading system in practice and games can be as tough as any coach in the league. The key concept is not to ever be out-hustled or go full speed – otherwise you pick up negative grades known as “loafs”.

Dungy explained: “If you're not running full speed, it's (graded as) a loaf. If you changed speeds, that means you weren't running full speed during the play, so that's a loaf. If you're supposedly a fast guy, a defensive back or linebacker, and defensive linemen are passing you by, that's a loaf. If you don't hit a guy when you could hit him, that's a loaf.

We had some disputes early on with Warren Sapp and some guys who didn't like our way of doing things in Tampa, but pretty soon that became the way we played.

You have to be able to push people. You have to challenge people. What I do, I try to set very high standards. You set the standard high where if you're not doing this, you're doing less than capacity and that's not good enough. That's what I try to do. Here is the standard. You don't have to yell about it. There's the standard – now work to achieve it.

For some guys, the standard is higher. When you have great ability, the standard for him is much higher than the guy who doesn't have that same kind of ability. Once you embrace those high standards and hold everybody to them, it's easier to push them.”