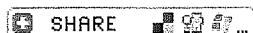


CULTURE OF MEDIOCRITY OF GETTING IN THE WAY OF ATHLETIC SUCCESS AT DCHS

Sat, 01/21/2017 - 6:49am admin



(Editor's note: When replying to questions from our sports reporter about recent basketball games, Coach Wade Murphy was prompted to write about why he feels Dawson County High School athletics programs often come up short. Murphy asked that if his comments were shared, they were shared in their entirety.)

The bottom line is that these games (against Billings Central and Laurel) were not won this weekend. They were won in the off-season. Laurel's kids have obviously spent a lot of time in the gym and the weight room. They are extremely athletic from top to bottom. Their young kids look really good as well. Billings Central's kids look similar.

People ask me all the time what the difference is between our kids and the kids from those schools. The answer is simply one thing — a culture of expectations for individual improvement. The students in those schools that participate in activities have a much higher expectation of commitment to improve than we have for our kids in our community. Kids who participate in our activities don't compete with the sense of urgency that the kids we competed against this weekend do. Don't get me wrong. I love our kids. We have some great kids who have great futures ahead of them as doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, etc., but when it comes to competing they have not been held to the same standard as kids from Laurel, BC, Dillon, Butte Central and other schools that seem to continually dominate the landscape year after year.

Summer after summer in my 11 years here I've watched the coaches in this school open the weightroom, the gym, and the fields. I've watched our track and cross country coaches show up for early morning workouts ... all of this on their own time, and honestly the turnout is dismal. When a football team has to field a team and put players in games who have never seen the inside of a weightroom or the basketball coaches have to put players in games that have never actually shot a basketball since the last season, and they are competing against other kids who participate for their schools with the understanding that these are minimal commitments in order to actually make the team, I think the results will be consistently predictable. There are always outliers but for the most part I think we can agree that it's a generally accepted belief that putting more time into becoming stronger and more skilled will probably bring better results. When a football coach holds a team camp and his own players don't show up or when the first day of practice arrives and players that are counted on don't actually come because they "aren't ready to play yet" those are cultural problems rooted in a lack of commitment, not a lack of ability. I'm fairly certain those are standard expectations of varsity athletes in competitive programs, and all the ability in the world goes untapped and undeveloped without the commitment to refine it. Commitment to that effort comes from a sense of urgency and a need to compete in order to make a team and then after making that team actually get into the game. The biggest separation between the schools I mentioned above and us lies in the fact that our kids don't have to compete to make teams or get into games. Without the fear of getting cut or not getting to play, there is no need or sense of urgency to improve.

I've heard every excuse in the book as to why more time in the off-season isn't dedicated to self improvement of both athleticism and skills: "I don't have time. I sleep in during the summer. I work. I do other things in the summer. It doesn't matter; the coach plays their favorites anyway. I don't have the right last name so why bother?"

Believe it or not, these are basic time-honored excuses that exist in every school with athletic programs. Funny thing is that these are the same types of excuses that we use in our everyday lives as adults as well when we don't want to do the things that are hard for self improvement. We've simply passed them down to our kids as a way to rationalize unpleasant results. What we've created is a culture of mediocrity. We've rationalized our results with excuses. My favorite one is that "these kids need a break." I always smile at that.

Kids need a break from playing? I grew up on a ranch. I would have done anything to convince my dad to let me play basketball, football and baseball all summer. Luckily for me, he let me most of the time. Never enough though in my mind! Some of my favorite conversations are with our former students who have been lucky enough to play collegiate athletics. When I ask them what the difference is between us and the kids from the other schools that they are often now teammates with they just shake their heads. It's always the same ... commitment to self improvement ... work in the off-season. They see it when they leave but it's hard to break out of a culture while they are in it. It's hard to see mediocrity while in the midst of it but it's easy to spot once you've experienced the other side of it.

When will it change? I don't know. I love these kids. We have some of the greatest kids I've ever been around, but until we begin to expect a higher level of commitment to the activities they are voluntarily participating in, we will continue to struggle to compete against the schools whose kids know that if they don't get better, someone else on their team probably will and when the coach looks to field a team that competes at the highest level, it'll probably be with the kids who have put in the most time, and that time invested simply made them better than the others. There aren't a lot of excuses to rationalize simply not being skilled enough.

I feel bad for the kids we have that do put the time in to get better. They go to camps, the weight room, open gyms/field workouts, whatever. They want nothing more than to compete and bring pride to their school and community and continually get undermined by a culture that doesn't value the challenge and sacrifice of self improvement. They get undermined by a culture of mediocrity that allows for the rationalizing of not competing.

To some this will sound like a coach making an excuse for his own mistakes. Believe me nobody dissects and evaluates themselves more than coaches do to themselves. This isn't some rant rationalizing our losses or misfortunes. I'm simply making observations based on my time here and in discussions with fellow coaches in our system and those we compete against. We have cultural issues here that need to be addressed before we can truly level the playing field.

Communities can run through coaches as often as they'd like, but if the culture never changes, it doesn't matter who you have calling the plays. Ask Sidney how that's worked out for their girls basketball program. I think they are on their 12th coach in the last 10 years. They finally have a guy there that really wants to turn things around. It remains to be seen if they'll let him keep the job.

We've had three head football coaches in 11 years and all of them have struggled with the same cultural issues. What I don't understand is when it became so unpopular to actually be passionate about something. I try to teach my kids that it's ok to care passionately about something. It's ok to have a desire to be so great at something that it consumes you and you work your tail off to be successful at it. Of course there is a healthy balance, but in order to be really successful, we have to appreciate the amount of sacrifice to the commitment required to achieve that success.

We haven't done that here. What drives mediocrity in my opinion is fear of failure and the desire to avoid really painful experiences. Ever see the emotional pain a team that loses a championship game goes through? Man, after all that work and time and to come up short? That's excruciating! It's always safer to sit on the side and avoid that kind of pain. Right? Wrong. That kind of pain shapes one's outlook on life. Because let's face it, losing a game isn't the worse thing that's going to happen in these kids' lives, but feeling that pain and understanding how to work through it? That's what sports teach our kids. You know what else sports should teach our kids? The extreme satisfaction of giving your all to a cause bigger than yourself and being successful in that cause. That's called sacrifice. Those are fairly important values to instill in our kids as well. Mediocrity doesn't provide that type of approach to life's challenges at all. We always tell our players that in order to get something you've never had, you have to do something you've never done. Also, that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome.

Year after year, the coaches in this school system struggle to garner consistent commitment required to compete at high levels. Believe me when I say, I wish high school sports were like they used to be. As coaches we used to take inventory at the end of the year and lock it up until next season. We encouraged kids to play as many sports as they could and work on their skills, get to a camp and refine their skills as much as possible until next season. Team camps and organized open gyms/field times really didn't exist. Unfortunately, high school athletics are not structured that way any longer. There is a lot of sacrifice that accompanies having competitive programs. Family vacations, work schedules, etc., now have to be modified to fit into what is required of students to participate and compete at a high level. If you ask a large percentage of coaches, my guess is that they probably enjoy spending time with their teams in the offseason, but that the necessary time away from family and other activities just to ensure that their teams are competitive is the number one reason they hang it up.

Of course the other side of the coin is always that we accept the excuses we make as reality, and we live with the culture we have allowed to take root and if that's the case, then when we are continually falling very far short, we can take solace in the fact that we know why. We have accepted mediocrity. I'm sure the rest of schools in the Eastern A would be very happy to know we won't be raising the bar. I can hear people saying, "Coach needs to chill out. Sports don't need so much emphasis. Focus on other things in the schools." That's fine, but those same people who seem to know exactly what each coach is doing wrong need to accept that without rededicated effort to doing the things that other schools and programs do, we will struggle to compete at high levels, and when that happens it needs to simply be accepted.

I think I can safely say that our kids don't start out that much different than the kids from those schools that we always seem to be behind athletically, but the expectations of self improvement and being competitive differs vastly in those schools as those same kids grow and move through their respective system, and that truly does make them different from our kids in the end.