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The X-Factor

A white glow can be seen in the distance as I travel down the highway. I follow the red-ant like trail of brake lights into the parking lot, proceed to park, and shuffle into the stadium with hundreds of other fans. Inside the fence, young children, faces painted with bright blue “M”s, chase each other around the perimeter of the grass. Those in the home team’s stands try to find some conversation over the blaring pump up music of the marching band. It is game time in Mukwonago, Wisconsin, and it is Homecoming.

Sitting in the far corner of the sideline bleachers are the school’s teachers, coaches, and alumni. With a squeal, a woman who looks about thirty runs up to a middle-aged man and hugs him. “Mr. Vick! How are you? I haven’t seen you in years,” the young woman exclaims. I watch the rendezvous unfold and, being within an earshot, follow their broken conversation, between the scolding of the children and waves, about the “glory days” of the state championship cross-country team over ten years ago. As the exchange of pleasantries comes to a close, the two embrace once more and move on to new conversations with new people. As the woman approaches who seems to be her husband, she whispers, “ He was an awesome coach. I wonder why he stepped down when he had so much success.” I know the answer to this question, and after more research, can definitely understand why Mr. Vick made this decision.

Mr. Vick is a high-school English and Journalism teacher at Mukwonago High School who has found much success both in and out of the classroom environment. In his “prime”, Vick was the head coach of both the girls and boys cross-country teams, who he coached to state 14 times, was the advisor of the school newspaper, and was a nationally acclaimed teacher with much prestige and respect. Today, he fills all but one of these roles, but stays equally busy. In 2000, Vick stepped down as head cross country coach with little regret. Upon talking to other coaches and educators, I have found that there are many factors that stress and overwork a teacher-coach, but most are handled with great grace and poise. Upon diving into the world and mind of these overworked and underappreciated individuals, I find the true joys and pains of being a teacher, coach, and parent in a whirlwind lifestyle and decide on whether it is the career path that I would really like to journey down in the near future.

As I sit in the stands awaiting kick-off, I catch the eye of my 10th grade basketball coach, Steve Pollnow. I give him a huge smile and wave him over. He departs from his wife, who is holding an infant, and strolls towards me, holding the hand of three-year-old boy with thick glasses and a priceless smile. I give Coach P. a quick hug and ask if it is an appropriate time to conduct our interview. He suggests we move to a less populated bleacher where it would be easier to concentrate, and I agree. I ask the warm-up questions of ‘Why did you become a teacher’ and ‘Why did you become a coach’ and receive answers about role models, vacation time, and love of sport. His calm disposition and deep ocean blue eyes help to maintain a strong connection in conversation. For a man with so many responsibilities, he seems surprisingly calm, which I realize later is a valuable asset for a teacher, coach, and parent who has not yet experienced burnout.

Burnout is defined as the state of emotional exhaustion caused by excessive psychological and emotional demands (Jackson, Schwab, and Schuler 630). According to sport and health professionals Diane Drake and Edward P. Herbert, these demands are caused by role conflict within one's life. Teacher-coaches usually experience role overload due to their extensive time and energy requirements for dual positions, teacher-coach inter-role conflict caused by other's expectations, and coach-family inter-role conflict due to demands from the workplace that interfere with home life. Though all of these factors are overwhelming to teacher-coaches, levels of burnout among the group are relatively low compared to other occupations. The three main factors that provide relief from complete burnout are personal releases, organizational skills, and mentors (171-172,178). When working in a school setting, personal releases usually take place during breaks and vacations, when the professional can finally have some time to his or herself. Mentors are quite easy to find in this setting, due to the high amount of colleagues who go through the same daily struggles. Organization is the hardest of the three factors to maintain, with such a pish-posh grouping of responsibilities that a teacher and coach must be conscious of.

Organization seems to be the key to both of my interviewee's success. While the opening kick flies through the air, Pollnow reminisces on a speech given at a basketball banquet a few years back, where he illustrated the "balancing act" of his life with three different sized balls, which were hard to juggle. When the balls were the same size, though, it was much easier to complete the task. Pollnow explains, "If I let my school work, family, or sports dominate my life too much the other ones would suffer... I need to keep in perspective that all are important to me and all need equal attention." Vick

found a different type of balance to be successful, “ I don’t know if it’s ever possible to totally balance anyone’s life...If we pour ourselves into the job, our outside passions- whether they be coaching, hobbies or family-will feel the pinch.” Though each teacher believes in a different way of prioritizing, the act of organizing these priorities is what is really important. As a teacher, coach, and parent, life would fall apart without organization. Douglas Baker, a former high-school teacher, poetry club advisor, and basketball coach contributes his own ideas on organizing the different realms of responsibility. “The language, expectations, and time demands of coaching student-athletes contrasted with those elements of teaching literary texts and writing to students required to sit in English classes; the passion and vibrancy of young poets in a student-driven club contrasted with the daily rigors of grading students to read and write assigned texts ” (38). Each environment contrasts with the others, and the three are regarded as separate.

Though kept separate in many respects, many commonalities are found between the tasks of teaching and coaching. According to Pollnow, they are basically the same thing, “ You cannot coach without teaching and you cannot teach without coaching.” In a 2004 study by Duane Millslagle, 40% of surveyed teacher-coaches perceived both roles as similar (7). Baker writes, “ A teacher (or coach, or adviser), through language and social interaction, worked with younger and less-experienced people to construct disciplinary practices and achieve particular developmental, physical, and intellectual goals” (38). It seems as though when teachers can find similarities between the classroom and coaching environments, students and athletes alike succeed.

In order to scrutinize this relationship from the student's perspective, I handed out a survey to the Mukwonago High School cross-country team, which provided a good sampling of high school athletes. Of the 36 students surveyed, 14 were both students and athletes of Bruce Lammers, a government teacher, track, and cross-country coach at the high school. Of the fourteen that have experienced Lammers' abilities in the classroom and on the track, ten admit to feeling a closer connection to him in the classroom because he is a coach. One student comments, "He [Lammers] knows how to teach whether it is hurdles or government." Pollnow, who deals with elementary students, finds interesting and sometimes humorous connections with his students outside of the classroom, which is displayed, ironically, numerous times throughout our interview as awkward preteens approach him with puzzled looks on their faces. "I think that seeing a lot of my students this summer at basketball camps, sporting events, and on the bench last season does make a good connection. They see you there and realize that you do not live at school, but you actually have a real life...I think they do connect with you better after seeing you out and about like that," Pollnow explains. Experiencing the meshing of two cultures opens up the young students' minds.

The mixing of the school and extra curricular cultures is essential for student athletes to learn. Douglas Baker states, "I do not believe that we simply transfer what we learn in one context to another. We need a discourse and conscious actions to guide us"(40). This discourse and guide is provided by the example of a well-connected teacher. These learning experiences and connections may go unnoticed by some educators, but those who do take notice find it a worthwhile and rewarding experience. Sports scientist Ken Brubaker points out, "As teachers or coaches, we tend to overlook

the fact that our pupils are students before they are athletes. They become students in life as soon as they begin to roll, sit up, crawl, and walk” (32). With this realization, students and educators alike will succeed in the classroom and extracurricular environments.

Though the dual role of teacher-coach provides advantages for teachers and their students, inevitable difficulties put strain on any person of this vocation. One big reason for this strain is the teacher-coach role conflict. In the Millslagle study, 43% of the dual role professionals surveyed were motivated to enter the dual profession by only the coaching role, compared to the 12% motivated by only the teaching role (6). Those professionals who differentiate between coaching and teaching perceived higher goal attainment and more satisfaction from coaching. In Pollnow’s life, the teaching aspect of the dual role definitely takes priority, “Coaching is, I guess, something that I take very seriously but will always come second to my teaching duties.”

Being an elementary school teacher, Pollnow’s teaching duties are quite different than his secondary teacher-coach counterparts. He is completely responsible for one group of students, every day of the week, 36 weeks of the year. His elementary school schedule is also different than the high school schedule, which provides a significant time conflict. Due to these struggles, the number of secondary teachers who are coaches outnumber elementary teachers that coach at a high school level. In Millslagle’s study, high school teachers outnumber elementary school teachers three to one (8). During basketball season, Pollnow’s daily schedule involves hurrying from one venue to a greatly varying other. The children board their buses at 3:35, which gives Pollnow just enough time to rush over to the high school for 4:00 practice. Most teachers, especially at the elementary level, stay after school for at least an hour to complete any work that

needs to be done and prepare themselves for the coming school day. Pollnow either has to come in to school early or do more work at home to fulfill all of his teaching duties, which naturally heightens stress levels and takes a toll on his family life.

When it comes to time and commitment levels required by the teacher-coach, the families of these professionals seem to suffer the most. In the Drake and Herbert case study, one of the subjects who experienced high levels of work-personal life conflict with increasing years of coaching and teaching and the birth of her children, took a one year sabbatical to spend more time with her family midway into her career (177). Due to this conflict in priorities, many coaches step down early in their careers in order to spend the needed time with their developing families. Vick explained his state championship cross-country season in 1994 in relation to his family: “At the time, my daughter Haley was two and a half, and my son, Josh, was about six months. My goal was to try and make my family as much a part of the team experience as possible...the old films of the event show us at the state meet in Wisconsin Rapids, the children in backpacks and in our arms, or in our jogging stroller.” Once his children had grown, Vick stepped down from the head coaching position. When asked about his motives for this decision, Vick states, “My main reason related to my family...I often found myself at practice wishing I were home with my own children...I’ve loved being more involved with my children and have had zero regrets.” Presently, Vick is able to attend most, if not all, of his children’s high school sporting and musical events. Most of these moments would be lost if Vick would still be coaching, and Saturdays off also gives him an opportunity to contribute around the house. Pollnow, who stands in the same spot that Vick did thirteen years ago, has every intention to quit coaching in the future in order to help his sons grow and develop.

Along with nurturing their relationships with their children, teacher-coaches also must find a way to keep a healthy relationship with their spouses. One subject in the Drake and Herbert study says, “ There was a time when my husband and I, we could do our thing...Now we really need to focus to do things together...it’s getting harder and harder” (71). Though time conflicts can put stress on a marital relationship, most spouses of teacher-coaches realize who they were marrying and decide to be as supportive as possible. Vick always made sure to pay special attention to his wife, and always referred to her as “my lovely wife, Marsha” in conversations and team correspondence. As a result, they athletes regarded her as a part of the team. Pollnow is equally thankful for his wife and her support. She enjoys bringing the boys to games to see their dad coach, and even “gets into” the competition.

Though these obstacles stemming from family and professional conflict are difficult for all coaches to overcome, the category of teacher-coaches who seem to suffer most from this struggle are the women in the field. The female traditionally occupies the role of the primary care giver, and Saturday morning competitions and late-night road trips can hinder the power of this role. Trying to fulfill the “triple life” of mother, teacher and coach is exceptionally difficult and cannot be performed without high levels of work-family stress. One subject in the Drake and Herbert study who was married and had two children reported much higher levels of this stress than her unmarried female counterpart. This stress was also a major cause of this subject’s decision to step down from her role of coach and focus only on educating and being a wife and mother (177). If I truly want to play this triple role later in my life, I believe that my decision will be the same.

The once-bright lights that shone down onto the turf are now fading, along with the noise of the crowd. The excitement of the win has left with its fans, and the football field stands illuminated and almost deserted. As I wait in line behind former and current athletes to talk to my own socially-skilled father, I reminisce on my life growing up in a teacher-coach's household. My mom is completely supportive of my dad's career choices, and because of this I was able to witness my father "at work" from an early age. These experiences probably prompted me to consider coaching on top of a teaching career. Through interviews, research, and personal experience I have taken in enough information to make an informed and hopefully satisfactory decision. I know that with appropriate priorities and family support I will be able to accomplish my goal of teaching, coaching, and being a loving mother and wife.

After contrasting the differences between the elementary and secondary teacher-coaching careers, I am not completely confident that I would be able to handle an elementary position that overlaps with a coaching position. My major would allow me the option to teach at a middle-school level, which is what I am aiming for at this point in my decision making. As much as I love teaching younger children and watching them develop, I am not sure that I have enough patience and diligence to balance three different roles that also conflict with one another. Those who are able to balance these three roles gracefully definitely have an "X-factor" that allow them to stay calm in stressful situations, yet exhibit passion enough to influence the lives of young students and athletes. I am hoping that with more experience, whether the "X-factor" is present within me will become evident.

After parting ways with Coach Pollnow and having a brief follow-up conversation with Coach Vick, I finally connect with my father, and we exit the stadium together. I glance back at the bleachers and picture myself, fifteen or twenty years down the road, connecting with past students and spending time with my own family at a similar Homecoming game of the future, and nothing feels more “like home” than that.

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