

Building a Championship Culture During a Pandemic

It is hard to believe that schools, and most businesses, are closed right now due to the Covid-19 pandemic. There is uncertainty, speculation and concern in our society. We are certainly in unfamiliar territory. Social distancing is a new term and reality for most people. Schools are creating at-home learning opportunities while coaches and student athletes are struggling with not being able to gather for practices. Spring Break games, commencement ceremonies, dances, plays and other school-sponsored events are being postponed with no end date at this time. But that does not mean that athletic administrators cannot use this time to improve their athletic programming and local community. Times like these are when athletic departments need to reflect on why we exist and how we can help support our community in this difficult time.

The principles of education-based athletics set us apart from other athletic organizations that are only in existence to make money from young athletes. Our schools merge academics and athletics to help develop the skills needed to be successful in life. Although the education of our students has transitioned almost entirely to online resources and at-home learning opportunities, your education-based athletics program should not cease to exist. Athletic administrators must challenge themselves to continue the work needed, even during a pandemic, to bolster the education of their students through an athletic program that serves our student athletes and the larger community.

I find myself at this time meeting with staff virtually and discussing how best to connect with our students, how we can create resources to continue their education from home and other ways to celebrate our school community.

But without games and practices, how do we advance our athletic programming? What should athletic administrators be doing right now?

In the last week I have been thinking about four different ways to advance our programs (1) celebrating and connecting the student athletes who are currently missing their spring season, (2) refocusing the budget, (3) continuing my education through NIAAA LTC webinars and other local professional development opportunities and (4) starting to complete those tasks on my school "to do" list that you never have time to do.

To start, it is important to have coaches continue to connect with their student athletes. We have told our coaches and communities that we are unable to gather and hold practices. But many coaches are doing a great job staying in contact with their teams and letting them know that we have not forgotten about them. I see coaches are using social media platforms to provide at-home coaching instruction to their student athletes. Our student athletes are then completing the tasks and sharing videos with the program. It has turned into a nice community-building activity in many programs both in my district, but also in countless other districts around the country. This example is not about improving the backhand of your tennis team, it is about letting children know that the school community cares about them.

Secondarily, this unfortunate situation has created an opportunity. With school closures, my budget is currently not spending on transportation, athletic training services, strength and conditioning services, officials, game supervisors and more. It is paramount for athletic administrators to determine the funds

they are currently not spending and have a sense of what they will save monetarily if our closure continues into April, May, June or later.

Once those reports are run and athletic administrators know what funds they will have at their disposal, they should begin gathering quotes for purchases that we advance their program and celebrate the student athletes of the district. It is important, that when we do return to normalcy, we do it with a bang. Athletic administrators should use unexpected funds to improve their facilities, programs and different offerings. How about investing in one or more of the following:

1. windscreens on fencing with your school's logo
2. banners in your gymnasium
3. window decals for the families of your student athletes
4. shirts for three-sport athletes
5. fitness center updates
6. uniforms purchases for the 2020-2021 school year
7. light pole banners
8. a new scoring table for the gymnasium
9. floor mats in the athletic wing

What is important in your community? Think of something that will generate excitement when the students come back to school.

Educators should always consider themselves students first. Personal understanding and continued education are great ways to improve your programming in the immediate. The NIAAA is offering webinars for leadership training courses (<https://members.niaaa.org/general/custom.asp?page=LeadershipTraining>) for athletic administrators. Consider taking a course while away from school. Investing in yourself is a great way to advance your program. By holding the classes online, you can complete the courses in the comfort of your own home and continue your reflection process for the next big task to add to your "to do" list.

Finally, look at that "to do" list sitting on your desk, notebook or laptop. Now is the time to tackle something on that list. What can you start working on that you never seem to have time to complete? What can you introduce or reinvent in your athletic department that will help sustain it and bring pride to the community? Consider the following:

1. create an athletic Wall of Fame application for past student athletes
2. organize stakeholders to serve on an Athletic Hall of Fame Committee
3. reread your athletic handbook and start mapping out what policies and practices need to be revisited
4. improve student voice in your athletic department by creating a student advisory council to help you develop these large tasks on the to do list
5. establish a coach's corner/workshop opportunity for coaches to learn from one another
6. add a club in your high school tasked with organizing a positive cheer section in your school district
7. work with your coaches to update record boards and team banners
8. review the athletic website for your school district and update information that no longer applies

Not all these suggestions will be a possibility for every athletic administrator, especially because there are funds tied to many of them. At the very least, have your coaches stay connected to your student

athletes and encourage those student athletes to stay active. Simply checking in with your student athletes will remind them and their families that your athletic department is about community and their overall education. Lead by example and start sharing different posts and emails that simply recognize those student athletes and their families. Athletic administrators to be highlighting the great work their coaching staff is doing in the community. Share how your coaches are building a championship culture. Many teams across the country to using creative ways to stay connect through social media posts.

In times like these, challenge yourself to think differently during this difficult time in our lives. If you return to school and have not advanced either the athletic program or your own education, you have done a disservice to your community. Champions can find the light even in dark times. What can you do to advance your athletic program today?

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