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## Teens learn life skills by coaching

BY JO GLADING-DILORENZO

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Sam Intrator and Don Siegel of Smith College are professors first and foremost, so it's no surprise that the inspiration for their beloved extracurricular project started with an academic question.

"What do sports really do for kids development?" Siegel asks. "That's something we've been asking forever."

Siegel, chair of Smith's exercise and sports studies department, and Intrator, a professor of education and child study and urban studies, are well aware that sports have far more potential value than intrinsic value.

You don't have to be following American cyclist Floyd Landis' spiral into the lower rings of hell in his fight against the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency to know this. Even if you get just a passing glance at the sports section on recycling day, you've seen enough of the dark hours in America's favorite pastimes.

Ah, but the potential. Isn't that what keeps us in the game or, during particular turns in the human life cycle, in the van, driving the progeny from pitch to field to court to pool - then to the bank?

Intrator and Siegel are on the bus. They love the fanged, warty little beast we call sports. Both men grew up playing ball on the streets of Brooklyn (where all of the best sports stories inevitably begin) and believe that sport can be a metaphor for life, and both perpetuate this hope in various facets of their lives outside of Smith College, through playing sports and coaching young people.

One of their most beloved ventures, Project Coach, is a sports-themed outreach project that seeks to create youth leadership in struggling urban communities through youth-run, after-school sports leagues.

Project Coach is teaching the secrets of success through sport to economically disadvantaged minority youths in two of the most economically distressed communities in western Massachusetts, both of which happen to be in Smith College's shadow.

Who isn't familiar with the popular metaphor of sport as a vector from poverty and disadvantage to college and a meaningful ever after? Project Coach asks: can coaching, which is far more attainable than sports prodigy status, be a way up?

"Sports is a way to engage them. It's something they all understand; it's a part of their lives and communities already. So pulling them in, getting them involved gives us an opportunity and a way to work with these kids on something that's already meaningful to them," Siegel says.

"These kids, these teenagers, are perceived as problems," he continues. "They're hanging around, making trouble, making adults nervous. In the role they're playing in Project Coach, as teachers and coaches to young kids, they're not problems in their communities, they're assets."

Coaching, Intrator argues, involves a whole set of behaviors and skills that create success in a wide range of other domains.

"To be a successful coach, you have to set goals, communicate them clearly, plan how you're going to teach a particular skill. You need to think strategically, lead, take initiative. I could go on and on," Intrator says. "All of these skills lead to success in school and in life."

In its first year, Project Coach trained 20 teenagers from Springfield to coach and run after-school sports leagues during 2005-06 for 120 second- through fifth-grade students at the Gerena Community School in Springfield. This year the program extended its reach into Holyoke, trained an additional 15 adolescent coaches, and provided after-school sports programs to about 80 children at the Holyoke Boys and Girls Club.

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Intrator and Siegel say the one thing standing in the way of further expansion of the popular program is money, or rather, the lack of it. The \$55,000 in seed money that financed their experiment is drying up, forcing the professors into the mysterious fields of marketing and fund-raising.

All Project Coach trainees complete the Massachusetts Youth Soccer Association (MYSA) G-Level certification training, a four-hour course that prepares aspiring coaches for the unexpected rigors and joys of teaching and managing wiggly little players.

The young coaches couldn't have asked for a better teacher. The state association's coaching certification programs are peerless. Not Little League, nor AAU, nor USA Swimming comes close to providing the kind of comprehensive, evidenced-based, progressive training for coaches that MYSA and its parent organization, the United States Youth Soccer Association, make readily available.

The philosophy is simple: kids learn best through play. (Sports are games, after all.) So coaches are trained to teach proper technique through developmentally appropriate, challenging and fun small games. Lecturing is not in the syllabus.

"The MYSA approach is a huge asset," Intrator says. "These are kids teaching kids, so they're naturally drawn to a method that incorporates play and movement into teaching. You don't have to tell a teenager that standing in a line or listening to a lecture is a boring way to learn."

Siegel and Intrator have built their own accountability system into MYSA's winning formula. Each week the coaches meet with Siegel and Intrator and the Smith graduate students who work in the program to write out, in 15-minute blocks, their weekly "soccer activity session."

After the practice each coach critiques his or her own session on the sheet "my thoughts about today's session." Once a week in a "coaching in action" session, the group watches a videotape of a practice and gives feedback about whether or not objectives were met and what should be changed.

In the process the coaches are learning a model of mastery that lasts a lifetime: Mistakes don't ruin you, they teach you.

"One of the really powerful aspects to the program is that for almost all of the kids, this coaching commitment is their first real job, first real paying job," Intrator says. "What they're learning: preparation, communication, problem-solving, self-assessment are all skills that transfer to their school work, foremost, but also to jobs.

"One of the big successes of the program has been that our coaches are being hired to work with kids during the summer by organizations like MYSA and the Holyoke Girls and Boys Club. I think what this says is that by the time these teenagers complete the program, they know what it takes, very specifically, to set a goal and achieve it."

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