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Amherst and Project Coach Develop Mutual Relationship

Submitted by Justin P. Long. Last edited on Wed, 2008-02-13 15:36.

AMHERST, MA - When a group of high school students from the Springfield, Massachusetts area came to Amherst College on Monday, Jan. 28, the Lord Jeff men's basketball team was expected to share its knowledge of the game with aspiring coaches. Not only were the Amherst players able to teach, but they were able to learn a great deal from a program striving to make a difference in one of the poorest communities in the state.



Head coach Dave Hixon shared his knowledge with eager Springfield high school students.

Project Coach is an outreach program created to encourage youth leadership in struggling urban communities through after-school sports leagues run by high school students. In short, Project Coach involves kids coaching kids. The idea spawned five years ago in the minds of Smith College's Sam Intrator and Don Siegel, who wanted to explore the effects athletics have on academic performance and development in high school students.

Siegel and Intrator toured state-of-the-art athletic facilities in Springfield but discovered that it was neighboring towns and high schools using them rather than local kids. Parents in Springfield communities, which are some of the most economically disadvantaged and distressed communities in Western Massachusetts, simply did not have the time and money to get organized youth sports leagues up

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and running, thus making the athletic fields irrelevant to younger Springfield children.

From there, Siegel and Intrator developed the idea that giving high school students responsibility and teaching them leadership skills would create a new wave of coaches who would not only benefit from a coaching experience, but could help dozens of kids finally take part in some sort of organized sport.

A notable difference is evident just five years after the program was born. There are currently 20 coaches (coaching 128 elementary students throughout the year) who have gone through a training process that includes an intense curriculum. Before working with the elementary school children, each coach must attend 10 learning sessions with topics including communication, attention control, philosophy of working with kids, and elementary school development.



Senior Andrew Olson took part in some friendly 3-on-3 competition.

After completing the necessary training and attending coaching seminars, the high school students then coach groups of third-, fourth- and fifth-graders from the Gerena School and sixth-graders from Chestnut Middle School. Not only do these teenagers provide services their parents often do not have time to provide, but they get paid for it—an important factor

considering the difficulties teens face finding jobs in poor, urban communities.

Amherst welcomed Project Coach last month, and the kids (most of which had never been on a college campus or even heard of Amherst College) were in unfamiliar territory when they stepped through the doors of Alumni Gymnasium. “Their heads were spinning as they saw the weight room,” says Intrator. “Students were working out, everyone was being friendly—just the exposure was a great experience for them.”

The Project Coach kids entered LeFrak Gymnasium as the Amherst men’s basketball team was finishing practice, and junior Mike Halsey dazzled the youngsters with two or three spectacular dunks as they sat in a semi circle. The night officially opened with Amherst assistant coach Koby Altman welcoming everyone and introducing head coach Dave Hixon ’75, who stressed to the youngsters the importance of

displaying model behavior as a coach. "It was important for the kids to hear that," says Intrator. "They're asked to be mentors in this program, and they need to see themselves as important figures in their players' minds. You can't expect good sportsmanship from your players if you don't display it yourself."

After listening to Hixon share his experiences as a 31-year head coach, the kids broke up into groups that were each led by two to three members of the Amherst team. Each group spent between five and 10 minutes at one of five stations: ball handling, passing, shooting, defense and 3-on-3 play.

The atmosphere was light and playful, as demonstrated by juniors Glenn Wong and Marcus Bradley teaching some dance moves in addition to their dribbling skills, but the players took it seriously and had the full attention and cooperation of the high schoolers. The highlight of the night may have been Brian Baskauskas' shooting partner in the three-point competition matching the junior sharpshooter shot-for-shot from beyond the arc, drawing a collection of positive reactions from impressed observers.

Siegel and Intrator obviously knew why the kids were at Amherst, but it was more important that the kids

themselves understood the purpose of such an experience. "I wanted to learn the correct skills and coaching methods rather than just pass on what I thought was correct or what I've picked up along the way," says Zakiel Hopper-Collins (known as "Ziggy" to his friends), a 14-year old 9th grader at the Renaissance School in Springfield. "I also wanted to learn to coach in ways that are fun. You don't want to drive kids too hard—you want them to have fun like we had today."

Intrator notes how Ziggy was right on with his response to the night. "In a typical urban community, only 20 percent of kids will be able to play organized youth sports, but every kid should be able to have a cool coach that will demonstrate how something you're passionate about, like basketball, can also be fun. The Amherst players really shared that piece with the kids."

Altman, who got the ball rolling and did most of the work in order to bring Project Coach to Amherst, was pleased with the night's outcome. "Our clinic had an energy and enthusiasm that affected both groups,"



Sophomore DJ Carcieri demonstrated proper defensive techniques.

he says. "The Project Coach kids were exposed to the Amherst campus and some pretty good ball players sharing their skills—but the Amherst basketball team gained even more. They emerged as leaders and teachers with a better perspective on how they could affect the lives of less affluent kids by sharing the skills of a game they all love."

Project Coach is still young considering its long-term objectives, but Intrator and Siegel have certainly conjured up something special. Ideally more college campuses will welcome and support a program that has just as much to teach as it does to learn.

Sam Intrator is an Associate Professor of Education & Child Study at Smith College, and Don Siegel is a Professor of Exercise & Sport Studies.

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