

# THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

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## *The University Classroom: Coaching & Teaching*

At the annual Brown Hall of Fame dinner in November, 2000, Bob Rothenberg, head coach of Track, gave a moving speech in accepting his award. He described his decades of experience as a coach at Brown and reminded the audience that the connection between academic and athletic endeavor should be fully integrated at an Ivy League institution. He noted that his own career had begun as a high school history teacher following his graduation from Brown in 1965. His approach to coaching track was a direct outgrowth of his experiences as teacher of an academic subject.

Fortunately for Brown, coach Rothenberg is not alone in his understanding of the essential connection between coaching and teaching. In addition to coach Rothenberg, Professor Emerita Arlene Gorton, coaches Matt Kredich (Swimming), Stuart LeGassick (Squash), Carolan Norris (Field Hockey), Scott Roop (Crew) and Norma Taylor (Women's Basketball) have been kind enough to contribute their views on the ways in which coaching athletics is integral to student learning at Brown. We hope that academic faculty will find their ideas inspiring and instructive.

### **Arlene Gorton, Professor Emerita**

On most campuses, the gym is on the fringe, both physically and perceptually. While the physical presence of a gym on the outer rim of campus may allow for more field space, the perceptual presence is isolating. During my many years as a Brown faculty member, I always talked about the importance of Brown's athletic philosophy being consonant with Brown's academic philosophy and about the need for our sport programs to be mainstreamed into the academic focus of the institution. I believe in athletics as part of the academic process and in the importance of our athletic personnel functioning as teachers. The only justification for sport at the University is sport in education as the main goal of athletics. The programs must enhance the growth of the individual student athletes. Sport can and must provide a learning environment, but this does not occur automatically. Coaches are in a unique position to serve as teachers; and the best coaches do indeed teach. Below several of our coaches address specifically how they teach. Their comments serve, I believe, to define how sport in education must function.

**Robert J. Rothenberg** '65 A. B., '66 M.A.T., *Track*: This past November Ruth Simmons addressed the faculty, students and staff of Brown University following the public announcement of her selection as the University's 18th president. She recalled having recently been asked whether universities should teach values. Her response was that "universities, whether implicitly or otherwise, always, always teach values ... even when they do not set out to do so." If this is inherent to the institution, then by extension, it must be equally true for the role of the teacher. And for those who have had the opportunity to coach young men or women on the playing field, there can be little doubt they too are teachers of values.

Coaching is a wonderful vocation inasmuch as it provides the opportunity to impact the lives of others. That opportunity carries responsibility. For the young, aspiring athlete, the coach often serves as a role model. The positive lessons that participation in athletics can provide - team work, goal setting, sportsmanship, sacrifice, dedication - are best learned when the coach recognizes that he or she is an educator. Sport has never played a greater role in American society than it does today, both in providing entertainment and in defining our cultural norms. Success or failure in the athletic arena is most often determined by wins and losses. Too often the "record" is the measure of a team and of its coach. Moreover, although the goal of winning is an intrinsic characteristic of competitive athletics, it is from the process of *trying* to win that the true values of sport are learned. These are the values that extend beyond the playing field.

Effective coaching starts with quality teaching, and the true educator teaches first by example. His or her passion for the sport, the work ethic displayed, the consideration paid to the rules and to the officials who enforce them, the manner in which the coach handles successes and disappointments on the field, the respect afforded athletic adversaries are not lost on his/her students.

Perhaps most important of all, is how the coach interacts with the athlete. The coach who chooses to coach the whole person, not just the athlete, has the greatest opportunity to teach. For him/her, the ultimate measure of success is determined not solely by the number of wins but by how well he/she teacher the people who entrusted to his care.

**Matt Kredich**, *Men's & Women's Swimming*: We had a practice one day where I did not allow our team to talk. Most people would believe that a swim team would not mind this assignment, as their faces are in the water for the majority of the practice, and much of the limited time that they have to rest is spent catching their breath. Indeed many of them initially thought that this assignment was going to be just another rule to remember as they went about the business of practicing swimming on a Tuesday afternoon in November. The rule went for coaches, too. In a typical practice I attempt to talk to every swimmer several times to give and get feedback, to provide motivation, humor, or even a sense of rhythm to the practice. My silence would certainly be felt. I gave this assignment not because I had some vision of how it was going to turn out, but just out of a gut feeling that this exercise would lead to

something really interesting.

A swimming practice involves athletes doing repetitions of various exercises over prescribed numbers of lengths of the pool with prescribed rest periods. These exercises are given in order to reinforce specific skills, to train various systems of energy production, and to create mental and emotional challenges for the swimmers to confront and to resolve. These exercises are specific to the swimmer's best event, training background, racing style, and personality. During a typical practice we have three different training groups, sometimes as many as six. One of the things that makes swimming so interesting is that two swimmers doing exactly the same practice will get extremely different benefits from the session, just as two scholars reading the same novel can have radically different experiences and interpretations. It is up to the coach and the swimmer together to plan, execute, assess, and assimilate the lessons and benefits of each practice into the ongoing plan for improvement.

As this particular practice crept by, I attempted to guess the moods and reactions of athletes by watching their facial expressions when they came to the wall. Although this was somewhat revealing for a few, others were expressionless, but I knew that they were not emotionless. As my thoughts drifted, my eyes did too, and I began to notice, or sense, a great deal more by watching the way they moved through the water. For some, frustration was evident in the way they rushed their breath, the way they were obviously losing their sense of their relationship with the water and slapping, ripping, thumping and clawing their way down the pool. Others, however, seemed to become more and more immersed in their own swimming as practice evolved, and as I watched them I thought that I could sense their presence in the water expand, as if their bodies were incorporating more and more of the surrounding water into their realm of control. I realized after a while that I was no longer watching their faces, but was sensing their emotions and energy by watching the way they expressed themselves through motion.

This was a revelation to me, although still somewhat murky, and I was so excited that I could not wait to express it to the team in our planned meeting afterwards. It turns out I never had to express it - they understood without me telling them because they were experiencing the same thing. We began the meeting by talking about the practice in general terms - I wanted to know how each of them felt about it. Predictably, those athletes who had looked frustrated in practice expressed it, but with unpredictable venom. They revealed a two-hour struggle that began as frustration and escalated into an inner war between patience and loneliness, between their sense of logic and sense of respect for authority, between hatred for the place and time and their sense of duty to the team. It seemed that there were a thousand different battles that spilled from their minds to their bodies and that their emotions were the warriors and casualties. They were exhausted. Some of the others, who had appeared to be so immersed in their own world, expressed shock at the torture that others were going through, and revealed that they had been having a wonderful time discovering nuances and aspects of their swimming that they had never recognized before.

I asked if anyone could have told me before the meeting what those who had just spoken were thinking during practice. A couple raised their hands and said that they could just sense frustration or happiness from their teammates, but couldn't explain it. A few others chimed in and said yes, now that they thought about it, they did notice especially the anger from some of their teammates. The more they talked about it, the more realized that they had noticed a different kind of communication going on, and almost all of them admitted at the end that they could have given a pretty accurate guess of what each person was thinking. One person even said, "It sure looked like you were having a good time!"

It used to bother me in high school when we were given an assignment to describe what a writer was really trying to say in his or her novel, poem, or short story. I felt like handing the book itself to the teacher and saying, "This is what they were trying to say." Athletes in motion are engaged in continual self-expression, self-evaluation, and creation. What they are "saying" is what they are doing, feeling, thinking in every moment of athleticism. It is a continual process of creation. They learn from themselves and learn from each other. As the coach, I used to try to *tell* them the lessons, but I didn't realize that you have to *live* it to know it, whatever "it" is. I'll never forget this practice because I think it marks the day when I understood that they were expressing, and interpreting, and discovering with great passion and intensity and did not need me to "interpret" for them all the time. I still feel like I have to pound some ideas towards them bluntly, forcefully, and with repetition. But I understand that it is my role to guide and allow the process, and I can only do this if we together are open to the creative process that led me to ask in the first place, "What if we have a practice where no one talks...?"

**Stuart LeGassick**, *Men's & Women's Squash*: My role as a varsity squash coach is naturally far removed from the immediate description of a coach that comes to mind: whistle in hand, furious exercise and physical exertions. At the end of the season many a parent will describe the job of a squash coach as part psychologist, sociologist, administrator, diplomat. But at the top of the list is that of teacher.

The parallels that exist between coaching a sport and academic teaching are many. A professor judges a student's skills and knowledge in the classroom. In an English class, a student may, however, possess a skill for organization of ideas and a distinct writing style. A squash player may possess a skill for disciplined adherence to a game plan and play with a distinct style. As a coach I have to assess a player's clarity of thought. ("Why are they hitting the ball to the opponent's forehand all the time?"). I have to appreciate the different ways in which everyone plays the game technically and how their distinct styles are dictated not only by the way in which they have been taught, but by their personalities and physiques as well. A five-foot tall player is not able to reach the front wall in two steps— they must take more.

A teacher has to approach criticism and instruction carefully. If you told a student to alter their writing style and added no specific directions to the suggestion, there would be little chance of an enthusiastic change. If I want a player to change the grip that they have used for the last four or five years, success would be difficult

without rationale, demonstration and explanation. What is the idea behind the new grip? A demonstration of the grip shows how it will look and feel. An explanation describes how it will improve their game. A player has to be convinced and inspired to change something they may have done for years. A good coach will inspire passion about the sport. As a coach at Brown, I am in the enviable position of seeing athletes one-to-one for two hours a day for four years. In that time, the opportunity to motivate students to challenge themselves is readily available. The team dynamic must have an atmosphere of freedom and discipline to excite all involved.

How the student athlete competes, survives, thrives under public pressure, sets goals and reaches them, manages time and how they conduct themselves individually and as part of a close knit group, is wonderful preparation for employment and life. When players play a match for the University, they do so in an open forum. They are exposed to public scrutiny. This public examination exposes both skill and personality. Students can study morals and ethics as a course at college. However, day in and day out, athletes are learning and practicing this life lesson on the "playing field."

Over the years, Brown players have been asked to ponder this situation: As a player, you are in a match where if you win one rally you will win the National title for Brown. A packed audience. Tension to chew on. The ball, just prior to you hitting it, grazes your arm. According to the rules, you have lost the rally. Nobody sees this happen. What do you do? Character is what you do when no one is watching. As a coach, I have the utmost respect for those able to think clearly and quickly and do the right thing: to call an infraction on oneself, to concede a match. To cheat and win may give a momentary thrill as you enjoy the victory with your team mates, but your lack of respect for the rules and the game will haunt you long after the cheering is done. Life on the squash is only complete with total respect for your teammates, opponents and the spirit of the game itself. This strong sense of sportsmanship is learned on a squash court, yet is carried forward into every aspect of my players' lives.

**Carolann Norris, *Field Hockey*:** After 18 years of working as a coach in the athletic department, my role as a coach has come full circle. Ultimately, our staff which includes myself, two assistant coaches and one volunteer coach serve our student athletes in all areas of their life. We try to lead them in a direction of appropriate values and responsibility for their actions. We see our job as helping them prepare for the "real world". We all know that our students think life at Brown is reality. We are accessible to them seven days a week, 364 days a year. We have had the opportunity to work with 1000 students on a day to day basis.

We try to make them accountable to themselves, their team mates, the Brown community, and their families. We encourage them to be on time, meet deadlines, face uncomfortable situations, and represent this great University in a positive manner. They learn to cooperate with students of different backgrounds (socially & economically), because they are from a wide range of backgrounds.

We feel very fortunate to be a facilitator in their growth as people, which we take very seriously. After all these years, our goal is to try to help the students leave

Brown confident and ready to take on their new challenges (and not to dwell on Ivy Championships, NCAA selections, etc.). If we take care of the total student (academically & athletically) everything else will fall into place. I would not trade this job for anything!!!

**Scott Roop, Crew:** As the Head Coach of Men's Rowing at Brown, I spend about three hours a day with our student athletes, and have open invitations to all to give special coaching or counseling at any time mutually possible. During this time strong and lasting relationships are created and enjoyed. The challenges we have on the water and in the boathouse are no different from those our graduates will eventually face when they leave Brown. The students learn to pursue vigorously both personal and team goals in this sport. Thus I see myself in a unique position to teach them how to identify and master those challenges.

As a member of a team they learn to lead and support their teammates through their behavior. The potential strength of each athlete comes from realizing that he has a tremendous impact on the development of the team from the very beginning. When the athlete realizes this, it becomes a responsibility and a source of empowerment. Each athlete will wear many hats on any given day, let alone in an entire season. He becomes a student, a teacher, a motivator, and in his own way a leader along the way. Each athlete takes greater ownership of these skills, and of the environment that he and his teammates collectively create during his four-year contribution to his team and sport. My role is to teach them that in rowing, as in life, one cannot do everything on one's own, and must learn how to work together to achieve goals.

As an athlete, however, one must also learn to set personal goals. Athletic competition is one of the few times in a person's life when he is rewarded purely on the basis of ability and effort. This becomes the moment of truth! You cannot call someone to help open the door; you cannot talk or buy your way to the finish line. Rowing is an activity that shows what a person is really about, an activity that tests and builds character. We work as coaches to teach, and the athletes to develop: self-discipline, strength, endurance, speed, relaxation, perseverance, tolerance (pertaining to the stresses on their bodies, of each other, and of difficult situations that they place themselves in, both inside and outside competition), physiology, psychology, communication, integrity, compassion, grace, quickness, skill, unity, timing, curiosity, nutrition, will, spirit, ethics, art, vision, balance, rhythm, power. The athlete at his best is balanced and complete. The qualities that I have listed above are not exclusive to the world of sport; so if I can teach the student these in the sport, they will stand him in good stead throughout his life. The mind leads and challenges the body – these are not two things that function separately.

Finally, I try to teach my students that people express themselves in a variety of ways. I was myself a world-champion athlete, and have had enormous satisfaction in coaching and teaching other national and world champions. But I was also an artist. I don't feel now, nor have I at any time felt, that one way of expressing myself, and its connection to life, is more valid or meaningful than the other. We all live, love

and die. We all have a lot in common. We try to set ourselves higher standards and to make things around us a little better. Young athletes jump around like newborn colts; as they mature, they race at full throttle with precision and grace. This brings beauty to life in the same way that great music does. As coaches, our task is to open their eyes to possibilities; to instill the knowledge of time limitations; to teach the benefits of life-long pursuit of excellence; and to stress the benefits of good health and habits.

**Norma Taylor, Tennis:** I believe you can teach lessons in many ways, through example and words, but I have always believed that actions speak louder than words. Here is an example of a lesson that I think was well worth learning involving a Brown female tennis player: there was a very talented freshmen class one year with one of the girls playing at the #1 singles position. This player had lost twice to another Ivy player and was about to play against her again. She was highly motivated to beat her, was well on her way to victory, when my assistant coach overruled her on a line call. My assistant coach was accurate and right to do this, even though it was our own player. One game later, with her coach sitting on the court, the opponent made two erroneous and obvious bad line calls on game point, which were not overruled by her coach. To make a long story short, my player, who was up 6-1, 3-0, lost the match because she was so upset that my assistant coach had overruled her and that the opponent got away with cheating. In a meeting after the match many members of her freshmen class were upset that Brown's own coach ruled against their own player and that she subsequently lost the match.

Here is the good part and the lesson: three years later, a member of that freshmen class, now a senior, was competing in a doubles match and one of her opponents made an obvious, bad, line call. The opponent's assistant coach was sitting right near the line and did not say anything to overrule her, at which point I got an umpire and the match continued. When the match ended, my player and I discussed the line call and the fact that the assistant coach did nothing to overrule an obvious and purposeful bad line call. I told my player that I was very disappointed in the assistant coach for not correcting a bad call. My player then said "Yeah, what is that coach teaching his players?" Secretly inside I was having a celebration of the lesson taught to this athlete at Brown, knowing that maybe in some small way I had taught that character, morals, doing what is right, is more important than winning a tennis match. I hoped that she would take this lesson with her in life. She is now in Medical School and will one day be a doctor: someone who helps, teaches, and saves lives.

When you coach an athlete, you are teaching more than just how to win. Representing your school, teammates and coach, become more important than just playing for yourself. Many skills are learned in a team/competitive environment, ones that stay with you for life. I do not believe that many of these lessons are acquired in the classroom, but they do emerge in a team environment where competition, team dynamics, achieving a group goal etc. are involved. Coaches have an enormous responsibility in these areas and a great deal of influence in teaching

life's lessons to their athletes. It is one of the things I enjoy about this career: an opportunity to affect someone's life in a very positive way.

The proof of the pudding is, of course, in the eating. These coaches have inspired their student athletes to measure their success in terms of learning not just winning. Their fundamental philosophy that coaching is integral to learning across the university has resulted in effective academic learning by many of their students as well. We encourage faculty to take some time during the academic year to observe the teaching techniques of their coaching colleagues in the field, on the court or in and on the water.