

Last week we got an email from a young coach who had read about Positive Conditioning. She was very interested in making this change from traditional conditioning methods and had some questions. I gave her some thoughts but also copied to Scott Rosberg who recently became a member of our speaking team. Here was his response:

Coach,

First of all, let me say AWESOME that you are going to implement Positive Conditioning. I first heard about it from Bruce when he came and spoke at our school my first year in Washington (2002), and I thought, "This is exactly what I have been looking for over the last 20 years!" I had always wanted my teams to embrace running, but I punished them with running. That didn't make sense. I started it with my girls' varsity BB team there at Granger, and it was incredible. We had such great success with it that I decided I will NEVER punish with running again. I then started it here at Park High School in Livingston, MT with my boys' varsity BB team last year when I took over this team. My boys embraced it wholeheartedly, and it was incredible once again. Now my assistant coaches and players are strong believers.

Positive Conditioning takes the traditional concept of conditioning as drudgery and punishment and turns it upside down. The general premise of Positive Conditioning is built upon the concepts of privilege and reward.

There are a couple of keys for success. Follow Bruce's booklet, understand the whole process and commit yourself to it. Especially make sure to start with the series of questions/premises at the beginning of the first practice that he talks about on the first page of the booklet.

First Premise I ask them, "Do you believe that being in great condition will make them better individual players?"

"Of course," they say, "Yes."

I then say, "And will you being a better individual player make us a better team?"

Again, they say, "Yes."

Second Premise - I then ask them, "Do you believe that being in better shape / condition will allow us to have more success?"

They say, "Yes."

I ask, "Do they recognize that being in great shape/condition is something the best teams at any level always have?"

Again, they say, "Yes.""

Conclusion - I finish that by saying something like, "All right then, given what you have just agreed on, it should be obvious to all of us that conditioning is a privilege for us all, and we need to treat it as such. It is one of the really important things that we will get to do to become our best."

The beauty is in the actual doing it. You MUST buy in 100%, and your coaches must buy in, too. (They may not be in 100% right away, but watch them change after your first few days of practice.) The key is that whenever you are conditioning EVERY COACH IN THE GYM is enthusiastically encouraging, yelling positives, communicating how well the ones who are working hard are working. DON'T REWARD KIDS WHO ARE NOT WORKING HARD! Reward all those who are. You will be amazed at how hard the kids will work when you are yelling positive, encouraging comments to those who are working their hardest.

Here is a key: make sure to yell the name of the person and EXACTLY what you are rewarding her for.

“Great job, Emily! Way to run hard all the way through the line!”

Watch the other kids craving that same kind of recognition and how hard they will work.

My favorite change I made from the old, “Get on the line!” coach that I used to be when I wanted to punish them, is how we do free throws differently. For the first 18 years of my career, I would do what most of us do - send them to the line for 5 minutes of free throws while my assistant and I would talk about practice, strategy, etc. That was so detrimental to us getting better at free throws. Nobody concentrated because we as coaches were not concentrating on them. It was like break time. Not anymore.

Now we send them to the line and shoot about 3 or 4 minutes of 1 & 1's. We (coaches) are walking around the gym, watching them. The kids GET TO RUN for a make! Again, it is a privilege. If they make 1, they run to the half-line and back. If they make both, they run a full court sprint and back. The key, though, is we are yelling things like, “Way to go, Landon. That’s the way to hit your free throws. Way to run hard!” We are rewarding both the free throw makes and the running hard. The first time I did this, I was blown away by watching the other kids. Immediately, they started looking around wondering what was going on, why we were yelling, and how they could get that. When they heard the positive comments for their teammate, they wanted the same. The concentration level at the free throw line went up, and the effort on the sprints went up BIG TIME!

Okay, so what about when you have a kid who doesn't give her all on a sprint, whether it's during the free throw running or any other running? For me, I watch her. I continue to reward the other ones with constant positive reinforcement, hoping she will join in. However, if after a couple of sprints, I don't see full effort from her, I blow the whistle, bring the team in and say, “Okay, we didn't get full effort from everyone. We had a couple of people who were coasting or not giving 100%. You agreed that for you to be better individually, and us to be a better team, we needed to be in better shape. You also agreed that it is a privilege for us to condition. You just lost your privilege for this part of practice. We're better than that, so let's make sure that doesn't happen again the next time we get to run.” AND THAT'S IT! No yelling at them, no punishing them, no singling her out - we just move on to the next drill. I usually try to make sure we have another conditioner ready to go, though, at some point in the practice, to give them (and her) a chance to redeem themselves. (If she continues to be a problem, we will call her in individually and talk with her about it. However, we will not single her out ever during the running.)

Let me address your questions: 1.) Keeping them on task and motivated is so much easier with this. YOU and YOUR ASSISTANTS must be enthusiastic and passionate, and they must see that from you. I tell our players that we don't run for punishment, but we will limit playing time. The bench is the greatest motivator in that respect. 2.) We always have the winning team in a drill get to run now. I know it is crazy but they LOVE it... 3.) Free throw question I addressed above.

There are many drills that you can do in different sports that lend themselves very well to Positive Conditioning. For more information on how to set up a Positive Conditioning program and for many more conditioning drills, check out Bruce Brown's booklet, Team-Building through Positive Conditioning at our website, www.proactivecoaching.info . Or better yet schedule Bruce or one of our team members to come to your school and show you how it works. I think you'll be glad you did.

I am so excited for you to be doing this. I think you are going to love it. We start practice next Monday, and I'm getting pumped up FOR CONDITIONING just writing all this! Good luck, have a great season, and enjoy the POSITIVE CONDITIONING!

Scott Rosberg