

## Winning with Highly At-Risk Student- Athletes

Throughout one's coaching career, coaches will experience several complexities as it relates to the well-being of the student-athletes that we coach. In the coaching community, there are several conversations being had about a "New Breed" of student-athletes coming through the pipeline. The premise of this conversation is based on a new reality that student-athletes today require much more than skill based training and preparation. That coaches must serve in a greater capacity than just coaching, and must be equipped to serve in several other roles, such as a parental figure, counselor, motivator, amongst others.

While attending the Women's Basketball Coaching Convention hosted by the Women's Basketball Coaching Association (WBCA), a professional organization that provides a platform for women's basketball coaches across the country to connect, network, and grow, I was able to sit in on a seminar and gain some valuable insight and perspective from a coaching colleague. Instead of focusing on all the many roles that coaches have to play, this conversation was geared more towards looking at the totality of student-athletes backgrounds, life experiences, and common characteristics that would warrant their "neediness" for a lack of a better word.

This opened up an entire different view for me. To a certain extent, when we recruit student-athletes, we want to learn as much about them as possible. However, even when you think you've learned a lot about a student-athlete, there are some things that are left hanging in the balance. And when a student-athlete says or does something outside of that picture you painted in your mind of them, we as coaches are sometimes very quick to rip away the scholarship and send said student-athlete back to wherever they came from. Whereas, if we utilized the information that we obtained about a student-athlete in a different manner, then we can see the red flags coming and prepare ourselves to better deal with them when they arise.

Highly At-Risk Student- Athletes (HARSA), a term coined by Chanda Rigby, the presenter of the above mentioned seminar, are student-athletes that meet one or more of the following characteristics: first generation college student, have an absent parent, learning disability, emotional disability, have experienced homelessness, low socioeconomic background, low test scores, taken remedial coursework, etc. This is all information that is obtained throughout the recruiting process, but when used improperly it can be detrimental to the student-athlete's success. As coaches, we expect a certain standard of behavior across the board from all of our student-athletes, not realizing that many of them may have never been properly taught. We are holding them to this high expectation instead of meeting them where they are, properly utilizing what we are learning about them in the recruiting process and developing the necessary environment to assist them in their pursuit of success.

This was an eye opener for me, as many of the student-athletes we recruit and come into contact with on the regular basis would fit this criteria, and therefore would fall into the HARSA category. It is important identify these characteristics early, and understand that these particular student-athletes may come to college with a very unique set of needs and will require much more effort on behalf of the coach. It's about progress not perfection; to meet each student-athlete

where they are at, and help foster an environment in which they can grow and be successful. If you can successfully do this, then you have found a way to connect to the person behind the mask... And that right there is considered a WIN.

Ayana McWilliams