



“TO CLIMB THE LADDER...OR NOT TO CLIMBER THE LADDER...THAT IS THE QUESTION”

ADVICE TO YOUNG COACHES FROM A YOUNG COACH

BY: JARED VAN ACKER- HEAD FOOTBALL COACH- GRAFTON H.S (YORKTOWN, VA)

“I wish I would’ve known that when...” or “If I could do it all over again...” are some of the common phrases that some young coaches make after getting a chance to move up the ladder in the coaching profession. As a young varsity head football coach entering my 30’s it is kind’ve weird to give advice to young coaches looking to make the leap to a higher levels of coaching. No matter what level there is a constant revolving door and moving up and down on the coaching ladder year in and year out. I personally have moved up the ladder pretty quickly in the high school coaching ranks. I was an assistant football coach for one year in Illinois while I was still a college student. After my college football playing days were over after knee surgery, I understood my playing days were nearing the end and I wanted to “hang up my cleats and replace them with a whistle” and sort of pay it forward and give young men the opportunity to play football the way I was given. After graduation, I was offered and accepted a job in Central Virginia at William Campbell High School, a small-school located just outside of Lynchburg, VA. I was a defensive assistant there for three years under the tutelage of Brad Bradley, an amazing head football coach with numerous regional and state championships under his belt. I was even fortunate to be a part of his staff when William Campbell won the state championship in 2005!

After three years as an assistant coach, I had the head football coaching “itch” and threw my hat in the ring for all the head coaching vacancies in the State of Virginia. Now was I ready for what I was about to embark?...In hindsight, yes and maybe even no....I was offered the head football position at Galax High School, located in Southwestern Virginia, which was a small-school with only 400 total students and plays in the smallest classification in the State of Virginia. I was only 25 years old, recently married, and had the dreams and aspirations to become a head football coach...and here it was in front of me and all I had to do was accept the offer! I accepted the offer and became one of the youngest head coaches in the history of the State of Virginia...now the hard work had to be put in! I served as the head football coach for three years at Galax High School and then accepted the head coaching position at Grafton High School last year. Grafton has an enrollment of just under 1,400 students and located in historic Yorktown, Virginia in the famous “757” Hampton Roads football hotbed. We went 8-3 and made it to the playoffs for the first time since 2005! I was selected the Bay Rivers District Division 4 Coach of the Year for reversing Grafton’s record from 4-6 to 8-3 and finishing 2nd in our district behind eventual Division 3 State Champion, Poquoson. Now I cannot take credit for such a turnaround...I was blessed with a talented group of athletes who played their hearts out for our coaching staff and each other. I’m a firm believer in the quote” It’s not about X’s and O’s but rather Jimmy’s and Joe’s” ...they believed in the system that I brought and played together. I was surrounded by a great group of coaches who taught the game of football with passion and was supported by the best administration in the State of Virginia. I am truly blessed!



I find it interesting that at the young age of 30 and only with 8 years of coaching experience on my resume that I have gone through the highest of highs, the lowest of lows, and everywhere in between in my young coaching career. Due to this I've felt compelled to share my experiences and give advice/suggestions to young coaches who are looking to climb the ladder in the coaching profession. So I compiled a list of 10 things you need to consider if you are looking to move up the ladder in coaching.

10 THINGS YOU NEED TO CONSIDER WHEN YOU WANT TO CLIMB THE LADDER

1. Administration
2. School/Athletes
3. Community/Parents
4. Resources/Facilities
5. Control/ Decision-Making
6. Finances/ Fundraisers/ Booster Club
7. Success/ Hype
8. Scenario
9. Staff/ Personnel
10. Beginnings

Support the community, parents, students, etc. Do they support their coaches when complaints are made or do they tuck their tail and bow to the pressure? Do they play small or big town politics? Do they let you coach or do they micromanage? Are they willing to think outside-the-box and try something new or are they set in their ways? Remember, one thing you cannot control is the ever-changing face of your administration. You may get hired by one administration and they could be gone the next year. The new administration might have someone already in mind for your position and maybe they have a different vision than the one you were hired on. While all of the other topics on this "top ten" list are important, it is vital to have a great and supportive administration. Otherwise, you're setting yourself up for failure.

School/Athletes

When considering taking the next step on the coaching ladder, it is important that you take a look at the school and the athletes that walk the hallways. There are many different scenarios that you will need to look into and research when making such critical decisions. Weigh the pros and cons of a big school versus a small school and how the school population impacts your level of athletic ability. Investigating its past football history will reveal whether or not it was a football powerhouse with a strong tradition or a perennial loser that is the laughing stock of the school. Is the position an opportunity for rebuilding or reloading situation? Are there athletes roaming the hallways who, for one reason or another, have not played in previous years? Does the school have specific sports (s) that are very successful, which interfere with participation in the football program? These factors are important with regards to the success of the program. Remember, in our cut-throat profession, if you don't win, you won't be there for long.



Community and Parents

The community and parents can either be a valuable asset or a thorn in your side. Inquire about community and parental involvement with the football program and determine if it is a positive contribution to its success. It is also important to know how involved and supportive the parents and community have been with past football coaches. Does the school allow big town/small town politics to rule its athletic programs? Unless you are an alumni looking to come home, or an assistant desiring to move up in the ranks, you will most likely be an outsider, or “the new kid on the block”. In addition, discovering how community and parent participation in fundraising and financially supporting the program is essential. It is important for new, young coaches to open up to the community and parents to gain their support. They can become your biggest ally in how effective and successful your program can be.

Resources and Facilities

While resources and facilities won’t make or break a decision to accept a coaching position, they are an influential part of building a solid foundation for your program. When you are researching a possible job position you will want to look at the facilities that you will use for your football program. You need to assess the facilities and determine if you have good enough facilities to be successful. How is the school’s weight room? Do they even have a weight room? Do you have a field house or is the locker room in the school? Do they even have a locker room? Is there enough storage for all of your equipment? How are the practice fields? Do you even have a practice field or will you have to practice on the game field? Is the equipment in good condition and do you have the necessary needs to be a successful football program? Is your school planning to get any “up-grades” or even “down-grades” in the next couple of years such as renovations, new stadium, building new schools, etc? All of these things can positively or negatively affect your football program and can affect the success of your football program.

Control/ Decision-making Power

Another thing that is very important is your voice and decision making power in your football program. How much power will you really have when it comes to the football program? Will you have input in scheduling of future opponents? Will you get to determine what style of offense or defense you will run for your program? Will you have the authority to interview, hire, or fire assistant coaches on your staff? Though you may be the head football coach there is a chain of command with the athletic director, school principal, superintendent, and school board who are really in control of the school and athletic programs. You will need to research how much influence they may or may not have on your program. Do they micro-manage or do they let you run your program? Do you have to get approval before you spend money earned through fundraisers? Will you be able to fundraise for your football program? Do they have a track record of getting involved in the football program and using “executive power” over



previous coaches? Remember if you are going to be responsible for the football program, you will want to make sure that you are truly in control of your football program. If you are not in control of the program, it really isn't your program and decisions made by others may positively or negatively affect your football program and your ability to be successful.

Finances/Fundraisers/Booster Clubs

"Money makes the world go around" is a quote that I remember learning at a very young age in which money or finance is very important in life. Nothing is different with a football program, in which a program that has money can use/buy multiple things that could help win football games. I am a true believer that there is a lot of "free money" out in communities surrounding schools that people are more than willing to give to support your program. The hardest part is going out to that community and receiving the financial support. Will you be able to fundraise for your football program or will it be frowned upon by your administration or school board? Do you have a separate football account in the school system where you can keep your money earned from fundraisers? Who has access to your account? Are you required to give a certain percentage to the athletic budget? I also believe a school's booster club is very important if run effectively. What will they provide for your football program? What will you have to do for the Booster Club? What is the philosophy of the Booster Club? I believe a Booster Club should do exactly what their name implies: boost the program. They should provide the extra necessary funds to help the school's athletic programs to be more successful. With dwindling athletic budgets and lower gate receipts there is only so much the athletic department can provide each of its sports...that is where the Booster Club should step in and help. Does the Booster Club have influence on the football program? Do you have a strong or weak booster club at your school? Does the Booster Club play politics or is it run by a certain sport, group, family, or individual that looks to their own interests?

Success/Hype

One other aspect that a young coach looking to climb the ladder is the amount of prior success or hype involved in your hire. Are there some high expectations placed on you due to your prior success? Are you replacing a coach who had a lot of success or failure? Is the administration, community, parents, and student-athletes expecting instant success or willing to give you time to build your program up through the ranks? I would make sure that you understand the expectations that are going to be placed on your shoulders before you even get started at your new school. You may be coming from a very successful program or had a successful career as an assistant and are expected to bring that success with you and make an immediate impact on the program. How are the administration, community, parents, and student-athletes going to react if you do not meet those expectations? Will your authority, coaching-style, offensive/defensive philosophy, and coaching ability be questioned? Through the years of my short coaching career, I have learned that you need to coach each year like it's your first year and understand that it could be your last year as well. Be yourself and coach the way that you coach because in the end you can say that you did it your way successful or not. Be able to put your head on the pillow at night and sleep in peace knowing you did your very best!



Scenario

Another piece of advice I would give young coaches looking to climb the ladder, would be to evaluate and assess if this is the right opportunity and decision to make for your career, family, etc. There are many different factors that need to be assessed when making this very important decision to jump in the ranks. Where are you in your coaching career? Do you have to take a job or can you look around and try to find the best opportunity? Are you married and what does your spouse feel about the decision? Do you have children and what do you think they think about the decision? Where are you financially? Do you have to re-locate or move for the new position? Is the move a lateral move or a promotion? Through my experiences the hardest aspect of making the new move is personal assessment. You have probably made new friends, settle down, new memories, etc...Do you really want to leave for this new position? Do you own or rent? Will you be able to sell your house or get out of your rental agreement? As you can see there are tons of questions and areas for assessment that need to be done before making such a critical decision. Luckily, for me I have a higher power that has guided me throughout all of these difficult and crucial decisions and has opened doors that I never thought possible!

Staff/Personnel

I am a true believer that a great coach is only as good as the people around them. If you are a young coach looking to climb the ladder, to help you achieve success you will want to surround yourself with good assistant coaches and personnel. Do you have the power to interview, hire, and fire assistant coaches? Will you get to bring coaches with you to this new school? Will you be given a staff that has already been established? Do you get to make the personnel decisions for your program? Will you be able to post available positions or does the Human Resources department handle this process? You will want to surround yourself with individuals who are willing to put forth all the hard work necessary to put you're your team in position to win games. You will want these individuals to be loyal to your philosophy, teaching/coaching methods, and vision for the football program. Your staff must understand the chain of command in your staff and that the head coach runs the entire football program. I would advise all young coaches to surround themselves with assistants with good character qualities that can be positive role models for your student-athletes. In my opinion, a loyal and positive coaching staff that is working in the same direction, and understands that they are coaching for the kids builds a strong foundation for success.

The Beginnings/ Early Days

After you have assessed all the areas above and determined that this is an opportunity that cannot be passed up, you need to put a lot of effort in building the foundations of your football program. You want to take the positive aura that surrounds your hire and really set the tone from the beginning. In my opinion you have to do four very important things before you can get started at your new school. You have to "change your colors" and have a team meeting with all of the players at your old school to announce your decision that you are leaving before it is made public. I have had to go through this very



hard event two times in my young career and there wasn't a dry eye in the whole room. You have developed lasting relationships with your young players, you have mentored them, and you have laughed with them, cried with them, celebrated with them, disciplined them, and hopefully impacted each of their lives. Secondly, you need to have a "meet'n'greet" with all interested players/staff at your new school as soon as possible after the announcement of your hiring. They want to meet you, get to know you, and listen to your vision that you plan to bring to them and the football program. I even get all of their phone numbers/contact information and call everyone in attendance personally to find out more about each of them, get their input on the program, and share my vision with them one-on-one as well. Third of all, you need to set up a "meet'n'greet" with the parents and community to meet everyone and get involved in the community as soon as possible. Last of all, you need to get the program in motion as soon as possible and begin to set the foundation for your first season. I even took vacation days/personal leave days to go to my new school to get involved with my new kids. I sometimes drove 6 hours away three days a week to and from my old school to my new school! You need to get the weight room up and running, start up a 7-on-7 program, team meetings, staff meetings, and building new relationships with your kids. You only get a "honeymoon" once when you start a program and you want to build a foundation of success during the early months!

Hopefully, I have given young coaches looking to climb the ladder an insight into the complex and crucial decision that you will have to make in the future. Good Luck and God Bless!

About the Author:

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Jared Van Acker

Coach Jared Van Acker recently finished his 2nd year as the head football coach at Grafton High School, located in Yorktown, Virginia. He has led the Clippers to back-to-back Division 4 playoff appearances, earning a #1 seed entering Region play in the 2011 season. At the end of the 2010 season, he was named Coach of the Year for the Bay Rivers District. Jared completed his fifth year as a head football coach, with three prior years at Galax High School in Virginia. Prior to Galax H.S., he served three years as an assistant coach at William Campbell High School in Virginia, where he helped coach the Generals to a state championship in 2005. He served one season as an assistant at Carthage High School in Illinois, where they finished as state runner-up. He played three years of college football at Quincy University, located in Quincy, IL. He received his Bachelor's Degree from Western Illinois University and graduated from J.D Darnell High School in Geneseo, IL.