



PLAY IT SMART

Turning Athletics Teams Into Learning Teams

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A program of The National Football Foundation and College Hall of Fame

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Play It Smart Spotlight: The Academic Coach

By building a critical bridge between the playing field and the classroom, Play It Smart annually affects the lives of more than 10,000 high school student-athletes.

At the heart of the 128 Play It Smart programs across the country is the academic coach. Equal parts mentor, counselor, advocate and confidant, the academic coaches work with the participants year-round, challenging them to grow as students, athletes and citizens. The academic coaches set individual goals for the kids and team goals for the group, equipping everyone with the support they need to fulfill their ambitions. In taking students' passion for their sport, something an athlete finds intrinsically rewarding, academic coaches are able to connect with their participants and develop a sense of pride and self-worth in the kids that touches them on a daily basis.

"My job is to act as a mentor to these kids and engage them in opportunities to improve their study habits and social skills," said Miriam Merrill, academic coach at both Hyde Park Academy High School and Harlan Community High School in Chicago. "The more involved I can be with what's going on in their lives, the more involved and responsible they will be to me and the program."

Academic coaches fulfill two critical principles in The National Football Foundation's Play It Smart program: relationships and opportunities.

Academic coaches cultivate one-on-one relationships with the student-athletes and often serve as their advocates to teachers, parents and school personnel. In working with the kids for the entire school year, academic coaches develop trust with the participants,



Regularly scheduled community service activities include opportunities for participants to read to local elementary school students, as seen above in Cincinnati, Ohio. As a result, student-athletes develop a sense of pride in their communities and build self-esteem that they apply in other important situations.

becoming a constant source of support.

Academic coaches also create new opportunities that might not be available for the student-athletes on their teams. Participants learn time



Relationships and opportunities are two critical tenets of the Play It Smart program and are often developed through group activities such as the Election Day volunteerism seen here in Hamden, Connecticut.

management skills and study strategies and often serve as tutors to their teammates during study tables organized by academic coaches. In SAT/ACT prep sessions, academic coaches stress the importance of preparing for these college entrance

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Principal Sees Broad Impact of Play It Smart

Ever since the Play It Smart program came to O.H. Platt High School in Meriden, Connecticut, I've witnessed a noticeable change in the climate of our school community. The student-athletes have learned and demonstrated equally that hard work and good grades are just as important as working hard at practice and winning games. The program encourages its participants to attend college and helps all of them work toward their life goals.

For a program like this to be successful in a school, there are several things that need to happen. First, the academic coach position has to be filled by a quality, knowledgeable person who is able to motivate students and communicate the program's mission. Second, the head coaches need to support the program 110%. Third, the school, administration and staff need to support and promote the program. If these basics are in place, the program will be successful and will have a positive effect on the school's climate in a very short time.

We've enjoyed a very successful run with Play It Smart since its implementation in September of 2000. Tom Ryan, our head football coach, along with two former assistant coaches, guidance counselor Ed Grady and special education teacher Robert Montemurro, were trying to find a way to establish a year-round after-school study program for football players to improve their GPAs.

Coach Ryan attended a National Football Foundation scholar-athlete banquet in the spring of 1999 and heard one of the scholar-athlete honorees speak about a program at nearby Hillhouse High School named Play It Smart. The program had everything Coach Ryan sought:

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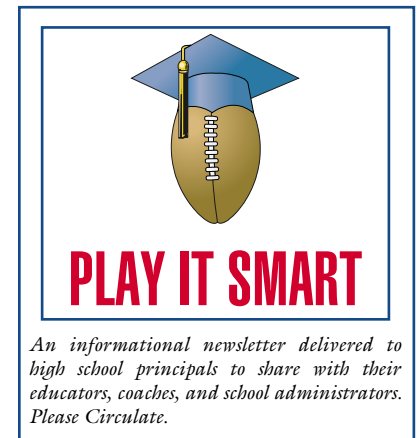
Youth Development: It's About Relationships

While Aleem Barnhardt lay in a hospital bed wondering if he would ever be able to play sports again, his Play It Smart academic coach, Jim Presbrey, sat at his side listening intently. The thought of having a career-ending injury flooded Aleem with waves of fear, sadness, and anger. Through it all, however, Aleem sensed that Coach Presbrey under-

stood what he was going through and would be there for him no matter what the future held.

Fast forward seven years and Aleem, now a graduate of Monmouth College, is proud of his new role, serving as the academic coach for the Play It Smart program at his old school, Orange High School in Orange, New Jersey.

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Key Factors in Mentoring Relationships: Empathy and High Expectations

The positive influence of a quality relationship with a caring adult mentor is well documented in the youth development literature. Yet, the specific qualities or characteristics that enable mentors to connect and build rapport with young people have not been identified systematically, particularly from the perspective of the individuals being mentored.

Recently, members of the research team at The National Football Foundation Center for Youth Development Through Sport at Springfield College (NFF Center) completed an analysis of feedback from over 1,000 participants in the Play It Smart program. Analyses of these data revealed several factors that are central to the development of an effective working relationship between program participants and their academic coaches. These factors have been grouped under two general categories: "Empathy" and "Pushing to Succeed."

Empathy—the ability to understand another person from his or her unique perspective—typically requires certain characteristics. Play It Smart participants used terms such as "patience," "understanding," "approachability," "friendliness," and "having a sense of humor"

as qualities that described caring and effective academic coaches. Play It Smart promotes itself as a relationship-driven program, and academic coaches spend considerable time during their training learning active listening skills and how to treat each young person as the expert on their own experiences. Consistent with the old proverb that "young people don't care what you know, until they know that you care," empathy appears to be the cornerstone of a quality relationship.

Although empathy is critical in establishing a trusting relationship, the NFF Center's research also revealed that effective academic coaches were those who were not afraid to push participants to succeed. This study provided evidence that once young people trust that you care about them, they are much more receptive to being challenged. Study participants used phrases such as "firm, but fair," "disciplined," "challenging," "pushes and motivates me," and "keeps me focused on my goals," to describe the academic coaches that they viewed as most helpful. These findings reinforce the importance of being positive and hopeful of young people's potential to succeed and then holding them to these high expectations.

Another aspect of the relationship between

academic coaches and program participants is the importance of serving as their advocates. Academic coaches who go to bat for individuals and act as their advocates with teachers, parents and school administrators demonstrate their caring in a measurable fashion. While many people might profess their support for individual students, there are few who will actively and consistently make the effort to promote their accomplishments, or remain an advocate when things get difficult. Actions do appear to speak louder than words.

Results from a recent doctoral dissertation from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro support the NFF Center's findings. Based on a series of qualitative interviews with experienced Play It Smart academic coaches, the researcher concluded that effective mentors are likely to be those with strong "people skills." Specifically, academic coaches believed that openness, an ability to read players,

knowing when to push and when to stop, and being extraordinary listeners are the key ingredients to creating a positive learning environment and increasing the chances for future success.

In summary, the NFF Center's recent study supports the belief that developing a relationship based on empathy, and holding young people to high expectations and standards of performance, are critical factors in promoting positive youth development.

Note: A U.S. Department of Education grant specifically provides \$10,655,312 over five years. In year one, the grant provides \$1,498,848, while outside sources will contribute approximately \$2.25 million to cover the additional schools in the program. Grant funding in year two increases to \$2,561,460, holds steady in years three and four, and tapers in year five to \$1,514,747. During the course of the grant, the NFF will continue to raise money from individuals, corporations and foundations.

The National Football Foundation Center for Youth Development Through Sport at Springfield College can be reached at 1-866-532-2289. Please visit www.footballfoundation.com/Center/center.php for more information.



The academic coach serves as a mentor for Play It Smart student-athletes who, in turn, enhance other youngsters' potential for success, as this Play It Smart participant does with a first-grader.



Empathy is the cornerstone of any quality relationship, and remains key to the mission of a Play It Smart academic coach.

Play It Smart: How it Works

- Every academic coach receives special training and support from The National Football Foundation Center for Youth Development Through Sport (NFF Center) at Springfield College (Mass.).
- Once training is concluded, academic coaches meet with students on the first day of school and set individual and team goals.
- Academic coaches formally become part of the team's coaching staff, and will act as a mentor to the student-athletes and a liaison with the coaches and school administrators to update them on their kids' progress off the playing field.
- Student-athletes become acclimated with the program and participate in organized study sessions, individual tutoring sessions, SAT/ACT prep workshops, college enrollment tutorials and community service activities over the course of the school year.
- Periodically throughout the year, the academic coaches meet with individual student-athletes and their teachers, coaches, parents and guardians to discuss goal-setting, areas of improvement and progress.
- Even after their season is over, the academic coaches maintain their positions as a mentor and advocate for the student-athletes, and follows the kids' academic progress to graduation and beyond.
- At a cost of little more than \$1 per day per student-athlete, Play It Smart graduates 97% of its participants, with 81% moving on to college.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT (Continued from page 1)

When asked about his career choice, Aleem was quick to point out that he wanted to follow in the footsteps of his former academic coach and mentor, Coach Presbrey.

Caring Adult Mentors

Aleem's story is not unusual. In fact, research shows that positive youth development is unlikely to occur unless individuals have the benefit of caring adult mentors and a community system that supports and promotes individuals' interests. The National Football Foundation Center for Youth Development through Sport at Springfield College (NFF Center) classifies caring adult mentors as one of the key external assets within its framework of positive youth development. Whether it is parents, teachers, coaches, or community leaders, it seems that everyone needs a person who cares about them and pushes them to be the best that they can be.

Effective mentoring relationships are based on caring and empathy. When young people sense that adults are sincerely interested in them as individuals, when they feel valued and accepted, and when they believe that they are being treated with respect, the foundation of a caring mentoring relationship begins to form.

Mentoring relationships between adults and youth cannot be forced or rushed. Research suggests that these relationships typically require consistent contact over an extended time period and are most likely to happen while young people are engaged in structured and goal-focused activities that they view as important. Jim Presbrey remained in close contact with Aleem following his season-ending injury,

and the time they spent together fostered a trust that helped Aleem maintain his focus on school and facilitated his transition into college.

Although mentoring relationships begin with caring and empathy, they are dynamic and ongoing processes that require the adults or older peers to challenge and demand excellence from young people. Effective mentors are individuals who hold high and positive expectations for youth and who are willing and able to maintain regular involvement over time.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement and monitoring is another external asset that can have clear benefits in youth development programs. Unfortunately, a significant number of young people grow up in environments where parenting figures lack the skills, strategies, knowledge, or time necessary to create an environment that promotes positive development. Nonetheless, there is considerable evidence that parents and guardians who become involved in their children's activities and demonstrate a clear interest on a day-by-day basis without being intrusive are in the best position to reinforce appropriate behaviors and attitudes at home. In addition, this line of research shows that sports and other after-school activities provide a concrete and

public stage for individual and team accomplishments, which invites parental involvement in activities that their children view as important.

Effective Mentoring Relationships

- Form the cornerstone of the Play It Smart program.
- Require consistent contact over an extended period of time.
- Demand adults or older peers to challenge and expect excellence from young people.
- Reinforce appropriate behaviors and attitudes on a daily basis.
- Feed off an available community environment to encourage activities that enable kids to give back to their communities.
- Occur while young people are engaged in structured and goal-focused activities that they view as important.

Activities with Intrinsic Value

Although the influence of parents and adult mentors on youth development is obvious, it is important to note that these relationships are more significant when they are related to activities that young people value. If one considers the fact that most junior and senior high school students rate school as boring and uninteresting, then it is not surprising that studies show that young people rarely include teachers among the adults who are most important in their lives.

The key to effective mentoring is to engage young people while they are participating in activities that they consider fun, challenging, and intrinsically rewarding. For individuals like Aleem, sports, hobbies, and other after-school activities provide the most fertile environment for mentoring relationships to develop.

Dr. Albert Petitpas, Ed.D., a leading sports psychologist, is the director of The National Football Foundation Center for Youth Development Through Sport at Springfield College in Massachusetts.



Effective mentoring relationships require consistent contact over an extended time period while young people are engaged in structured and goal-focused activities, like group study sessions in Buckingham, Virginia.

PRINCIPAL (Continued from page 1)

regularly scheduled study sessions from September to June; accountability in grade performance and school behavior; and community service activities that provided the kids with an opportunity to give back outside of school.

After speaking with several key personnel, Coach Ryan worked closely with Play It Smart Regional Coordinator Jeff McCann to secure the program at Platt and implement it for three hours a day, three days a week the first year.

As the program entered its second year at Platt, Louis Bronk/Zdunowski, a former standout football player at Platt and Wesleyan University, assumed the academic coach position. The program took off, and immediately showed dividends in the kids' academic performance. More student-athletes signed up for the SATs, community service activities brought the team closer together, and the team GPA skyrocketed from a 2.1 to 2.7 after just the first term.

In the third year, Coach Bronk continued to make strides: 674 hours of community service were completed and the team GPA rose from 2.7 to 2.99.

Brian Frederick took over for the fourth year of the program. Brian was a former Platt football player, and he played college football at Central Connecticut State University. Student-athletes continued to be positive role models at Platt High School. Our student-athletes' acceptance into college continued to increase and GPAs rose to 3.0.

Now in its fifth year with us, Play It Smart continues on a positive path. GPA for the program's participants is at 3.2 and more than 70% of the student-athletes have qualified for the honor roll.

Starting in September, The National Football Foundation, with a grant given by the U.S. Department of Education, will fully fund the Play It Smart program at Platt and expand it to include tutoring five days a week and after-school study. As of this time, girls' and boys' soccer, basketball and wrestling have signed on to take part in the Play It Smart program.

Play It Smart's success has been greater than we anticipated. If any principal wants to change their school climate, I highly recommend this program.

Tim Gaffney is the principal at Platt High School in Meriden, Connecticut. Platt implemented the Play It Smart program beginning in the 2000-2001 academic year.



Positive youth development is not likely to occur unless individuals have the benefit of caring adult mentors and a system that supports and promotes their interests.

THE ACADEMIC COACH *(Continued from page 1)*

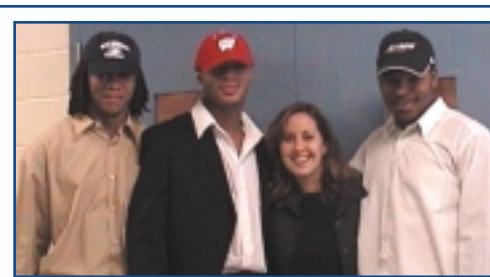
exams and drill test-taking strategies. Through regularly scheduled Play It Smart-sponsored community service activities, players develop pride in themselves and their local communities while developing skills that they can apply to other important situations. Academic coaches also play an instrumental role in the college application process, from instructing students on eligibility forms and financial aid opportunities to organizing campus visits and talks with professors or college enrollment officers.

The challenges academic coaches face on a daily basis encompass a wide range of issues. Their responsibilities include administering team-wide study tables; providing individualized tutoring help; planning incentive programs that reward hard work; and providing the coaching staff with team academic progress reports, just to name a few.

Not to be overlooked, however, is the academic coach's role in building key relationships with school administrators, teachers, the coaching staff, parents and others. Each academic coach strives to develop a strong

working relationship with these people to ensure that the program can run effectively and efficiently.

"My responsibility goes beyond pushing these kids academically and athletically," said Curtis Owen, academic coach at Chandler High School in Chandler, Arizona. "Making sure the coaches, the principal, the



As an academic coach, Laurie Lazovick (third from left) develops a unique and lasting mentoring rapport with her New Brunswick, New Jersey, student-athletes.

athletics director] are well-informed of what we're doing and what we're trying to accomplish—that is as important as anything else."

Merrill encountered this issue as a first-year academic coach at her two Chicago schools last fall. Not wanting to fight an uphill battle in competing for the attention and time of her students, she approached the coaching staff and informed them of the program's goals and missions. The staff has supported her

kids how important it is, then nobody will respond to it."

Greg Ford had already served as academic coach for two years before he accepted the responsibility at Oak Ridge High School in Orlando, Florida. At Oak Ridge, a new school to the program as part of a multimillion dollar U.S. Department of Education grant, Ford had the dual challenge of introducing himself along with the program to more than 70 student-athletes, but his situation became easier once the established staff lent their support.

"Any time you go to a new school, you look for a glimmer of hope, one point from which you can build and work," Ford said. "Having a coach and a staff that is accommodating to the program's needs is vital to its overall success."

For more information on the Play It Smart program and how to get involved, please visit www.playitsmart.org or call The National Football Foundation at 1-800-486-1865.

The Play It Smart Academic Coach

Some of the responsibilities of the Play It Smart academic coach include but are not limited to:

- Schedule and supervise team study tables and individual tutoring sessions.
- Organize regular community service activities.
- Run SAT/ACT workshops and college application tutorials.
- Inform coaching staff of student's academic progress.
- Coordinate with teachers, parents and counselors about a student's classroom and extracurricular progress.
- Act as a mentor and an advisor for dozens of student-athletes.

Did you know...

There are 122 Play It Smart academic coaches at 128 schools around the country.



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