

STUDENT CENTERED

Get "Gritty" in Your Classrooms

BY JIM FORNACIARI

Secondary school leaders and their classroom teaching staffs do not need to be Chicagoans to learn a few lessons from the world champion Cubs. The real lesson for school leadership is not in the novelty of the Cubs finally winning a World Series, but in how the team actually achieved that goal.

The Cubs were on the brink of losing the series, trailing the Cleveland Indians three games to one, but then managed to overcome heavy odds by winning the final three games. What caused this sudden reversal? The Cubs simply went back to relying on a characteristic that had been developed and instilled in them by manager Joe Maddon—grit.

As a former high school baseball coach and, most importantly, as an AP teacher, I was inspired watching Cub players confront each turn “at bat” as an opportunity to wear down and eventually defeat their opponent. I have found that my students—much like Maddon’s players—benefit greatly from the fostering and encouragement of “grittiness” in the classroom. Certainly, to be successful, Maddon’s players must develop the physical skills needed to play professional baseball, much as my students must develop sound critical thinking and essay-writing skills. However, it is the development of grit that University of Pennsylvania professor, researcher, and author Angela Duckworth says is an essential element to student growth.

High Expectations

The first key thing teachers must do to develop a classroom culture of grittiness is to establish high expectations. When Maddon was introduced as the new Cubs manager before the 2015 season, he said, “We’re going to set our marks high. So ... I’m going to talk World Series.”

Why should classroom teachers aim for anything less? When my school, Glenbard West High School

in suburban Chicago, launched our AP European History program in 2007, I wanted all involved to understand my expectations as the instructor were high. As I planned to launch this new course, I reflected upon a lesson learned years before as a coach: The more time and effort a team put forth, the more difficult it was for athletes to give up. This same pattern holds true in the classroom.

Early in the school year, many of the very bright students I teach are surprised to learn that talent alone is not the only attribute needed for success. By demanding a high level of work, I have developed a group of students who don’t easily give in when they encounter the inevitable frustrations and roadblocks.

Growth Mindset

Another key characteristic of classrooms that foster the development of grit in students is found with teachers who advocate for a “growth mindset.” Stanford University professor and researcher Carol Dweck pioneered this concept. Her research encourages teachers to not accept the age-old notion that a student’s ability to grow mentally is static or fixed. Dweck argues that students who put in the effort can learn more and grow over time. In order to have students adopt a “growth mindset,” teachers must be careful to establish a new tone in conversations with teens in which students are recognized for effort rather than for intelligence. Dweck’s research suggests that students will continue to stretch for teachers who provide feedback that focuses on their effort rather than on their talent. Understanding the importance of this kind of recognition and feedback, I recognize several students with each unit of study as “Students of the Unit.” The award is not given to the student with the highest test score, but instead is given to the student who displays great

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perseverance. Although this type of recognition has often been categorized as "elementary," I have found it pays tremendous dividends in pushing my students toward grittiness.

Developing Passion

The third key thing that teachers need to do in order to develop grittiness in their classrooms is to bring a passion for their subject matter. While speaking at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching recently, Duckworth

said, "Grit is not just about perseverance over time, but also passion over time." I have found that this element comes first and foremost from the teacher. It should be a given that all secondary teachers want to teach teens, but that interest often comes long after the passion and love for their subject material has been cultivated. Once teachers begin to model passion for their subject, it's far easier to elicit that same passion in students. Impassioned students find it difficult to walk away from roadblocks or challenges.



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TO ESTABLISH “GRITNESS” AT YOUR SCHOOL:

- **Encourage teachers to develop a course mission.**

Giving the students a large class goal to strive toward throughout the year will help encourage more student investment. Teachers may even allow the students to be involved in selecting the goal.

- **Encourage and develop a school and course alumni network.** By developing an alumni network, you are putting your students in touch with inspirational people they can relate to and connect

with. The stories shared and messages given by alumni can inspire even more grit for your students. Consider creating an alumni speakers' network, which can be used for small groups or entire school sessions.

- **Encourage your teachers to engage their passion for their chosen fields.** By re-energizing teachers

with professional growth in their subject areas, your students come out the real winners.

Of course, principals need to recruit and hire teachers interested in developing strong relationships with their students. However, I encourage school administrators to also hold in high regard a teacher's passion for his or her chosen field. Without this clearly on display in the classroom, how can we expect our students to develop their own passion for learning?

Class Mission

Another tool teachers can use to promote grittiness in their classrooms is to create some type of class mission. While teachers cannot simulate anything on the scale of the World Series, with a little creativity, the possibilities are endless. As an AP teacher, the mission I want my kids to aim for has been clearly established: I want the group to push toward doing their best on the AP exam in May. I have found that developing this course mission early in the school year helps students understand that working through hardships and frustration will be worth the effort. Teachers can actually enlist student ownership in the creation of the course mission, which will encourage even greater investment from students.

As a history teacher, I am fortunate enough to share some very inspirational stories with my students. These stories help to model the grittiness I am encouraging them to develop. Who could not be moved by the stories of the citizens

of London surviving the German Blitz in the early stages of World War II? Students are often just as interested in the stories I share frequently about alumni—the success stories of my former students highlight the accomplishments they can achieve in college or in the working world. These stories are normally shared through a quarterly course newsletter that most often includes several alumni interviews. Although my students may have never met the medical school students answering questions about their busy lives, these stories of determination often provide great energy and enthusiasm for my current students attempting to climb that same mountain.

Finally, administrators need to understand that the teachers willing to push students to develop grit will at times encounter some initial resistance. That resistance can come from both students and parents alike who can be surprised the first time obstacles are encountered. It is important for administrators to demonstrate support for teachers willing to push kids toward this valuable lifelong attribute. If we are going to ask our students to develop grit by working through roadblocks and obstacles for their betterment, our staff must be willing to do the same. 

Jim Fornaciari teaches AP history at Glenbard West High School in Glen Ellyn, IL. He was named AP Midwestern Teacher of the Year by the College Board in 2015.



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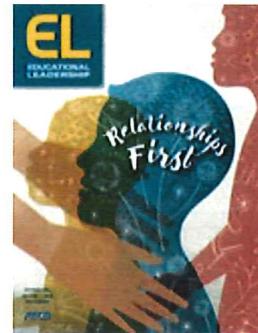
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Since his arrival in Chicago in April 2015, Maddon has helped develop the team into a winner. Although he has a deserved reputation as a solid baseball tactician, I believe it is Maddon's emphasis on cultivating positive relationships with his players that separates him from his peers.

The same can be said for our strongest teachers. Like Maddon, they work to become experts in their fields, but also bring to their classrooms a tool kit for forging relationships. Such teachers appreciate that the career they have entered is based on working with people. Let's unpack some tools from this relationship-building kit. Using these strategies can make every classroom a winner. You don't even have to be a baseball fan.

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Creating this shared mission early in the year is an important step in crafting relationships. For instance, students in the radio broadcasting class at suburban Chicago's Homewood-Flossmoor High School have for many years created an hour-long live radio documentary during spring of their sophomore year. The students select a topic and then write, direct, and produce the finished product. Students must accomplish this mission before they can advance to positions of leadership at the school radio station as juniors and seniors.

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Before students will take intellectual risks and push themselves toward the shared mission, they must feel safe. Students will gain that security when they know they're being treated with dignity and as a valued member of the class.

I use in my classes a practice also seen on many ball fields that helps communicate respect and value: welcome each of my students with a "fist bump" and a friendly greeting as they enter my classroom each day. This gesture lets each student know that he or she is a valuable member of the group and an important part of the upcoming lesson. This routine can also provide opportunities to privately address a student concern. You might quickly mention to a student your question about a missing element of recent homework assignment, for instance, as you greet him or her. Students will feel safe when their shortcomings and struggles aren't mentioned in front of the class.

Get to Know One Another

If we're going to push students, we must make a genuine effort to get to know them. This tool takes time to develop. The sooner we start, the quicker the dividends come.

Start by simply having students fill out an information card highlighting personal interests, travel experiences, and accomplishments. Elementary and middle school teachers looking to learn more about their students often ask kids to create picture books or brief iMovies about themselves. Once these have been completed, the real test begins, as teachers put what they've learned about students into use, perhaps by referencing accomplishments or facts about specific students that connect to content or a discussion topic.

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And don't underestimate the importance of giving kids insight into your life and your passions away from school. This makes the connection complete. I still remember my high school political science instructor Charles Shields sharing stories about traveling to Washington, D.C., in the 1960s to protest American involvement in Vietnam. (Shields eventually became author of the best-selling book *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*.) It wasn't just this teacher's storytelling ability that helped foster relationships; it was also his willingness to share insight into his life. The storytelling took five minutes away from planned activities—and made me more connected with this teacher and his lessons the whole semester.

Challenge Students

Setting high expectations—as when Maddon proclaimed that the Cubs might win the World Series—enriches relationships. Creating a rigorous course might seem counterintuitive at first glance. Inexperienced teachers often reduce rigor in the classroom believing this will make students accept them better, which is a mistake. Students may play along with a teacher who's unwilling to challenge them, but the much-needed respect and true student buy-in won't develop. Amanda Ripley (2013) noted, "Boredom is the specter that haunts children from kindergarten to graduation on every continent." By creating a classroom designed to challenge kids and avoid boredom, teachers demonstrate respect for students and their abilities.

Asking students to take on a challenging course often leads to stress and fatigue. Students will want to know that you're equally invested in the mission, because it will be difficult to accomplish without a teacher's strong support. The exams I give in my Advanced Placement classes along the way to the final standardized exam are difficult, so I offer students opportunities for "test corrections"—before- or after-school sessions that give them extended time to review the results of each exam. Students correct each of their wrong answers and, in doing so, earn back (toward the overall score) a quarter point that they lost for each incorrect answer. I also hold review sessions leading up to the Advanced Placement exam in May. Although these sessions take time, they make clear my support and empathy for students' efforts to reach our shared mission.

There's a catch in supplying the aforementioned supports; teachers who want to do so must listen to students. It's easy to think of our courses in a vacuum, but we need to understand that today's student is busier than historic norms. For example, when students ask to delay an exam because they're scheduled to take a test in a different course, teachers who show some flexibility demonstrate empathy and a commitment to students. Relationships between teachers and their students are living things. It's important that these relationships continue to grow and develop. Often, the teacher-student relationship will strengthen after a period of adversity in which teachers ask their students to stretch.

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Teachers don't need the budget of a major team or international corporation to create their own rituals. Here are two I use with my Advanced Placement European History students.

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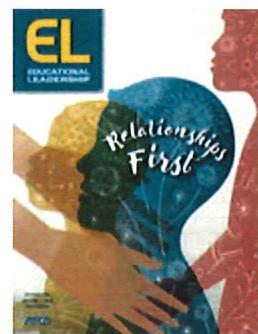
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Road Tested / A Different Kind of Alumni Connection

Jim Fornaciari

During my college career, I found that having opportunities to engage with alumni was a great motivator. My professors did an outstanding job of making alumni available through evening Q&A sessions, and I was moved by their advice on topics such as classroom morale. By drawing on the wisdom of teachers in the field, I gained incredible insight into the profession and graduated better prepared for the challenge of being a first-year teacher.

Now, as a veteran high school teacher, I provide my students with the same kind of motivator. Last spring, I noticed that the sophomores in my AP European History class were struggling to get through the semester, so I created an informal alumni network to provide them with an extra layer of support. I reached out over e-mail to a large number of my former European History students who had gone on to college; graduate school; and, in some cases, their careers. I understood that they were busy, so I asked for one or two things. First, I wanted them to reflect on the grind of the AP review process and offer their advice for getting through it. Second, I asked them to consider the importance of taking a rigorous course load in high school and to share its effect on their later success. Within a week, my inbox was overflowing.

As we worked through the final two months of the year, I displayed one response per day on our SMART Board. Many of my students were worn down and some doubted their ability to overcome the challenges a difficult class can present; but when they were introduced to this group of alumni, they managed to connect in a very special way.

To get through the AP exam, alumni urged my students to attend review sessions, develop study schedules, use review books, and form study groups. They also offered encouraging comments: For instance, a sophomore at Northwestern University told my students to "make the most of your opportunities, work hard, and everything will pay off in the end."



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Although the practical advice helped, I was even more pleased with the results and the mileage gained from the second request. The alumni said that by taking challenging courses in high school, they were more prepared and eager for the opportunities of university life. They shared the exciting endeavors they were immersed in, like preparing for the LSAT, getting ready for job interviews, and studying abroad in Europe and Asia. I was no longer the one telling my students that they would eventually benefit from taking tough classes. Now they were seeing those benefits firsthand by connecting with exciting young people who had gone through the same hard experience just a few years before.

As the school year ended and my students and I reflected on our informal alumni program, I realized how powerful these connections had become. My students hoped to follow in the footsteps of their former classmates and achieve similar levels of success. Many even reached out to various alumni over e-mail and social media to set up college visits for the coming summer and fall.

Our AP European History Alumni Association will continue to grow, and it will be a pleasure to build on the stories of our first group of respondents. The effort that it takes to reach out to former students pays off in the engagement and excitement generated among current students, no matter the subject area.

Would you like to write for the next "Road Tested" column? Visit www.ascd.org/educationupdate for submission details.

Jim Fornaciari is a social studies teacher at Glenbard West High School in Glen Ellyn, Ill.

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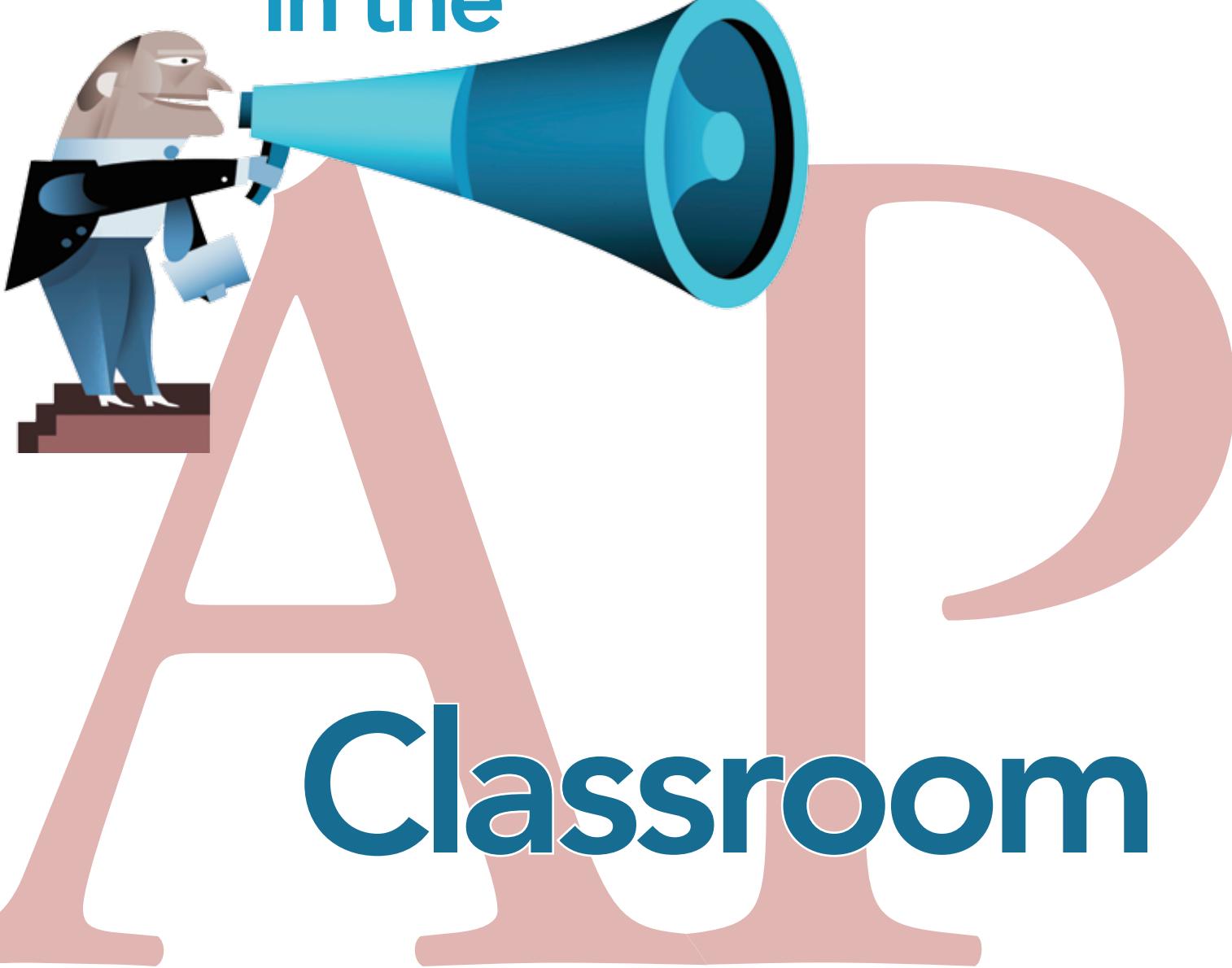
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Jim Fornaciari

Coaching in the



When developing an AP history course, a former baseball coach adapted several coaching strategies for the classroom.

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When I was given the responsibility of building the AP European history program at Glenbard West High School in suburban Chicago seven years ago, I was fortunate to have a full year to plan for this exciting but somewhat intimidating challenge. I took advantage of it by taking part in several College Board workshops, but despite those quality professional experiences, developing a successful AP European History course was a challenge that I needed to own. As a former head baseball coach, I understood the idea of owning something and being held responsible for its success. Drawing on my experiences as a coach would prove invaluable in the AP classroom.

Many parallels exist between quality coaches and quality classroom teachers—especially AP teachers, who often feel the pressure to produce positive test results. Having developed a series of techniques and strategies for building a team-oriented winning culture on the field, I adapted those methods to work in the AP classroom. Although there is no substitute for having the core fundamentals in place when teaching an AP class, the use of certain strategies can help develop a positive team culture inside the classroom.

New Territory

I was very clear with the first group of AP students I worked with that we were involved in a groundbreaking experience. It was important for the students to feel that they were participating in the school's academic history. There was some opposition to the school's efforts to develop more AP courses and encourage a larger portion of the student body to take them. Many suggested that AP courses were simply too difficult for high school sophomores to

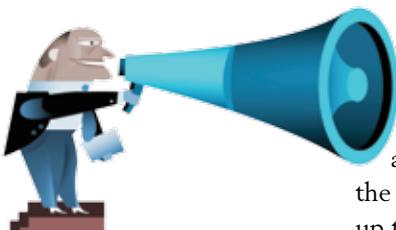
handle, so I used that opposition to strengthen the pioneering spirit of my students, who thrived under the challenge.

Set High Expectations

Clearly defined and enforced standards helped students buy into the class. I was straightforward with my students, telling them that taking a college-level class demanded a college-level investment. When I was a coach, I noticed that the more time and effort a team put forth, the more difficult it was for them to accept poor performance. That same idea held true in the classroom. By demanding a high level of work, I developed a group of students that would not easily give in when they encountered a roadblock.

Throughout the year, students spend a great deal of their time studying, writing, and researching European history. They developed a common bond while struggling through difficult exams and strenuous writing assignments. When students returned from spring vacation several weeks before the May exam, we began a series of voluntary evening review sessions. Participation in those sessions was outstanding, which was a testament to the commitment students had made to the course. By that point, students had invested far too much to lose sight of the goal.

During my coaching career, I wanted to attract the best possible players, but I understood that some gifted athletes might not come out for baseball because they weren't willing to make the required commitment. As the European History course developed, I wondered how a course with such high expectations could continue to attract enough students to maintain itself. Students had a lot of choices when it came to course selection,



The most important contribution a parent can make to the success of an AP classroom is to provide the needed encouragement and support at home, but to do that, they must understand the nature and objectives of the course.

and many were simply not as rigorous as the European History AP course was shaping up to be. Knowing that, I created a culture in which students felt they were important to the class. My ability to create that type of culture was just as valuable as my understanding of the content itself.

Developing Positive Relationships

As a coach, I worked hard to find out as much as possible about my players and their lives away from baseball. A personal connection with a struggling player could help me help him be more comfortable on the field. Personal connections are even more important in the classroom. Students appreciate receiving congratulations for a recent victory in a wrestling match or recognition for excelling in a Model United Nations competition. Small connections take very little time but can pay tremendous dividends in developing a positive teacher-student relationship, which in turn fosters a positive classroom climate.

Teachers can continue positive relationship development by allowing students to get a glimpse of their lives outside the classroom. A simple mention of going to a game over the weekend or detail about an interesting travel experience helps students better understand and appreciate their teachers. When discussing my life outside the classroom, I am willing to display a sense of humor. I have found that having the confidence to laugh at myself from time to time helps my students see me not simply as a teacher, but as a human being.

Celebrate Student Success

Another way to attract quality students to a rigorous AP class is by celebrating student success. Student recognition can come both formally and informally. After the first year, several students helped create a permanent classroom display titled "European History AP Hall of Fame." The plan was to formally recognize students who completed the course and sat for the national exam. Each year, a new set of students want their names added to that list.

Another form of recognition that inspires and encourages students is naming a unit MVP. The students in each of my classes select a "student of the unit" after each exam. Often

students select a classmate who made outstanding contributions over the course of the unit even if he or she did not have the highest unit test score. This student-initiated practice is another example of student ownership. This form of peer recognition can become a tremendous motivator. It is easy for even the strongest students to get a little discouraged in a fast-paced AP environment, and periodic recognition from their classmates can go a long way to keeping students looking ahead with a positive frame of mind.

Another means I have used to recognize students' achievements is the school newspaper. Printing students' successes in the newspaper allows the entire student body to recognize AP students' commitment and hard work. Teachers can also work cooperatively with school or district personnel who are responsible for alerting the local media to school success stories. That kind of local publicity can encourage other students to consider taking a difficult course as well as congratulate current AP students.

Involve Parents in the Process

When I was coaching, I found that parents could be tremendous assets. The most important contribution a parent can make to the success of an AP classroom is to provide the needed encouragement and support at home, but to do that, they must understand the nature and objectives of the course. Teachers must take advantage of the open house program at the outset of the school year to inform parents about the value of taking an AP course—not only to stress the benefits of obtaining college credit but also to emphasize the tremendous benefits students receive by embracing the challenge of such a course.

During the open house, teachers should outline the important aspects of the course, such as the testing schedule, homework, and writing requirements. It is essential that teachers clearly discuss the time and effort required for students to be successful in the course. Failing to be up-front and honest with parents about the expectations will create potential issues during the school year, but enlisting parental support at the beginning of the year cultivates more investors in the course. Once parents are onboard, they can offer valuable

encouragement at home.

I have found it helpful to provide parents with a CD presentation about how they can help their children succeed in AP European History. Parents receive this CD at the conclusion of open house so that they can review it at home. The presentation answers questions about the course and the school's AP program that were not addressed during open house. It also suggests ways that parents can better partner with their children for academic success.

Although open house meetings are typically short, the teacher must stress that any AP course will be a challenge and that at times parents might think that it is too much for their children. The teacher should let the parents know that this kind of reaction is not uncommon but, in the long run, is possibly not the most helpful. Just as a coach needs parents to speak positively at the dinner table after a difficult loss, it is even more important to the mission of the classroom teacher for parents to speak positively about the course.

Any kind of negative talk about the course that is initiated by the parents can be counterproductive. Early in the school year, students are likely to struggle with the rigor of what in most cases is their first college-level course. Naturally, parents are surprised and want to protect them. For parents to be an asset, the teacher must be clear about the course and its many benefits. Once a teacher has done that, parents usually will be supportive and encourage their children to work hard.

Another important way for teachers to develop the necessary support from parents is to stay in touch with them throughout the school year. If a student gets off to a poor start, the teacher must call to discuss the issue. Although parents understandably do not enjoy such calls, in the long run, they will become more supportive of the course because of them. Most parents will appreciate the teacher's efforts to include them in their children's education, and they will be eager to develop a plan for improvement.

Communicating with families is an important part of a teacher's professional responsibilities (Danielson, 1996). Teachers should not limit their phone conversations to the parents of struggling students. I have found great benefit

Glenbard West High School

GLEN ELLYN, IL

GRADES: 9–12

ENROLLMENT: 2,300

COMMUNITY: Suburban

DEMOGRAPHICS: 66% White, 16% Hispanic, 11% Asian, 5.1% Black; 19% free and reduced-price lunch

ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM: 1 principal & 4 assistant principals



in making positive phone calls to parents after observing a student's success. By taking the time to contact parents and offer positive feedback, a teacher can develop important relationships that will pay great dividends. The parents will sense that they are dealing with an invested professional who genuinely cares about their children's well-being. If those parents were not initially sold on the course and its rigor, they will be for the rest of the school year.

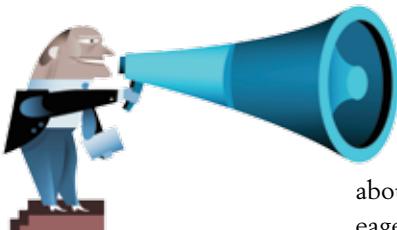
Parental communications also strengthen important relationships inside the classroom. Although high school students are years removed from elementary school, they still appreciate the positive recognition of a well-respected teacher. By taking a few minutes every week to call or e-mail parents, a teacher will develop a reputation in the school and around the community for praising academic success. What a great way for a teacher to get "buy in" from parents and students!

Used properly, rituals can enrich the school experience. Little rituals might seem insignificant, but they go a long way to creating and celebrating a positive team climate inside a rigorous, high-energy classroom.

Using Culture-Building Rituals

Certain team-building rituals and pastimes made playing baseball at Glenbard West unique. Used properly, rituals can enrich the school experience. Little rituals might seem insignificant, but they go a long way to creating and celebrating a positive team climate inside a rigorous, high-energy classroom.

I have been fortunate to welcome a small contingent of seniors to AP European history every year, but the majority of the students who take the course are sophomores. The



Clearly, these results could not have been achieved in a cold environment. Teachers can develop their own unique classroom environments without having to sacrifice academic excellence.

seniors begin the school year excited about their final year in high school and are eager to experience college. During the first semester, the seniors are understandably busy with applying to college. Many of the seniors have been outstanding role models for my hardworking sophomores. Knowing that, I take advantage of the college application process as another way to build community. A senior who makes a college decision brings in a copy of the acceptance letter to give to a sophomore of his or her choice, who then has the responsibility of bringing in some kind of celebratory treat for the class. This seemingly simple ritual can go a long way to creating a bond between classmates.

Another class ritual takes place at the conclusion of each school year. The group celebrates their hard work by creating a T-shirt that commemorates the successes of the year. Students proudly wear them as badges of honor following a challenging but rewarding year.

Our Results

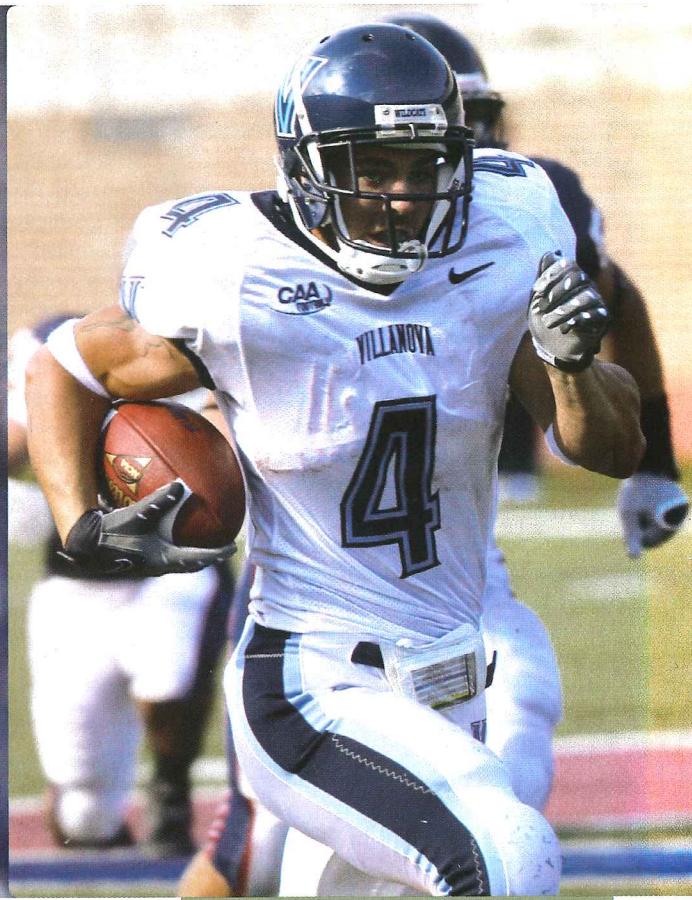
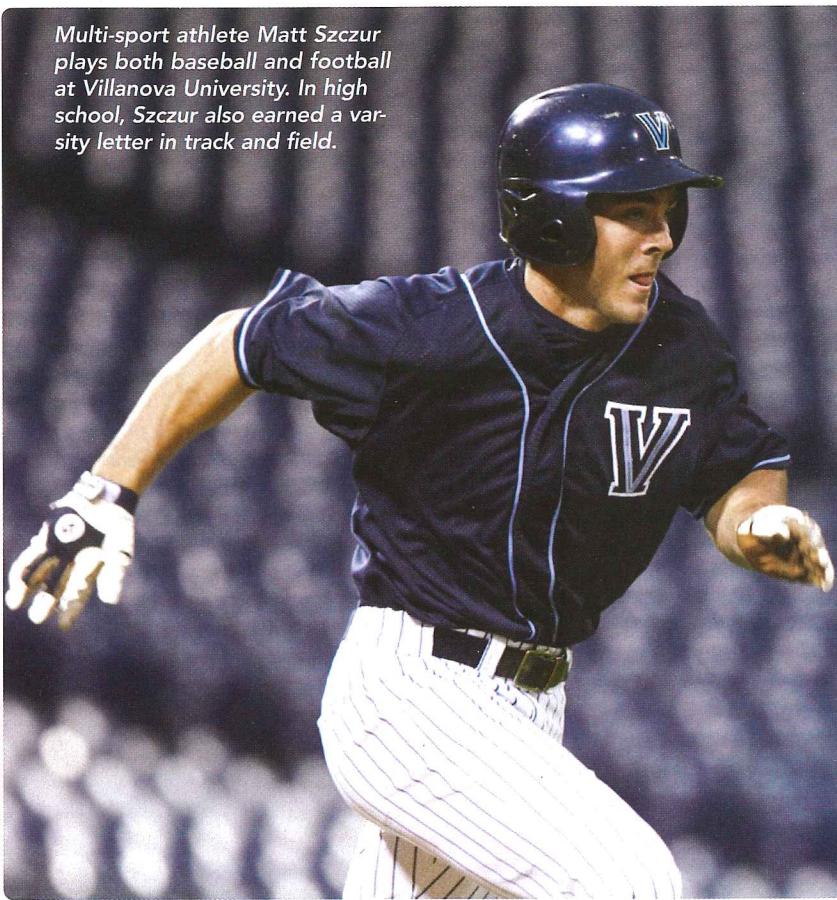
When I became a head coach, I understood that scores and records would be closely scrutinized. I welcomed that challenge. When I became an AP teacher, that same feeling of competitive pride helped drive me to create a unique team climate in my classroom that has created some outstanding results. Over the first six years of the course, the pass rate was more than 95%, and the average score was more than four points. Naturally, students leave the experience armed with great confidence and ready for more AP course options. Clearly, those results could not have been achieved in a cold environment. Teachers can develop their own unique classroom environments without sacrificing academic excellence. **PL**

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Multi-sport athlete Matt Szcjur plays both baseball and football at Villanova University. In high school, Szcjur also earned a varsity letter in track and field.



BY JIM FORNACIARI

MULTIPLE CHOICE ANSWER

A longtime high school coach explains why encouraging multi-sport participation is in the best interest of your athletes—and your team.

Every region of the country is proud of its homegrown athletes who go on to make a name for themselves at the collegiate or professional level. Here in the Chicago area, two athletes I especially enjoyed watching develop were Cliff Floyd and Antwaan Randle El.

Granted, I wasn't thrilled to see Floyd come to the plate against my team with the

bases loaded, and I'm sure area football coaches were stymied when trying to stop Randle El from scoring another touchdown. But we all developed great respect for them as athletes and competitors.

Floyd and Randle El come to mind because they are part of a quickly disappearing era—that of the multi-sport athlete. Floyd was an all-state basketball and baseball player before moving on to professional baseball. Randle El starred

in three sports in high school and continued to compete in all three at Indiana University before playing in the NFL.

Both of these athletes came through high school when kids were encouraged to play two or three sports. That emphasis on diversifying one's talents seems to be all but gone now, and in my mind, that is a negative. I believe we are doing a disservice to today's young people by steering them toward sport specialization. And I

Jim Fornaciari recently retired as Head Coach at Glenbard West High School in Glen Ellyn, Ill., a suburb of Chicago, where he continues to serve as a history teacher. His teams went to the state finals in 2002 and 2003 and his program produced a number of college and professional players. He can be reached at: James_Fornaciari@glenbard.org.

also believe that as coaches, we should play a prominent role in bringing back the multi-sport competitor.

Better Athletes?

There is little doubt that modern training and weightlifting programs have helped produce stronger athletes. There is also no question that earning a starting spot on a high school sports team is more difficult than in years past. So it would seem to make sense for an athlete to spend his or her primary sport's off-season lifting weights and concentrating on sport-specific skill development.

But doing so comes at a price. The benefits of competing in different sports—with different coaches and different teammates—are many. When added up, they trump the plusses of an athlete spending all his or her time focusing on one sport alone.

One major positive of going multi-sport is that the athlete will become a stronger competitor. Take, for example, a pitcher in a late-inning bases-loaded scenario. If he faced the same type of pressure situation a few months earlier on the basketball court, he can use that recent competitive experience to mentally overcome it. Although that pitcher did not work throughout the winter with a private pitching instructor, the confidence he gained by participating on a competitive basketball team will pay far greater dividends.

Becoming a stronger competitor also entails taking risks and learning to fail, which doesn't happen much in a weight-room, says Steve Stanicek, a former Major League Baseball player and current Head Baseball Coach and Assistant Football Coach at Lockport (Ill.) High School. "I do not see enough kids dealing with failure very well," he says. "Even more importantly, I don't see them taking the risk to give 100 percent every time—even though it might result in failure."

"They feel better in a safe environment like a pitching lesson, rather than getting on a wrestling mat and taking the chance they might get their tail kicked," Stanicek continues. "The good thing about getting their tail kicked is they have to try to figure out how to not let it happen again. If they are competing in only one season a year, it's tough to learn how to do that."

Our student-athletes can also receive important team building lessons through playing other sports. A few years ago, my

top pitcher found a way to help make everyone on the team feel valuable. The previous fall, he had completed his senior football season as a little-used backup quarterback. Despite seeing limited playing time, he still felt valued by the football team's leaders.

When the baseball season started, he brought this experience to our team. He understood that even though he was going to be one of our key players, he needed to appreciate every member of the team. That, of course, bolstered team camaraderie in a huge way.

Even negative experiences can help an athlete in his or her next sport. If our basketball team struggles through a difficult losing season, the lessons learned about perseverance and holding one's head high can be used in whatever sport is waiting for those athletes come spring.

Another benefit is increased athleticism, which is what you want when your outfielder needs to make a leaping catch. "Learning how to move your body the way your brain is telling it to when you have to make adjustments on the fly is crucial to being a great athlete," says Stanicek. "Today's kids are bigger and stronger and faster than in the past, but they have a hard time moving their bodies in subtle ways."

Scott Lawler, Assistant Baseball Coach at the University of Notre Dame, sees this as he recruits players for the Fighting Irish. "Multi-sport athletes train different muscles in their body and seem to be more athletic than athletes who play only one sport," he says. "One-sport players have trained their body to do sport-specific movements, but so many movements cross over in an actual athletic contest."

Single-sport athletes also risk developing an injury through overtraining. The American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness recommends two to three months off per year from any one sport. And most professional baseball players shut their arms down for at least four months during the off-season. So it's difficult to

understand why some high school baseball players are encouraged to throw on a year-round basis.

One more nod for the multi-sport athlete can be seen in attitude. As a baseball coach, I always looked forward to the arrival of winter sport athletes to our early season practices. My experience was that boys coming off a long basketball season or a tough wrestling campaign were often much more excited to start our practices than boys who put in monotonous hours in a batting cage all winter. The kids who played a different sport in the winter seemed energized by a change in their athletic routine.

Developmental Benefits

Athleticism, competitive drive, teamwork, and enthusiasm are all things

Parents are often the main culprits behind specialization, so it's important to educate them about the benefits of multi-sport participation. Take time during preseason meetings to broach the topic and then continue communicating the message throughout the year.

coaches want to see in athletes. But there are additional benefits for the multi-sport competitor as an individual.

The first is that it allows a young person the flexibility to follow more than one interest. In high school, it wasn't clear whether Randle El was best at football, baseball, or basketball. He was encouraged to compete in all three sports until he could figure out where his passion lay.

Playing several sports also teaches a young person how to use their talents in more than one way. In our changing workforce, most employers want to hire individuals who can adapt to changes and develop new skills with ease. The experience of shifting gears to a different sport each season is great preparation for the working world.

For example, the backup quarterback/star pitcher I mentioned earlier learned the lesson of appreciating everyone's value during the football season. What a great life lesson he could then bring to so many situations! Had he played fall baseball and missed the limited snaps he received on the football

field, he would have missed an opportunity to grow as an individual.

Finally, let's think about what we really want kids to get out of sports. In most cases, we want them to have positive educational experiences that help them mature. By playing different sports for different coaches, they will have a vast array of experiences and thus more opportunities to learn and grow. They will also meet more people, which can open new doors. Adding variety to a student's experience helps them to emerge as balanced young adults.

Culture Shift For Coaches

There are many factors that have played a role in the disappearance of the multi-sport athlete, which is why there is not just one solution. Overall, it will take a change in the attitudes of a lot of people. And it starts with us as coaches.

One of the main reasons for sport specialization is the influence of coaches who believe winning comes through a year-round commitment. Can we change our tune? Can we tell our athletes that

off-season training is optional and playing another sport is encouraged? And can we show them we sincerely mean it?

One way to do this is for coaches to work more collaboratively. As a head coach, consider being an assistant coach in another sport and asking head coaches in other sports to serve as your assistants. Multi-sport coaches are in a great position to help foster the right culture and attract more students to play more sports.

It can also be helpful to discuss this topic as coaches. Formal and informal meetings are a good place to talk about the benefits of multi-sport participation and build bridges between coaches of different sports. Newly hired coaches may need to be educated on the importance of encouraging multi-sport participation. We can turn to our athletic directors to help us with meetings on this topic.

We also each need to do as we say, since it can be easy to send mixed messages to athletes. For example, a basketball coach who publicly talks about the benefits of playing a spring sport but coaches a club team during the spring

sends a confusing message.

Coaches should also consider special recognition for multi-sport athletes. Some schools give out patches or awards to student-athletes who play several sports during the school year.

Educating Parents

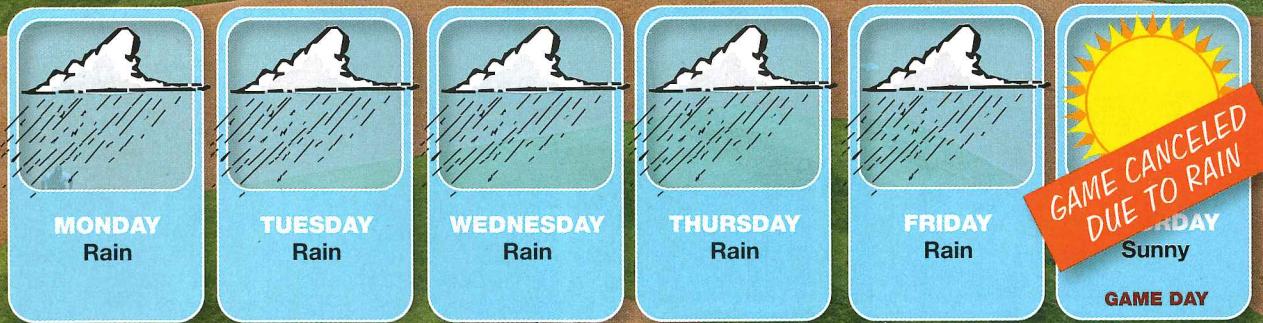
Parents are often the main culprits behind specialization, so it's important to educate them about the benefits of multi-sport participation. Take time during preseason meetings to broach the topic and then continue communicating the message throughout the year.

Along with explaining all the physical benefits, talking about scholarships will often get parents' attention. Many think the path to a scholarship is through specialization, but more college coaches are looking for multi-sport athletes.

"I often rank kids who play more than one sport at a higher level on my recruiting list because I know they stay competitive all year long," Lawler says.

Some college coaches are also concerned that a young person who has been

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specializing for several seasons has already reached his or her ceiling. While the athlete who played multiple sports might be raw in some areas, college coaches can foresee tremendous growth once that athlete gets their coaching at the next level.

We can attend games of our athletes in other sports, which shows everyone we really encourage our players to be on other teams.

You can also emphasize the importance of multi-sport participation to parents through any communication you put out. As a head baseball coach, I produced e-mail newsletters three times a year to keep parents and community members informed about our important team news. With each issue, I was sure to provide a list of all of our multi-sport players involved in my program,

along with their accomplishments in their other sports.

Athletes On Board

Of course, we must also get the message across to our athletes. I found it worked well to simply talk about multi-sport participation. In practice I referenced examples of mental toughness or physical preparation in a sport other than baseball. From time to time, I gave my players brief reading assignments that focused on being competitive, and many of the stories highlighted contemporary athletes who made a multi-sport commitment in high school.

Coaches also need to walk the walk. For example, we can attend games of our athletes in other sports, which shows everyone we really encourage our players to be on other teams. And your athletes will appreciate the fact that you made an effort to support them.

Transition times—when one sport season is coming to an end and a new

one is beginning—present more opportunities to show your belief in multi-sport participation. I observed a veteran girls' softball coach make a great statement last spring by canceling an indoor batting practice in favor of having her squad watch a basketball tournament game. Her message of support for a multi-sport culture was clear.

One last example I learned from a rival coach. During the fall and spring sports seasons, this basketball coach clipped local newspaper articles about his players competing in other sports. He then sent the articles along with a positive note to his players highlighted in them. Although this communication was not done on a public level, it sent a very powerful message to the athletes.

There is certainly value in working with private instructors during an off-season. There is also benefit that can be found by working in the weightroom. However, encouraging these activities at the expense of playing an actual sport is not in the best interests of young people. Let the kids play! ■

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