

Building a Team the Spartan Way

By Mike Rowe, Head Football Coach, Rocori High School,
2011 4A State Football Champions

Mike Rowe

3rd Grade Teacher Cold Spring
Elementary School since 2009

Graduated from Valley City State
University in 2002

Masters from St. Cloud State
University in 2007

Married to my wife Elisabeth and
have two children, Avery and Ainsley.

fun had vanished from practice because all we cared about was the almighty "W". After the season ended I met individually with all 75 football players. What I learned forever changed how I will build and coach my teams.

Lesson 1: Family Groups- Our sophomores stated there was a disconnect between them and the seniors and that they didn't always get along. The solution was to create a family atmosphere where everyone will care and help out one another. In our program we make eight colored teams that compete against each other in lifting, attendance, and coaching competitions. We call them Family Groups. These Family Groups compete for a trophy called the Cup. The Cup is awarded to the team that accumulates the most points at the end of the year. What we found is that everyone wanted to win the Cup. It created a strong bond that surprised even our coaching staff. We found that our seniors were more willing to pick up our sophomores that couldn't drive for morning lifting. They even developed a phone list to call to make sure athletes were up so they wouldn't miss morning lifting.

Lesson 2: How to Handle Adversity- Another change we made in the program was creating a character education program called "Monday Meetings." During our 2-7 season we lost a lot of games because when things got tough we backed down. By installing a character education program, we were able to create a weekly topic that would match that week's game. Even more importantly, the character education program strives to also teach these young men how to be better people outside of our program. As a coach I believe it is our responsibility to teach our football players how to be men. Times have changed and we believe it is no longer only the responsibility of parents to mentor young students. In order for our athletes to earn a letter, they needed to attend every one of our Monday Meetings. Some of the topics we covered were: gratitude; being a man for others; false masculinity; empathy; and how to treat women. Our athletes were extremely receptive to these topics and made

I always find that valuable lessons are learned not when things are going well, but when adversity has set in. After our 2010 season our program was in need of a shot in the arm. We finished the season 2-7 and I felt all the

changes to their daily lives that we observed, as well as were reported to us by their family members, faculty, and members of their communities.

Lesson 3: Building Fun into Practice- Another piece of information I learned from my players was that practices were dragging on during the end of the season. Our coaching staff met together during the summer and came up with a couple of ideas to make practice more enjoyable. The first thing we did was make all of our practices last only two hours, and during the playoffs we shortened them to an hour and a half. Instead of conditioning at the end of our Monday walk through practice, we play Ultimate Football with our Family Groups. Every team gets a point for winning their weekly Ultimate Football match. On Wednesday after practice we break the teams into their Family Groups and issue a coach's challenge for the week. These activities can range from relay races, academic challenges, sporting activities, singing and even touchdown celebrations. We give teams points based on their performance.

Lesson 4: Rewards Go a Long Way- Our coaches use a pretty simple approach on how we handle helmet stickers. Each week every athlete has an opportunity to earn 5 stickers: 2 stickers for making both morning lifting sessions; 1 for playing special teams; 1 for playing defense; and 1 for playing offense. Our team had to win in order to receive the offense and/or defense stickers. That meant that our whole team got them or nobody got them. We had an increase in our quality of play at practice because everyone wanted those stickers to decorate their helmets.

Conclusion: These are just a few things that our program has had success by trying. We found that it has really brought our players closer together because athletes that wouldn't normally hang out together became closer through the Family Groups and challenges. Our staff also noticed that our players really enjoy football practice because they know there will be rewards if they work hard. Most rewarding for the coaching staff, we received many compliments on our players' respect for others, both on and off the field.

I have had an opportunity to speak to a lot of successful coaches from different states at various coaching clinics this year, and they are also doing similar things. I think coaches have to do what is best for their team, but if you are struggling to get kids out or struggling to get your team to bond together, I know these simple ideas will work. I want to thank MFCA for giving me the opportunity to write this article. Best of luck to all of you next year. ■