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## IN THIS ISSUE

**A National Team Coaches' Approach to Cultivating Team Culture - Part 2: An Interview with U.S. Women's National Water Polo Team Head Coach Adam Krikorian - page 4**

**National Team Coaches' Approach to Cultivation of Team Culture: Summary and Recommendations for Coaches - page 13**

**Leadership, Growth, and National Championships - page 18**

## **Leadership, Growth, and National Championships**

**Jim Davis, Ed.M., MA, RSCC\*D**

Leaders have shouldered extra burden in recent years (a global pandemic will do that to you). Fear and uncertainty have made small decisions seem heavy and challenged our collective motivation. On Chicago's north shore, a group of educators, coaches and students did everything they could to meet the challenge.

The New Trier High School Trevians have a long, storied history of athletic and academic success. They added to that legacy during the pandemic, when their powerlifting team completed one of the most successful runs of any sport in school history.

The Trevians competed in six competitions at the state and national level, and they won them all. In 2021, they completed their "three-peat" of the USA Weightlifting High School Throwdown Championship. They won the all-outdoor pandemic edition of the Illinois High School Powerlifting State Championship. And then, after a two-year hiatus, defended their position at the Natural Athlete Strength Association High School Nationals competition in Oklahoma City.

The run was an important statement for the Trevians but not because of the hardware. The true value came in the form of leadership and character lessons learned in the process.

### **Training through Uncertainty**

On a Friday afternoon in March, the coaches on our staff held their phones in one hand while they worked, eagerly awaiting a decision from the superintendent. There was a rumor that school might shut down school for a week which, based on the schedule, would lead into spring break. Two weeks away from training would throw a wrench into the work we were hoping to accomplish.

Our team had been traveling to Oklahoma City for NASA High School Nationals for seven years before we won our first championship in 2019. 2020 was the year to defend, to prove that it was not a fluke. With training potentially coming to a halt, our entire organization was infused with a combination of nervous excitement, fear and uncertainty.

Word came in. We were shutting down. There was no way of knowing just how long we would be away from our team, so we did what any good leaders would do. We steadied our hand, evaluated the situation, and started putting together a plan.

I sent out a note to our staff with an update, directing us all to an office space with a large whiteboard. In this proverbial "war room," we evaluated the situation, imagined potential timelines (none of us saw the extent of what was coming), aligned on a strategy, and began taking swift, thoughtful action.

We devised a plan to deliver training sessions and motivational videos from a distance. We spent the next couple hours recording training videos and uploading them to YouTube. We included all the movements we

thought could be performed at home with little or no equipment. We began distributing them via online strength training platforms. We would make the best of it.

Each week brought about a new challenge. As the duration of the quarantine extended, we scheduled workouts via Zoom – teams logged in for body weight training, yoga and fitness routines. Often, they came just to see some familiar faces.

Still, the quarantine lagged on. Our staff checked in regularly with each other and with the students. We began recording new videos using household items to continue resistance training: a backpack full of books, a laundry basket weighed down by household items, even a Hinkley & Schmidt water cooler. We did our best.



*2019 Champion Co-Captain Bella Mendes with a pre-lift speech*

Though we stayed ready, spring sports were canceled that year, including our trip to nationals. The decision was understandable but disappointing.

Chicago winter turned to spring, then summer. We began hosting outdoor conditioning sessions. Soon after, we assembled an outdoor strength training facility and started lifting again. Spirits were high and everyone was glad to be back in each other's company. But as summer turned to fall, COVID-19 regulations increased alongside rising case numbers.

In October, we bundled up in sweatshirts and sweatpants, knowing we would only have a couple more weeks in our outdoor facility. As we came to grips with the possibility of

having to once again move to a remote learning environment, we received an email that once again catalyzed our approach.

### Back in Action

Denise Dubravec, principal of New Trier's Winnetka campus, connected us with Suzy Sanchez, director of culture, community, and outreach at USA Weightlifting. USA Weightlifting is an arm of the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee that oversees the sport of weightlifting. USA Weightlifting was hosting its annual competition – the High School Throwdown – which is a national high school competition with remote submission options. This was exactly what we needed.

The event was safe, fun, and provided just the right amount of challenge to get students and coaches motivated once again. Importantly, the event complimented our athletes' sense of shared purpose.

There were countless steps along the way. A variety of logistical concerns had to be ironed out. We had to participate in the contest safely, in accordance with Center for Disease Control and Prevention and local regulations, and we had to get it done fast. We did. Ninety students continued training and filmed max attempts in squat, bench press, and power clean. They cheered and supported each other through each rep. Those efforts were submitted to the competition and judged by a USOPC panel in Colorado Springs. Then we waited...

As the judging took place, we found ourselves with some down time to evaluate what we had just been through.

### **Goal-Directed Behavior**

Leadership depends on direction. A leader must lead their people somewhere, toward something. Goal setting provides essential direction, especially regarding health-related behaviors. Studies suggest that “intentions set up cognitive processes” resulting in “nonconscious goal pursuit,” (Aarts, 2007). That is, once a goal and a strategy have been identified, behaviors can subconsciously align. The very act of having a specific goal influences the way one behaves, consciously or otherwise. This is especially important during a public health crisis.

With that first spring season cancelled, there were no starting spots to earn, no championships to win, no games to show off one’s training. Many student athletes were shaken. Tangible goals were off the table. Thankfully, our training has always been focused on one outcome above all: growth. We focus on getting a little bit better every day. Not even one of the strangest times in history could derail our primary goal. Importantly, “growth” was a goal we all shared. Even when people were far away from one another, they were together in their shared purpose.

It was not always easy, but we continued to lead people toward growth. The athletes lifted and ran, stretched and hydrated. We aimed them toward improvement, toward diligence and resilience, toward optimism and empowerment. This had been our approach for years. With a strong history of this approach, we needed only continue it during those strange times. The students did an incredible job.

As the quarantine lumbered on and students began questioning why they had to train or whether they even wanted to, we reminded them of our purpose: to grow, to work toward the best version of ourselves. The pandemic could not strip us of that.

Leaders too often dangle the carrot of a championship, a starting position, or some other tangible outcome in front of people, hoping that they will continue striving toward it. Nothing wrong with that, necessarily. But the pandemic was a great opportunity to reflect on a simple question: if we took the trophies away, would the experience still be meaningful?

Those who were walking a strict path toward an external goal were halted. Those who were walking a path toward growth could continue.

We were walking down that road when the October opportunity to compete in the USA Weightlifting competition appeared. The prospect of competing added fuel to the journey. When the lifts were judged and scores were tallied, the Trevians came out on top. Our 90 lifters narrowly edged out the second-place team from Dos Pueblos (CA), who had 89 competitors. Truly, every lifter mattered in this team accomplishment.

Since we had been focused on growth, we did not need to wait for the opportunity to compete to be motivated. When the opportunity came, we were ready.

## Growth is Hard

Unfortunately, concepts like growth mindset are often referred to as “soft skills.” Even their parent category “social and emotional learning” can sound like a feel-good approach to leadership and education. To the driven, these skills can be easily dismissed.

Maintaining a growth mindset can be incredibly tough. We all faced it. Sports and school were cancelled, professional situations were paused, jobs were eliminated, and relationships were strained. Reminding oneself of the mission to improve, and aligning behaviors accordingly, can be a challenge. During the quarantine, the pull to stay put on the couch all day was real. But our athletes kept on.

A focus on growth does not mean that the outcome is not important. In fact, the teams I have worked with achieved better outcomes because they are focused on a thoughtful process. Growth-focused teams find success far more often than those focusing on a trophy. That said, focusing on growth also gives you a good chance at winning a trophy.

After that 2020 competition, USA Weightlifting hosted another competition in spring of 2021, then another in the fall of the following school year. Three times in a row, the Trevians stepped up to the plate. Three times in a row, they won.

The Trevians also won the 2021 Illinois High School Powerlifting Association State Championship (edging out Stagg High School by only a few points). Then, after a long wait, they found themselves back in Oklahoma City to defend their NASA High School Nationals title. There, competing against athletes from Texas, Arizona, Colorado and beyond, the Trevians won again. Our sixth championship in as many opportunities.

After every win, we took great care to frame the experience. A trophy is nothing without its story, we said. The trophies at New Trier represent a process focused on growth. In this case, they represent resilience, teamwork, and the ownership of one’s circumstances. When the entire system of education and athletics was turned on its ear, the students did not complain (well, not much). Instead, they kept plugging away. They controlled what they could control. They managed their effort. They stayed focused.

## Life Lessons

People say that sports teach life lessons. That’s not necessarily true. Sports offer a powerful platform for education, but coaches and cultures teach life lessons. The leaders in our school, on our staff, and among our students were responsible for the lessons learned. A culture focused on growth, community, and hard work supported that learning.

When it comes to the Trevians’ streak, winning was not the lesson. The lessons did not exist in the barbell. The students cannot take their commemorative t-shirts into a job interview, and they cannot carry

a trophy into a long-term relationship. The lessons which apply to the lives of those we lead had to be explicated.

In so many powerful experiences, words fail. But as leaders, we have to try. We asked our athletes, what did you do in this moment to set yourself apart? How would you classify those behaviors? we said. Call it grit, call it growth, call it something so that it can be taken forward into other walks of life. It is difficult to bring a feeling from one moment to the next, but naming the actions creates a skill. They can then decide where else in their life they might apply it.

The greatest demonstration of learning came in Oklahoma City this past spring. The meet was over and the meet hosts (NASA) were tallying the scores. We were not yet sure who had won. While the scores were being tallied, the NASA team began breaking down the equipment and loading their trucks. Almost everyone in that hotel ballroom stayed in their seats, eagerly awaiting the results. But not the Trevians. Our kids were side by side with the NASA folks, helping them carry bars and plates and racks. They picked up litter. They kept contributing. They had not yet announced the scores but in that moment, it was clear that we had already won: this was a team of leaders. Our staff could not have been more proud.



The next time our athletes find themselves in a strange, unpredictable, scary situation, they will know something about themselves.

When the outcome is uncertain, they will have an opportunity to focus on growth. They can remind themselves to control the things which are under their control. They can take comfort in knowing that they have been in a similar situation before, and they came out on top.

Leadership provides direction. That much is true. But the truest form of leadership empowers people with the skills to pursue their own direction even in the absence of the leader. True leadership creates leaders. We have a lot of those at New Trier.

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