

From The Locker Room to the Band Hall: What We Can Learn From Master Coaches

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“The Golden Age”- we hear this term bandied about frequently, typically in reference to bygone eras which have been romanticized through the haze of time. The 1930s are often referred to as the golden age of motion pictures due to the advent of technicolor film and the maturation of the great Hollywood studios. The 1950s are said to be the golden age of baseball with Mantle and Mays at the peak of their powers serving as living icons of the sport. This term, because it so often invokes the distant past, can be deflating, implying the best is behind us. We, as today’s band directors, are among the privileged few who, in my opinion, are living in the golden age of our art form. There have never been as many truly great bands, be they concert or marching, middle school or high school, as there are at this moment. This golden age has been ushered in by the equalization of information available to us practitioners that has been facilitated by the internet age and the willingness of the leaders in our profession to freely share what they know. While this is exciting, the large number of powerhouse programs in existence can also be daunting to young directors who aspire to lead their students to great achievement but see reaching such lofty heights as an insurmountable mountain to climb. This begs the question: if the information available to us band directors is more equal

than ever, what can one do to make a difference and help students realize the peak experiences we all know can be provided by a thriving band program? I submit to you that this question can be answered by studying and embracing the *art of coaching*.

If one wants to validate the notion that a skilled coach/leader who is able to mobilize their players to think and act as one and chart a thoughtful strategic path for their team is a difference-maker, they need look no further than professional or large-scale collegiate sports. Despite comparable multi-hundred-million-dollar budgets in the NFL, why have the New England Patriots been the one near constant force over the last twenty years? Even though the majority of NBA teams have had several superstar players on their rosters over the prior twenty+ years, why were the San Antonio Spurs the only team to put together a streak of 22 straight playoff berths while no one else was even close to such a feat? Why, despite the existence of many huge state universities with endowments of a billion dollars or more, has the longest-term juggernaut in NCAA football been Alabama? The common denominator that answers the question of breaking through parity to produce what Alabama Head Football Coach Nick Saban calls “special good,” is the presence of coaches who are able to ingrain their system into their teams by



producing tremendous “buy-in” and who can think strategically about player development, staff utilization and management, and maximizing strengths while mitigating weaknesses. In short, the great coach understands that the most brilliant playbook ever means nothing without a staff who is trained to teach the content in a unified way and players who have been motivated to execute the playbook at the highest possible standard of performance. (One can replace “playbook” with fundamentals, score study, design team, etc.) While accomplishing these objectives is easier said than done, the exciting news is that there is an abundance of wonderful materials available from and about master coaches that have nothing—and *everything* to do with producing great bands.

I have found it helpful to categorize the areas in which I have been assisted by learning from master coaches. Below are topics and accompanying resources that I believe translate directly from the gridiron or court to the band hall and are useful to building successful, healthy cultures:

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Developing a Standard of Performance

One of my coaching heroes is the late Bill Walsh, most famous for his tenure as Head Coach of the San Francisco 49ers from 1979-1989, where his teams won three Super Bowls and were the dominant team of the era. Though a brilliant football mind with an encyclopedic knowledge of complex systems, what separated Walsh from his peers was his dogged dedication to what he called his “Standard of Performance.” Check out “The Score Takes Care of Itself” by Bill and Craig Walsh for an easy read that will immerse you in methods for embracing painstaking attention to detail in your program. Tired of your horns thinking it’s OK to crack a note every measure? Tired of the instrument storage lockers looking like a dorm room in April? Coach Walsh’s information is all about teaching players and even staff to be as protective of the program’s cultural expectations and standards as the head director/coach.

Developing Program Priorities and Creating Relationships with Players

One of the sporting books in which I have brought countless takeaways into the band hall is Tom Verducci’s, “The Cubs’ Way.” This work focuses on the masterminds who ended the Chicago Cubs’ 108-year World Series drought, culminating with their 2016 World Series win. I love this book because it tackles building programs from two angles. The first angle is constructed around the Cubs’ then general manager, Theo Epstein, and his methods for assessing where the team was upon his hiring, what was working, what wasn’t, and perhaps most importantly, which battles were worth fighting in the quest to get the team to its potential. His ability to quantify his non-negotiable values for every member of the organization was a huge reason the team’s improvement was so rapid. This translates directly to dealing with student leaders, and even band parents. The second touchstone of the book

is Manager Joe Maddon’s ability to insist on the very best work possible from his players while treating them with respect and as the unique individuals they are. It also features several instances of Maddon thinking way outside the box in order to get his players’ mentality to a place that embraced excellence while maintaining a joyful spirit. The lessons from Maddon have been most helpful to me during the grind of a long competitive marching season or an arduous UIL concert preparation process. None of these pursuits matter if the students we lead don’t think the process is rewarding, and yes, *joyful*.

Making the Most of What You Have

Who among us hasn’t bemoaned the lack of depth in one of our sections or another, or our lack of double reeds, or focused on how many more students the program down the road has? Michael Lewis’ renowned “Moneyball” is all about doing more with less and focusing on developing the players you *do* have over the long term. Read this one if you find yourself needing to believe that the kids you have right now can get reach heights you may not have thought possible.

Some Other Great Coaches to Study

Pat Summit, John Wooden, Chuck Noll, Jim Valvano, Tom Landry, Vince Lombardi, Bill Parcells. There are volumes of information about the approach to team building and management on all of these master coaches, and I have found every one of them to be helpful in my journey to learn as much as I can about how to best serve my students and colleagues while expecting their best. In the words of the great Eddie Green to a beloved colleague, “we do everything differently, yet we do everything the same.” I challenge you to find wisdom for your program in places you might not have imagined.