



Reflections From The Field: How Coaching Made Us Better Teachers

DeMeulenaere, Eric J.; Cann, Colette N.; McDermott, James E.; and Malone, Chad R.

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Book Review

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Who looks to middle or high school athletic coaches for innovations in pedagogy? Our stereotype of the coach in the classroom is of someone in a polo shirt with a whistle on a lanyard, teaching health class or low-tracked sections of history. In *Reflections from the Field: How Coaching Made Us Better Teachers*, Eric J. DeMeulenaere and Colette N. Cann, along with Chad R. Malone and James E. McDermott, undermine this image and offer glimpses of master coach-educators who are adept at discerning the unique needs of a team or class of students and crafting a coaching/teaching style that fosters not only athletic success and acquisition of knowledge, but also growth in students' interpersonal skills and sense of their own potential.

At the heart of the book are essays by each of the four named above, recounting how the narrators addressed difficult coaching situations and then applied what they had learned on the court or field to transform their classroom pedagogy. After each coaching essay, DeMeulenaere and Cann analyze the team and classroom dynamics in light of educational theory. They also supply an introduction and two chapters of concluding analysis and reflection.

The athletes/students in question were all "at risk" or otherwise unpromising. McDermott's principal had called one of his baseball players the "worst piece of ____ [expletive deleted]" the principal had ever seen. Malone agreed to coach the Highland Park Lady Cougars basketball team after they had lost a game 90-6. Cann coached a volleyball team with no height, no strength, and no stars. And DeMeulenaere took on a fledgling girls' soccer team whose members were more concerned about the boys watching practice from the bleachers than

about training to win.

The brilliant strategies crafted by each of these coaches go beyond inspirational speeches. McDermott persuaded his athletes to stop using foul language by making himself the “designated swearer”: when a player felt a need to cuss, he would raise his hand (one finger for English and two for Spanish) and McDermott would oblige, shouting at practice but speaking into his hand during actual games (13). This use of a humorous method to encourage professional demeanor complemented other techniques McDermott employed to convince players that they could be serious athletes -- and, in McDermott’s English classroom, serious students. But to use the word “techniques” to refer to what McDermott and the other three coaches did suggests a bag of pedagogical tricks. What the narrators offer are not miscellaneous tips or even best practices, but testimonies about how acting as servant-leaders on practice and playing fields and in the classroom transformed all involved. Teaching, for these coach-educators, is never paint-by-numbers, but requires capacity to read the situation, listen to those being coached or taught, and innovate in courageous ways. Although the word does not figure prominently in their narratives, coaching and teaching in this vein require extraordinary *love*.

Reflections from the Field is relevant for theological educators. Despite the seeming disjuncture between the contexts described in this book and those of a religion classroom or theological seminary, readers will find analogies. They will also be prompted to think about ways that students -- and faculties -- could be strengthened by higher emphasis on collaboration and mutual support (the “team” aspect). Finally, the book will renew conviction that great teaching matters, and renew inspiration that it is more than worth all that it costs.

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