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Student-Athlete Edition

On Being Accountable

Teams can't function without accountability. Accountability is absolutely essential for teams to succeed at a high level. It's necessary for cohesion and the commitment of members to each other. Yet, so often the reality of accountability is misunderstood. That is, many people believe it's their right or responsibility to "hold" others accountable.

But that's not the case. That's because being accountable is a choice. It's not a choice that a coach or another player can make for you. You have a choice over how you spend your energy and focus your attention, and how you choose to act and react to your circumstances. You always have a choice.

Let's draw a clear line about what accountability is, and how it differs from compliance. There is a pivotal difference that must not be missed: accountability is based on intrinsic motivation and personal choice; compliance is based on extrinsic motivation—usually doing what you are told to do. In the case of compliance, you do what you are told because you like your coach, or you want playing time, or both. You may even believe compliance, rather than commitment, is what is expected. Often times what you are asked to do may not make sense to you, but you don't challenge it for fear of retribution.

Years ago as a college student on a major college campus, I would chuckle at the way coaches would send "spies" to make sure athletes were attending class. The spy would show up five minutes after the class started to "count heads" and ensure that the athletes were in class. Not more than a minute after the spy left the players picked up their book bags and exited out the back door. This was a clear demonstration of the athletes choosing to appear to be compliant. It was a game. The coaches knew it. And the athletes knew it. The coaches thought they were holding the players accountable by checking to see that they were in class. But that's the fundamental error—you can't hold others accountable.

This example demonstrates the reality that often student-athletes aren't necessarily choosing accountability; they're just accepting that someone else is going to hold them accountable. Under this system, student-athletes are most likely to put in only enough effort to get by. What's going on below the surface here is coaches are acting from the belief that "we don't think you can choose to be accountable regarding this responsibility, so we are going to make sure you are." This might be a step in the direction of a culture of compliance, not commitment.

Remember, no one can hold you accountable. Oh, someone may say "I'm holding you accountable." It happens all the time. But they're not really holding you accountable. They are forcing you to comply. And compliance is on the other side of the canyon of commitment. An external push may be helpful, and certainly well-intended, but in the end deep commitment is personal and compelling. To achieve success, believe in yourself.

You always have a choice about your beliefs and behavior; the commitment to and execution of specific actions and attitudes. That is the important distinction between compliance and commitment. You choose to be accountable—it can't be forced upon you. *You* internalize a commitment, a choice, and then it's up to you to make good decisions that will help you to live out your commitment. That's accountability.

If you choose to be accountable, and this is definitely your personal choice—then act decisively. Accountability is ownership. Here are some ways you can "own" your actions:

- You choose to take personal accountability for your impact on others
- You choose to collaborate with your team members to achieve your team goals.
- You check your ego at the door and set aside your personal agenda to achieve a greater mission—that of team success.
- You commit to the success of all your teammates and eliminate blaming and finger-pointing.
- You and your teammates hold each other to agreed upon high standards of behavior.
- You are willing to help teammates align actions and behaviors to produce desired results.