

Schools need authority to fire coaches

Written by Mark Dukes

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In most jobs, your performance can result in anything from salary raises to termination. But if you're a high school coach in Iowa, there are no worries of getting fired because of your won-loss record.

High school fans can be known to grumble about their head coach as much as their counterparts in the college and professional ranks. Grumble all you want, though, because you're stuck with your head coach, no matter how many losses he or she accumulates.

A healthy debate can be generated over the merits of this situation. Is it important for high school coaches to win? Is it grounds for termination if a coach loses too much? Is winning or losing a high priority in high schools?

The Iowa Court of Appeals last year issued a 2-1 ruling in favor of Bruce Wall, who was fired as the Jesup football coach in 2009. The appeals court gave Wall his job back.

Wall had appealed to the school board after he was fired, which supported the decision of its athletic director and principal. He then appealed to an adjudicator, who ruled in his favor. The school district appealed to the Iowa District Court, which found in favor of the school, then the Iowa Court of Appeals ruled for Wall.

The appeals court ruling meant Wall should be reinstated to his job and receive back pay. The Iowa Supreme Court refused to hear the school district's appeal.

Wall's football teams had a 2-34 record from 2005 to '08 and were outscored in that four-year period 1,521-200. The school board ultimately decided Wall should be fired for two reasons: "Ineffective leadership and failure to maintain student interest and participation."

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Wall, a former Maquoketa Valley star, stood his ground and won. But it makes you wonder, why would a coach want to return to a school that doesn't want him? And doesn't a coach at some point understand that he or she might not be getting the job done or isn't the proper fit?

A high school coach's main responsibilities include teaching fundamentals, motivating athletes, working with integrity and promoting sportsmanship. Life lessons often are learned in high school. But which learns more, a winning team or a losing team?

High school coaches are so much different than college and professional coaches. High school coaches cannot (or should not) recruit players. They do not make big salaries. They work with much smaller budgets. And they are not scrutinized on national television.

But many communities expect their head coaches to put at least a competitive team on the field. Losing too much will get the boosters and alumni riled.

Winning teams, especially in football, set a high tone for the student body. Losing teams become a downer for students, parents and fans.

In the end in Iowa, it doesn't matter whether a coach wins or loses. Something just doesn't ring true about that.

A coach is paid to do a job. That job includes many things, including performance. Performance means doing things to get the most out of your athletes. If those things aren't met, a school ought to be able to find someone else.

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