



# HEROES IN WAITING

While a limited number of players can be in the lineup at any one time, the rest of the squad still plays a large role in your program's success. Top coaches explain how to get the most out of bench players. | By Patrick Bohn

After the University of Southern Indiana lost a winner's bracket game in the NCAA Division II Midwest Regional last season, senior A.J. Dokey addressed the squad. "He said, 'It's my fault we lost. I wasn't energized, and I didn't get us going,'" USI Head Coach Tracy Archuleta recalls. "He told the guys he'd do better the next game."

An athlete accepting blame after a loss is hardly unique, but the circumstances behind this admission were different: Dokey never played in the game, spending all nine innings watching his teammates from the dugout. "What A.J. said that day has stuck with me," Archuleta says. "I've always believed in the importance of a strong bench, but he really drove home the point that backups play critical roles in the success of a team in unseen ways."

Although Dokey appeared in only 18 games for Southern Indiana last season, he provided a steady, veteran presence in the dugout. And when he was called on, he also delivered on the field—entering as a defensive replacement in the 12th inning of the Division II title game and recording the final

out as the Screaming Eagles won their first national championship.

Few bench players will end their career on such a high note. But by defining and valuing their roles, you can maximize their contributions, regardless of how often they take the field.

## ROLE PLAYING

The first step to helping bench players thrive is ensuring they understand and accept their assignments. Some coaches find that individual preseason meetings are great times to start those conversations. While it's never easy to tell a player he won't be a regular in the starting lineup, these sit-downs are essential to getting the most out of your bench players.

Before Tim McDonald, Head Coach at Bay City Western High School in Auburn, Mich., has preseason meetings with his players, he asks them to do self-evaluations listing their strengths and weaknesses as well as what they see as their role on the squad. "Players are usually pretty honest about how good they are," he says. "So if I think a guy is a bench player, he's likely to have arrived at that conclusion himself, while also giving a

coming off the bench. When he found out that was our plan, he wasn't happy," says University of Houston Head Coach Todd Whitting. "But I asked him if he thought being a backup would be worth it if it gave the squad a better chance to go to the College World Series, and that helped him see the bigger picture. When you can put the move in the context of team success, players are more likely to buy in."

who never started for me become regular starters on their junior college teams. I tell my players that all the traits they can demonstrate as a backup, like hard work and a great attitude, will impress college coaches."

Another way to keep backup players motivated is to let them know exactly how they can earn a starting role. "I always try to identify three or four things each bench player needs to improve if he wants to get into the

**"Early in my career, I tried to avoid conflict. I'd often dance around the issue and say things like, 'Well, you might get some playing time ...' All that did was create unrealistic expectations. It's much better to be honest."**

MIKE BEDICS, NOTRE DAME HIGH SCHOOL, EASTON, PA

lot of thought to what he needs to do to improve. And if he thinks he's a starter, then we have a chance to talk through our difference of opinion before the season starts, which reduces problems down the road."

The conversation requires even more finesse when the player has been a starter in the past. "Last year, Landon Appling, a three-year starter for us, began the season

Although players may be understandably upset when informed their playing time will be limited, it can help to tell them individual success is still possible no matter how long they spend on the bench. "Every coach has examples of guys who became quality starters after spending time as a backup," says Marc Wiese, Head Coach at Puyallup (Wash.) High School. "I've even had three players

starting lineup," says Texas Christian University Head Coach Jim Schlossnagle. "That gives them something concrete to work on and helps them realize their status isn't permanent if they put in the hard work."

When outlining these steps, however, it's critical that you remain honest about the likelihood of a reserve earning a starting position. "Early in my career—like many young coaches—I tried to avoid conflict," says Mike Bedics, Head Coach at Notre Dame High School in Easton, Pa. "But that created problems when I needed to tell players they were going to be on the bench. I'd often dance around the issue and say things like, 'Well, you might get some playing time ...' All that did was create unrealistic expectations."

"It's much better to be 100 percent honest," he continues. "Not only do players respect being told the truth, it gives me a chance to see how they'll respond to being a bench guy. If a guy is a little ticked off, I know he's going to work hard to be a starter."

While many coaches limit their preseason meetings to one-on-one discussions, others prefer to involve their staff. Archuleta says it can be especially helpful to have a second voice on hand in case players challenge your reasoning.

"I like having my assistant coaches with me during these meetings," he says. "Often, they are the ones working closely with these players during practice, so they're able to offer a more detailed description of what's keeping the player out of the starting lineup."

#### PRACTICE PLAN

Once you know your backups are on board with their role, the next step is helping

PATRICK BOHN is an Assistant Editor at *Coaching Management*. He can be reached at: [pb@MomentumMedia.com](mailto:pb@MomentumMedia.com).

## PARENTAL PRESSURE

**A complaining parent can cause headaches when it comes to their son's playing time, so coaches need to develop strategies to deal with them before a problem arises.**

"If I get the feeling that a parent might give me a hard time about their son being on the bench, I'll have them present when I talk with that player about his role," says Marc Wiese, Head Coach at Puyallup (Wash.) High School. "This way, they know where things stand right away and they can ask any questions they have for me."

Tim McDonald, Head Coach at Bay City Western High School in Auburn, Mich., says letting parents know what goes into your evaluations of their sons can be helpful. "I'll frequently get e-mails from parents with stats and highlight videos from their kid's summer league or travel team games," he says. "I tell them, 'Regardless of how he played in

the summer, I have to evaluate him based on what my staff and I see during the school year.'"

If the parents don't trust your judgment, Mike Bedics, Head Coach at Notre Dame High School in Easton, Pa., suggests giving them an inside look. "I invite parents to our practices," he says. "That often shows them another side of things, where they can see their son and the starter together, which usually illustrates what their son needs to do to earn more playing time."

When parents just won't buy into his reasoning, McDonald lets someone else do the talking. "My players fill out a preseason questionnaire listing their strengths and weaknesses, and they're usually honest about their shortcomings," he says. "If a parent comes to me with a playing time complaint, I can often show them that their son agrees with my decision, which makes it harder for a parent to say I'm being unfair."



them improve on the field. That starts with taking the time to work with them in practice.

"I always tell my staff that we never know how good a player is until his final game," says Whitting. "So we need to be working with every one of them every day.

confidence high and working on areas he's struggling with."

Archuleta regularly lets his backups know that the one thing they can control is their effort. "I'll constantly ask my bench guys if they've worked on their weaknesses during practice," he says. "If they haven't, I

reserves attuned to the details of the contest. "Dugout energy is huge," says Whitting. "We have a dugout participation sheet that lists 10 to 15 things our bench guys are expected to do during a game. For example, we always yell 'back' on pickoff moves by the opposing pitcher, and if one of our fielders makes an

**"We have a dugout participation sheet that lists 10 to 15 things our bench guys are expected to do during a game. For example, if one of our fielders makes an error, the bench guys will yell out, 'So what?' in support. This keeps them engaged and helps the starters as well."**

TODD WHITTING, UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

"Not spending practice time with your backups is the quickest way to make them upset," he continues. "If you've given them a list of things they need to improve in order to start, it's your job to coach them up and let them know you're observing their progress."

While holding his backups to the same standards as his starters during practice, McDonald is careful to account for their differing skill levels. "I'm not going to throw batting practice to a top college prospect the same way I do to his backup," he says. "While I'll challenge the starter on his weaknesses, with the backup, I may alternate between pitching to his strengths to keep his

tell them that I'm not going to feel sorry for them when they complain about their playing time."

Practice can also be a time for bench players to experiment with new skills that can help them find a larger role. "I remind players that if they learn to play another position, they're giving us more options to find them playing time," McDonald says.

#### BE PREPARED

When it's time to play ball, one of the biggest challenges with bench players is keeping them involved in the game. An engaged bench ensures team camaraderie and enthusiasm are high while also keeping

error, the bench guys will yell out, 'So what?' in support. This keeps them engaged and helps the starters as well."

Short pop quizzes during games can ensure bench players are paying attention. "I'll have my bullpen pitchers and backup catchers sit next to me as I call pitches," Bedics says. "I'll ask them why I called the particular pitch I did and why I wanted it located in that specific spot to help them focus their energy and improve as players.

"I'll also remind my bench guys to let me know if they see something I miss—like a specific defensive alignment we should be in," he continues. "That way, the players feel ownership, and I have extra sets of eyes watching the field."

Archuleta, on the other hand, doesn't give his bench players specific tasks, preferring to let each focus in his own way. "Some guys want to talk to teammates about what's happening on the field, but others—especially pitchers—want to be left alone," he says. "It's important for me to respect the unique processes guys have to help them succeed. If I don't, I'll have a robotic team, and the players won't reach their potential."

Once you've decided to send a player into the game, advance notice provides him a chance to mentally prepare and increases his odds of succeeding. "If I know I'm going to be sending in my backup right fielder, I'll have him mimic an at-bat while the starter is at the plate," says Schlossnagle. "I'll have him put on his batting helmet and gloves, get into his stance, watch the pitches, and visualize swinging the bat. Studies have shown that visualizing tasks beforehand can help people accomplish them more successfully."

A last-second reminder to stay calm can help keep the pressure off. "Pinch-hitters often try to do too much," says Wiese. "They're thinking, 'If I get a big hit today, I may start tomorrow.' But sometimes, all I want them to do is get a bunt down or move

## SENIOR STRUGGLES

A great group of seniors can provide the leadership needed for a team to succeed. But they also present challenges to coaches when they're positioned behind younger players on the depth chart.

"One year, I had a senior who wasn't playing much, and late in the season, he broke down and got very emotional," says Mark Wiese, Head Coach at Puyallup (Wash.) High School. "He wasn't going to play in college, and he wanted to be on the field so badly during his final year that it was hard for him to accept his role. I wound up starting him a few times, but I'm not sure that was the best way to handle the situation," he

continues. "I was putting his needs ahead of the team's because I felt bad. It would have been better to tell the player I could see his passion, and even though he wasn't starting, that passion would serve him well in everything he would do in his life."

Since that experience, Wiese has made a special effort before the season starts to spell out the unique situations non-starting seniors may find themselves in and make sure they'll accept that role. "I try to walk seniors through the implications of being on the bench," he says. "Is he going to be okay with missing his senior prom to not play in a playoff game? If not, then maybe being on the team isn't the best idea for him."

a runner over. So I make sure I talk with them about the game plan before they go in."

After a bench player's appearance is over, it's vital to discuss it—especially when things don't go well. "Backups put a lot of pressure on themselves," Bedics says. "I remind them that one mistake isn't going to lessen my opinion of them. I'll say 'Yes, you were picked off, but we still have confidence in you. Tomorrow in practice we'll talk about how this happened.'"

"And I'll look for the positives in a situation," he adds. "Maybe a hitter made the third out in an inning, but he hit a hard line drive right at the shortstop. That's something he can be proud of."

Coaches can also help bench players by inserting them in situations that are suited to their talents. "If you call on a guy who struggles with hitting a good curveball to come in to face the other team's best starter, you're putting him in a demoralizing situation," McDonald says. "Instead, look for a matchup where he's likely to be successful."

#### IN THE SPOTLIGHT

With so few chances to shine, it's easy for bench players to feel overlooked as the starters soak up the accolades. That's why it's incumbent on coaches to recognize the contributions of their bench players.

"Last season, I probably used the same lineup in 28 of our last 29 games, which meant that a lot of the bench guys didn't get a chance to play," says Schlossnagle. "But I'd take the time after a game to remind the squad that by charting pitches, for example, these guys were part of our success that day. Simply pointing that out made them feel valued."

More tangible awards can also help bench players feel appreciated. At Bay City Western, the coaching staff creates a list of in-game goals that can earn a player a Gatorade. "The list doesn't include things like hitting a home run or striking out 10 guys in a game," McDonald says. "Instead, it's focused on things any player can do, like executing a squeeze bunt or stealing a base late in a game."

"By making the list ahead of time, the bench guys know that we're not rewarding them just for the sake of it, and it gets the whole team behind them," he continues. "If a player does something we know is on the list, everyone in our dugout starts yelling, 'Gator juice! Gator juice!' It means a lot to that player when the starters show him support."

Another way to give bench players their due is to make sure they are considered for any honor or award that is not solely for on-field performance. "Our booster club gives out an award each year to the player on the

team who's shown dedication to athletics," Bedics says. "It's not an award specifically for bench players, but it's the kind of award that can recognize their contributions, whether it's being the first one on the practice field each day or always showing up for fundraisers with a great attitude."

Sometimes, just letting bench players partake in something usually reserved for the starters can make them feel valued. "I'll rotate my captains throughout the year and have my bench guys available for media

interviews after the game," Bedics says. "I don't want those things to only be for my best athletes."

Whether through something big or small, the key is to let bench players know they're a big part of the team. "Each year, we play a non-league game at Safeco Field," Wiese says. "I'll have a lot of my non-regulars start that game and play a few innings to thank them for all they've done for us. It doesn't take a lot to give your bench players a moment they'll never forget." **CM**

**TURFACE ATHLETICS™**

**NEW**

Pro League® Champion Brown™

## HOME FIELD ADVANTAGE

The #1 Conditioner for Safe & Playable Fields

Pro League® Red

Pro League® Heritage Red™

Pro League® Champion Brown™

Pro League® Natural

Give your infield the unique, deep brown color of NEW Pro League® Champion Brown™, or select one of our other custom-engineered colors to enhance your field. Our full line of infield conditioners are designed to provide you with the safest, most playable fields.

**BETTER PERFORMANCE. BETTER COLORS.**

For a sample, call 800-207-6457.

For more on the Pro League lineup, visit [www.turface.com](http://www.turface.com).

Find us on Facebook  
[facebook.com/turface](https://www.facebook.com/turface)

Circle No. 111