

# AVOIDING TRAGEDY

by Greg Shepard

## THE WRONG WAY

The following story recently made national news: It involved an incident with a high school wrestling team from the Central Washington area. Apparently there was animosity between team members who were Mexican-American and those that were white. Four of the Mexican-American wrestlers held a white kid down and shoved a broomstick about 12 inches up and into his rectum. The headlines screamed out phrases like brutal gang rape with a broom handle and to add fuel to the fire, the parents of the accused were upset because their sons were expelled from school.

How in the world could something like this happen? I called a friend who coached at a neighboring school and asked him about this incident. He expressed that the story was blown somewhat out of proportion but that it was basically true. The broomstick was inserted the full 12 inches.

Leadership could have prevented this from happening. If I have my facts straight, the coach allowed "hazing". To be a member of the wrestling team, you had to go through initiation or hazing. Older team members would make younger team members do things to be on the team. The hazing got out of hand as requirements spiraled out of control.

The coach also had a big bulletin board in the wrestling room. Those who quit the team were publically degraded on this bulletin board. Apparently, just calling a boy a "quitter" was mild.

The boy who was brutally victimized could no longer stay in school and has since transferred. He probably felt so traumatized that it was just impossible to face his peers and teachers.

All in all it was one of the saddest days in high school sports. I hope we can all learn from this needless tragedy. Now let's look at the "Right Way" and discuss some changes in philosophy and leadership which would have prevented a lot of heartache and saved a coach's job.

## THE RIGHT WAY

First of all the BFS Journal has been replete with wonderful examples of "Right Way" coaching methods. This journal is no exception especially the "Quest For Greatness" segment.

How precious relationships can be as they are developed between coach and athlete. I got a call today from Billy all the way from Missouri. He'd heard about a BFS Clinic and came the last hour or so. Billy thought that I might be the clinician but it was Jim Brown. Anyway Billy was all excited as he addressed me as coach. You see Billy played football for me in 1977. He said he was all fired up about lifting again. I asked him about his life. He was a groundskeeper and married with three children. You could tell he still trying to be the best he could be and was a great father. Billy thanked me for being his coach and I thanked him.

As I reflected on that call, I realized how unimportant some things are in coaching and yet how important other things become when you look at life over an extended period. I might also mention that Billy was a fourth team player so I am very thankful that everyone was treated as though they were special.

I believe we ought to promote brotherhood and acceptance of different cultures and races. Shouldn't we strive for team unity? Shouldn't we as coaches teach this? Coaches are in an extremely powerful leadership position. If we use it wisely, we can help create genuine warm feelings between Mexican-Americans, whites, blacks etc. Don't we have enough hatred and gang violence in this world?

Hazing creates an atmosphere for negative and destructive behavior and attitudes especially when race separation is encouraged. "Right Way" leadership should have the older athletes helping the younger athletes in their new experiences with a team. We need big brothers who are willing to teach and help the new kids. This fosters team unity and good feelings that will last a lifetime.

I think we can all empathize with the coach who couldn't stand a kid quitting his program. However, labeling a kid publically as a quitter is not what good leaders do at the high school level or any other level. How about a hug and an offer to help the kid at anytime? I promise with all my heart that coaches who take this latter approach will have less kids quitting, have more kids on the team, have more wins and have life long warm relationships.

I know many of you have a testimony of the Lord as I do. Asking this question has helped me many times, "What would the Savior want me to do in this situation?" Then, after sitting or kneeling in quiet reflection, great answers seem to become very obvious.

**Almost the exact same incident  
occured in Wisconsin. The case  
is the midst of legal battles.**

**DON'T HATE - GIVE RESPECT**

**DON'T HAZE - GIVE HELP**

**DON'T RIDICULE - GIVE HUGS**