

A Note to Coaches: What is Leadership for an Athlete?

As your team embarks on this study of leadership, you will soon learn that Jesus has much to say about leadership — and that most of it contrasts greatly with the modern view of leadership. You'll serve your athletes well if you help them to see the role of a leader as being embodied by three roles:

A leader is a servant. — On athletic teams, often the freshmen are the ones expected to carry the equipment or the water. The freshmen are teased by the upperclassmen. Often there are initiation rites that young players are expected to “pass” before being fully accepted as part of the team. Jesus says that these behaviors are not fitting in the kingdom of God, but that *“whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave”* (Matthew 20:26-27). As Christians we have often followed the lead of our culture, laying the office of servanthood on the back of the youngest and least experienced. Instead, Jesus calls those who would be leaders to be servants of the team — to carry the equipment and water, run errands, volunteer to do things that need to be done for the good of the team. Once an athlete becomes a servant of the team, only then can he be a leader.

A leader disciplines others. — In 2 Timothy 2:2, the apostle teaches the young pastor, Timothy, to disciple other young men. *“The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.”* Timothy is told to train others to be able to train still others. What should freshmen see in seniors? They should see persons who are eager to serve and to share with the younger ones the things that they have learned from those who have gone before them. They should see persons who exhibit the fruit of the Spirit. Any athlete who desires to lead must accept the responsibility to be an example and a teacher to others.

A leader ministers to the poor and needy. — Jesus says, *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”* (Luke 4:18). The leaders of your team should be the first to look out for those who are hurting and to go to them as encouragers. Your leaders should be passionate about meeting the needs of others, and they should withhold no effort in doing so. When another member of the team is shunned by others, your team leaders should take that athlete under their wings. When an opponent is injured or defeated, your leaders should show compassion. A leader reaches out to all of those who all those who are hurting or in need.

Coaches, you have been called by God to teach your athletes that there is no sphere of life where these truths can be ignored. In your families you should live as a servant. In the church you should follow this command. In your school you should practice servant-leadership. Certainly, then, this eagerness to serve should also be a distinctive quality of your athletes and your team. With this in mind, we are praying for you as you endeavor to teach and model leadership to your team. Thank you for your work on their behalf!