

THE FORTY-EIGHT-HOUR RULE:  
EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND THE STUDENT ATHLETE

*What educators can learn from students' commitments to sports*

By Alan C. R. Mueller

**S**EVERAL YEARS AGO, I taught a course called First-Year Experience. During one class, we discussed decision making. A student named Sean mentioned that he played "water pong." I am familiar with many student pastimes, and although I had heard of the classic drinking game beer pong, I had never heard of water pong. I asked Sean what it was. Sean, a high-achieving student who was also a member of the lacrosse team, explained that water pong was a game with the rules of beer pong, using water rather than beer. I was intrigued. Why would a student play water pong? Was he part of a religious group on campus trying to make a statement? Was he a teetotaler? Or was he a health nut who was simply looking for fun ways to keep hydrated? None of the above. Sean explained that he was "under the forty-eight-hour rule."

Sean volunteered an explanation of his athletic coach's rule: during the forty-eight hours before an athletic competition, he could not drink any alcohol. Six other student athletes in the class corroborated this rule. All of the students who confirmed its existence were eighteen or nineteen years old, and the college was a dry campus. I asked Sean why he chose to follow the forty-eight-hour rule, while he seemingly disregarded the laws of our state and the policy of our campus. At the time, I served as dean of freshmen and although I didn't work in the student conduct office, I maintained a basic understanding of the institution's code of student conduct. Sean's story challenged my understanding of this code and its importance. He answered my

question candidly: "If I'm caught with a beer in the dorm, I just get a fine, but if my coach hears that I drank before a game, he'll make me run until I puke." This classically behaviorist answer didn't sit well with my idealistic version of what college education truly should be, but it got me wondering about the role of emotional attachment to behaviors, the consequences of such attachments, and what educators do to create that emotional attachment.

As an experienced student affairs administrator and educator, I believed then, as I do now, that while punitive sanctions may alter behavior in the short term, colleges and universities should hold themselves to a higher standard. But as I listened to Sean, I recognized that his decision to follow some rules and not others had to do with the level of emotional significance he placed on varying authorities and activities. It was clear that Sean was more invested in his coach's rule than he was in the rules of his college. If Sean was telling the truth, then his coach had decided to levy the power of excessive exercise as a disciplinary tool.

On the most basic level, Sean is learning about cause and effect. He learns that his actions have consequences and that he gets to choose which consequences he will risk and which he won't. On one level, this may be a positive learning experience. At the same time, however, if Sean is looking to his coach as a role model, he may also be learning to avoid emotional investment in the policies of the college and the laws of the state. There is certainly more that other educators can do to tap into and shift emotional investment.

**T**HE EPISODE with Sean reminded me of other, more positive stories of coaches and their ability to emotionally engage their student athletes for good and ill and the lessons all educators can take from that. My father taught at the University of North Carolina in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I recall a story he told me about hall of fame basketball coach Dean Smith's policies for players on his teams. Students under Smith's mentorship were told by Coach Smith *never* to miss their classes. This story is consistent with various media reports I've read over the years. Through this policy and other practices, Smith seems to have used the emotional investment that students had in athletics to improve students' lives. He expressed and modeled clear standards and invested in his players' education off the court as well as on the court. This investment and the clear respect Smith had for institutional policies may have been the single greatest factor that influenced the emotional development of his students. Smith taught students to do more than follow the rules. He taught them that he was deeply concerned about their education. I imagine that if I were a young student athlete who knew that a living legend such as Dean Smith cared about my performance in the classroom, my commitment to the classroom would deepen.

Similar to Coach Smith, his longtime rival Mike Krzyzewski opens his book *Leading with the Heart* with the following: "Okay, everybody, listen up. We have only one rule here: Don't do anything that's detrimental to yourself. Because if it's detrimental to you . . . it'll be detrimental to Duke University" (p. 4). This emphasis on the student and the institution is the hallmark of Mike Krzyzewski's career.

But then there's the other negative example from my own life. During one semester, I received an e-mail from a student named Danielle, one of three upper-

division student coordinators of the first-year emerging leaders. As we prepared to take the twenty-member group on our opening retreat, Danielle explained that she had a softball game Saturday afternoon and therefore could not attend the retreat. The retreat was a short event; we were scheduled to leave campus Friday after classes and return Saturday by lunchtime. I asked Danielle when her report time was for the game, and she explained that it wasn't until well after we would return from the retreat. I then asked her if she was choosing not to attend to conserve her strength. She explained, "That's not it at all; my coach told me that I couldn't go and that if she found out that I did, she would cut my playing time."

On the surface, Danielle's decision seems very much like Sean's. She alters her behavior to avoid negative consequences from a coach. She has an emotional investment in playing time because she loves her sport. But she was also worried about losing her scholarship. Her emotional investment came from a desire to complete college. Her means to this education was contingent on an athletic scholarship, which she believed would be in danger if she participated in this retreat.

Eventually, Danielle left the sport and found balance. To be fully educated, she learned to invest in spending time with friends, participating in cocurricular activities and playing her sport for the love of that sport. Months later, Danielle confided in me that she regretted having accepted her athletic scholarship because it had caused her so much unnecessary stress.

The actions of Sean, Danielle, and athletes under Coach Smith and Coach Krzyzewski demonstrate which points of emotional significance in their lives drive decision making. Sean was so emotionally invested in his sport that he chose to honor his coach's behavioral expectations. Developmentally, Danielle may have been more ready than Sean to question authority. The other, more famous coaches used the power of emotional attachment to encourage positive behavior among their student athletes.

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**C**AN THOSE OF US without the benefit of cool uniforms, intercollegiate competition, fun games, and glamorous role models find ways to build a team? Can we

find points of emotional investment and use them positively for the development of our students? I believe the answer is yes.

Rather than considering punitive consequences as a path to building more emotional attachment to education, I suggest that we can learn from the more positive aspects of athletics. Perhaps we can do more to build teams in learning situations and publicly celebrate success. Using team-building activities in classroom and cocurricular settings is one way. We can be even more intentional if we use these kinds of activities to support small groups that may be charged with working together throughout a class or through cocurricular involvement. Perhaps there are people of note in the entertainment industry, politics, or other public areas who maintain side endeavors that fuel their passions in educational areas. Why not explore these lives as a route to increasing students' emotional investment in the classroom? Friendly competition can also be incorporated in classroom and cocurricular activities. Some of my most memorable educational experiences have been with nontraditional pedagogies such as employing popular game show formats in instruction. Competing in an academic setting for points might have some potential for re-emphasizing to students their own role in their learning.

It is important to engage students emotionally, and it is the educator's job to work at building emotional

significance where it is lacking. Coaches, faculty, and administrators bear a responsibility to know where emotional significance already exists in lives of students and employ it appropriately for students' intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development.

In the foreword to Krzyzewski's book, basketball great Grant Hill explains that one of the reasons he was drawn to Duke University was that, unlike most coaches who were recruiting him, Coach Krzyzewski did not promise him certain amounts of playing time. Hill explained that he was told that he would have to work hard to earn everything he would receive. Clearly, Mike Krzyzewski knew that for most young student athletes coming out of high school, there was emotional investment in playing time. As an educator of the whole student, Krzyzewski chose

to express emotional investment in personal responsibility rather than only in achievement. By making explicit our own emotional investments in the entire student, we as educators can help shape the emotional touchstones and learning experiences of our students.

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NOTE

Krzyzewski, M. (2000). *Leading with the Heart*. New York: Warner Business Books.

