



New Ideas for Recognition Programs in School Athletics

By John Patton, CMAA

When people look at your school athletic program what do they see?

As an athletic director, a wide range of individuals and groups in/associated with your school look to you for leadership across many fronts and include students, coaches, parents, teachers, administrators, local businesses, and others.

What will be your leadership legacy? Will it be winning programs, a school coaching philosophy that promotes character development, or some other thing? My hope for you is that character development is first and foremost in your considerations. You can assist in developing character in all those involved in school sports by having a well-thought out, well-planned, and well-executed school athletic recognition program in your school. What do you have right now?

Most likely there is some sort of athletic recognition program in your school. In most cases there will be recognition of outstanding athletes and teams. Perhaps you recognize coaches, or maybe volunteers, but have you taken the time to create a plan and set the tone for how you recognize ALL of those involved in athletics in your school? Even if you feel you have a great recognition program in place, I believe those who serve their schools and communities best are always looking for ways to enhance what they do.

Based on many years of observing successful athletic programs across many schools and a survey of school athletic directors in Alberta, Canada, let me give you some ideas that may assist you in raising the level of recognition of school athletics.

Setting the Tone for Recognition

Hopefully you have a philosophical statement that guides your school athletic program. If you don't, this is where you should start. Having a clearly stated philosophy, vision, mission statement, and objectives will assist you in structuring your recognition program. Know what you are trying to achieve, and an effective recognition program will help you get there.

Make a Plan

Even if you do have a series of things you do at your school to recognize individual athletes, teams, coaches, and others, it is a good idea to revisit your program each year to see if it is meeting the objectives you have defined.

If you do not have what you believe to be a well-structured program or well-organized plan for recognition in place, the athletic administra-

tor should meet with the school principal to discuss their suggestions for creating or enhancing your athletics recognition program. With support from the principal, the athletic administrator should then meet with coaches to get their thoughts and feedback on how they would like to provide recognition via the school athletic program. Make sure that all sport coaches are afforded the same opportunity to provide input. At some point, and depending on how much change you are considering, it may also be worthwhile to include student athlete leaders in the discussion.

Some Suggestions to guide you:

- Make sure you have school administration support and budget for your recognition program. How you do this will vary from school to school and will be easier in some locations than others. Perhaps funds come from the general school budget, your athletics budget, from a booster club, local sponsors or donations from parents. If you have user fees for school sport, perhaps you can tack on a small amount to each sport fee to help fund your recognition initiatives.
- Create a yearly plan, with a schedule of what recognition will be provided when and who will coordinate it. Make sure all coaches and student athletes are aware of all aspects of the program, including deadlines for submission of information.
- While students are the first priority, don't forget the importance of also recognizing coaches, volunteers, parents, officials, custodians, secretaries, etc. You have many supporters and you can often maintain that support with a simple thank you (although formal recognition and gifts can help too!)
- Inform athletes and parents of recognition criteria during pre-season parent meetings and ensure it is posted on your school athletics website.
- Ensure equal recognition for girls and boys.
- Do something during the season for each sport.
- Recognize publicly (Wall displays, announcements, social media, website, etc.)
- Consider an end of season or end of school year awards banquet.

What if dollars are tight?

- How you pay for the recognition program can be a stress for some schools, but if you can find the room in your athletics budget, it will pay dividends.
- If dollars are short, you might consider approaching local sponsors or having an annual fundraiser to cover expenses.

The following lists are a collection of ideas that I have seen, or that have been shared with me; it is not exhaustive, and ideas are limited only by your imagination and budget.

Recognizing Individual Athletes: Athlete of the Week/Month Ideas

First, determine your criteria. There are various options

possible, but it should be a discussion between you, your coaches, and perhaps your student athlete leaders.

- Determine criteria: e.g., game MVP, Community Supporter, Academic Achievement, etc.
- Buy lunch for Athlete of the Week
- Award a special t-shirt weekly or monthly; 50/50 male/female
- Post picture/poster and name/sport in hallway/awards display case
- Recognize the student(s) during morning announcements
- Ask your local post-secondary institution (if applicable) for a set of free tickets to recognition award winners to a university/college game
- Post every award/recognition on social media

Other Individual Awards to Consider

- Heart of the Game award (every game): hustle, never quit, teamwork, sportsmanship
- Weekly/monthly most sportsmanlike athlete
- Celebrate graduating seniors during their last home game: introduce, PA recognition, gift item, team poster/senior poster
- Pep rally for individual sport athlete accomplishment or "send off" to respective sport championships
- High school sports Wall of Fame in the school: pictures/stories of students who achieve at local or provincial/state/national level/international or professional sport level. One school has called this theirs "Next Level" Wall
- Wall display, with photo
 - Athlete of the Year (male and female)
 - "Character Award" Winners
- Citizenship Award: A points system to recognize student athletes for their community and school service
 - Points tracked, and a limited number of awards are issued
 - Helpful for students when applying for scholarships and jobs
- Rookie of the year for each team
- Student athlete leader: designed for students who provide exceptional leadership based on criteria outlined by the athletics department
- Awards such as plaque/trophy, water bottle, lanyard, backpack, t-shirt, etc.
- Player who is "on fire" gets picture with a local firefighter's helmet on
- Each game team members vote on MVP and Grinder. Noted next day during announcements
- Points system in place where students at a certain level of points receive school letter, proficiency bar, excellence bar

General Ideas

- Headshot photo/name of each individual sport athlete posted in school (trophy cabinet, cafeteria, hallways, gym entrance, etc.)

- Recognize female and male athletes equally
- At last game of season, coaches/parents get up to say something about each graduating player. Part of celebration includes giving them a cool team poster as a parting gift

Team Recognition

- Make a point of highlighting/recognizing each athlete on the team individually at least once during the season; regardless of being a starter or benchwarmer
- "Played every year of high school in same sport:" certificate, letter or some other form of recognition
- Parade all team members through school with students out of class cheering them on as they navigate the hallways – for first game of season or other special games/playoffs. One school has a "high 5" hallway where all students line the hallway and athletes run in between them taking high 5's and cheers
- Homecoming game for football once annually; includes tailgate party
- Create a wall of honor; celebration dinner once a year
- Once a year, each team gets a pizza party
- Team schedules/games posted on monitors all around the school
- Pep rally with music and introductions for each team at start of season: whole school and parents attend
- End of season in each team sport: staff/student game
- "Celebrity" Game: against police/firefighters/paramedics, etc. – could be a fundraiser game
- In gymnasium, have large display board where names of players on teams in season are posted (keep posted all season)

Making it to Championships (State/Provincial)

- Student body lines hallways to "send off" the team
- In smaller K-12 schools, the team tours every class
- Recognition at front of whole school assembly
- Pep rally: whole school
- Banners: any banners won at championships are presented to the team in front of student body at a school assembly.
- Banners: All team members sign the banner they won; banner hung in gym in perpetuity

Other General Ideas

- Put a large TV screen in entrance foyer to school and post weekly pictures, results, of the previous week's competitions. Maintained by AD, coach, or student athlete
- Consider investing in a school athletics archive project
 - Several companies available at the National Athletic Directors Conference that provide software and/or hardware for this purpose
- Faces in the crowd: take a picture of a crowd at a school game, circle one student and give them a prize, like free access to future games, movie pass, special seating, or school apparel.

- Live stream home games so supporters not local can watch
- Feature teams/individuals on school website, school athletics website, or social media
- Rotate in season pics of teams/individuals on school hallway TVs
- Team sports: senior team plays teachers in the week prior to home tournaments
- Work closely with local media to ensure good coverage of school athletic teams
- One big picture made and posted: shows all school teams for that year (individual and team sport)
- Acknowledgement, in school newsletter/e-newsletter
- Each team to have its own Instagram feed; results/successes posted throughout season
- Small value coffee shop cash cards as random or end of season gifts: parent and other volunteers, coaches, or managers
- Scholarship in recognition of important contributor to the school athletics program or a team



Thank you to coaches/managers:

- Learn their favorite Starbucks (or local coffee/treat place) treat for each coach in your program and occasionally surprise them
- School athletic apparel gift to all coaches
- Once a season breakfast for in-season coaches
- End of season gift, budget allowing. Note that in Canada all high school coaches/managers are volunteers
- Create Public Service Announcements (PSAs) using current school athletes (picture with slogan of some sort) to share on hallway TVs, local media. Message could be "come out and support" or "thank you parents/supporters"

School Athletic Banquet Ideas

What you do depends on many factors including funds available, number of teams in the school, and size of the facility. Try to ensure each team gets equal recognition.

Banquet Type:

- Single Sport: awards banquets at end of sport season
- Complete school (multi-sport) athletics program awards banquet at end of school year

Banquet Format:

- Breakfast, lunch, or dinner

- ▶ Include a guest speaker (local media celebrity or successful student athlete alum)
- ▶ Audio-visual to include photos and/or videos of athletes in action
- ▶ Team captains to prepare and give speeches; thank coaches, parents, etc.

Student Athlete Awards

While you will usually see awards like MVP, please consider some of the following:

- ▶ Citizenship award
- ▶ Student athlete award (academic)
- ▶ Heart of the team award (athlete who never gives up)
- ▶ Team manager of the year
- ▶ Multi-sport athlete recognition
- ▶ Cross-sport awards like:
 - Male and female athlete of the year (for the school)
 - Most improved team in the school
 - Most sportsmanlike team
 - Most successful team
 - Most community minded team

Coaches:

- ▶ Recognize “coach of the year” (create a multi-faceted criteria)
- ▶ Coach, most successful team
- ▶ Most sportsmanlike coach (sportsmanship, ethics, integrity)
- ▶ Most community minded coach

Student Athlete Council

If you do not have one, consider starting a student athlete council to allow student athletes to be more involved in the athletics program, and to be seen as leaders in the school. This is a great leadership building opportunity.

Long Standing Traditions:

- ▶ One of our schools, Westwood High School, celebrates “Westwood Wednesdays” – every Wednesday, students wear the school colors
- ▶ Teacher jersey day: before certain games, each senior varsity athlete asks a teacher to wear their jersey for the day to help promote school attendance at that night or weekend’s game

- ▶ Hall of champions: A special room in the school set aside to recognize past and present athletic history/success. Include memorabilia, photos, or newspaper articles
- ▶ Multi-sport athlete awards to recognize students who participate in at least three sports per year
- ▶ Student-run tournament. One school hosts two huge annual invitational tournaments (volleyball and basketball) that are completely coordinated by students with minimal oversight from teachers
- ▶ Take coaches out for 9 holes of golf or disc golf followed by a meal
- ▶ Longevity: consider a special award for long standing coaches. Might be a briefcase, a bag, apparel, or plaque with the school athletic logo
- ▶ Create a coach wall of fame
- ▶ Give out coach jackets each year

Spectator ideas:

- ▶ Track the attendance of supporters of your athletic program. It might be nice to recognize those student athletes, parents, or others who come out to support your teams.

- ▶ Invest in a t-shirt cannon to shoot t-shirts into the crowd at games.

Give back: Take your team to a volunteer somewhere in the community that needs help e.g., local soup kitchen or homeless shelter, players to assist coaching at local junior high or elementary school.

The bottom line is that most people love to be recognized, and the more effort you make to recognize all levels of involvement in your school athletics program, the more people will want to be involved with it, and the better the school and community spirit. Remember, school sports are about much more than winning contests, and your recognition program should reflect this. **IAA**

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