

CASE 8: VICTORY ISN'T EVERYTHING

Latent and Articulated Dissent as Forms of Player Backlash on a Winning High School Football Team

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ABSTRACT

The Copeland Cavaliers have become one of the greatest high school football teams in the history of New Jersey, though has the “win at all costs” mentality of the head coach impinged on the loyalty and determination of its players? Team members must now figure out how best to communicate their dissent in a way that ultimately leads to organizational change or else they may find themselves in a situation not well-known to them: defeated.

The Copeland Cavaliers football team has won 303 of its last 330 games: a winning percentage of just under 92%. They have won 12 district titles in the past two decades and have been state champions five times in that same stretch. In their small New Jersey county, the Cavaliers have, since 1992, achieved many state records, including, though not limited to, the following: most throwing yards by a quarterback in a single season (6, 233 yards in 2009), most rushing yards by a running back in a single season (2,298 yards in 2011), most consecutive games with at least seven defensive sacks (61), most players joining Division I football schools upon high school graduation (an average of nine per year), and most consecutive seasons atop the league's division (14 seasons in a row). In Copeland, fans live and breathe black and tan: the color of the Cavaliers' uniforms.

The team, including starters and backup players, consists of a total of 41 players (22 of whom comprise the offense and 19 of whom comprise the defense) and a total of 8 coaches. From the outside looking in, it seems as though, behaviorally and communicatively speaking, all 49 constituents of the team get along, working harmoniously to win the team's next state championship. During interviews, players and coaches oftentimes comment about such things as camaraderie, drive, motivation, synergy, hard work, dedication, and devotion. If one were merely to attend games and read the weekly sports column, the relationships between and among players and staff of the Copeland Cavaliers would seem nothing less than congruous,

compatible, and, in a sense, congenial. From the inside looking out, however, things are much different than they appear. Although players are afraid to admit that there is a huge problem, especially considering that the town of Copeland supports them so much and any negative image in the mind of the public could impinge on their success, there is. His name is Ryan Roth and he is the head coach of the Cavaliers.

Coach Roth started coaching the Copeland team back in 1988, 26 years ago, when the team often struggled to achieve a final season record of 6-6. The town brought in Coach Roth because they knew that he would bring with him a much-needed energy. He came from a family of football players and coaches (his grandfather played football in the Big East conference and later coached a college team in the Big 12 and his father played in the Patriot League in college and then coached in the Big Ten for 32 years before his unfortunate and untimely death) and he, himself, was a tight end for a college in Division II. Players like and respect Coach Roth, without question, but there are certainly things about him which make communication difficult. “I could not ask for a better coach,” explained Bradley Wright, the team’s star defensive end, “but his whole life is about winning. In fact, every single meeting, whether it is with one player or with the entire team, ends with him saying ‘win, dammit, win.’” “It would be awful to have a coach who was not all about winning,” said Chase Albanese, the team’s quarterback and one of its three captains, “but there comes a time when other things become more important. When we are afraid to talk to Coach Roth out of fear that he will yell at us or bench us, that becomes a huge problem.”

The Cavaliers were 4-0, atop their division, and had outscored their opponents by a total score of 147-42. The team’s players, however, were at their tipping point. As long as they played their hearts out and gave it their all on the field, Coach Roth was complimentary and in a great mood. However, even if the team was ahead by a score of 35-3 (as it was against the Rumsfeld Rockets), he interacted with his players as if they had done something wrong and even disrespectful. It was the nonverbal “I cannot believe that you gave up that field goal and we no longer have a shutout” manifestation decoded by many of the Cavaliers that led to feelings of mediocrity and disenfranchisement. During the “locker room talk” preceding the fifth game of the season, Coach Roth said “you guys have played good football recently, but you can certainly play better.” He continued by saying “I expect you to run faster, hit harder, and score more. Whatever you have been doing, do it with more tenacity. In order to be great, you must portray an image of greatness. Right now, your record speaks louder than your actions. Go get them and I will see you at the half.” The Cavaliers won the game against the Hillsdale Hawks by a score of 28-14, but this victory created angst for Coach Roth, illustrated in his “. . . I am disappointed and I hope that you perform better next Saturday” end-of-game speech.

LATENT DISSENT AMONG THE CAVALIERS

In the days following the game, verbiage about Coach Roth permeated the halls of Copeland High School. The players on the Cavaliers assumed that by “trash-talking” about their coach to each other, it would somehow provide a certain sense of social cohesion. From lunchroom gossip to after-school chats to in-the-hall comments to between-class texts, there were few, if any, of the players who did not get their turn to make a snide comment about Coach Roth

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and his leadership strategies. “What kind of high school head coach tells his team to do better after a two-touchdown win and after having played their absolute best?” asked Jake Halton, the team’s starting wide receiver, who caught seven passes for 59 yards and a touchdown in the victory. “A coach who clearly doesn’t give a crap about his players,” responded Dan Frost, the team’s starting center. He continued by saying “in all honesty, if this was not my fourth and final year, I would question whether or not I had the desire and drive to be part of this team again next year. I really feel sorry for the freshmen and sophomores who have to deal with him for the next several years. Our school and town see a great team play every Saturday morning, but they have no idea what we have to go through day in and day out.” “I never even told any of you this because I did not want it to piss you off,” said Troy Robinson, the outside linebacker, who led the team with six tackles the last game, “but I injured my left foot in last Wednesday’s practice. After the three trainers took a look, they decided that it would probably be best if I stayed off of it for the next 48-72 hours to reduce the swelling. Guess what Coach Roth said? He said, and I quote, ‘the trainers have told me that there is nothing broken or fractured, so if you do not plan to come to practice and play in Saturday’s game, you can plan to sit on the bench for the remainder of the season.’ My foot is still hurting, but I am afraid to mention it to anyone at this point.” “Do you guys remember what he did last year when we fumbled the opening snap of the game, causing that safety against the Rumson Riders?” asked Jim Doherty, the backup running back for the Cavaliers. “Oh yes,” answered Thomas Roberts, the starting left tackle, “he extended our next practice for three hours and required us to wear those ‘we might look like football players, but we play like the cheerleading squad’ shirts over our pads. He made me look and feel like a fool. He always does.” Even Scott Lumber, the backup right guard for the Cavaliers, said, “. . . Coach Roth is the reason that I have come to hate this game so much and I have only been on the team for six weeks.”

Communication between and among players, off the field, was oftentimes consistent: 80% was framed around the team’s chances of winning and making it to the state championship game and the other 20% was framed about Coach Roth. Each and every Friday night, as part of a cultural, ceremonial event, the Cavaliers congregate at one player’s home, whose family is gracious enough to invite the entire team (no coaches, just players) for a two-hour dinner, coupled with an opportunity to merely have some recreational fun with one another. All players are required to be home by 10:00 PM on Friday evenings and either Brian Wacklund or Seth Ferguson, the two assistant coaches, will phone their homes to be sure that they are abiding by this rule: mandated, of course, by Coach Roth. In addition to the dinner and the recreational activities, an inspirational team speech is offered by one of the team’s three captains: Chase Albanese (the starting quarterback), Jacob Lacoste (the starting running back), or Matt Montgomery (the starting left tackle). This week, it was Matt’s turn and, in addition to getting his fellow teammates pumped up for the next day’s game against the Pittstown Pirates, a comparatively weaker team, and congratulating all of the stars from the previous weekend’s victory, he made an important announcement regarding Coach Roth:

“I think that it is clear that we are all on the same page about Coach Roth. Is he a good coach? Yes. However, the way that he deals with us players is atrocious. He tells us to play when we are sick or injured. We score 35 points and he wonders why we did not score 36. He thinks that every time that our quarterback gets sacked it is a result of a

weak offensive line rather than a strong defensive attack. We are barely congratulated for our extreme successes and we are always drilled for any on-the-field mistakes that we make. I think that we will also agree that the worst thing about this is that we are afraid of him. We are afraid to tell him to treat us better. We are afraid to tell him to treat us like deserving, hard-working players. We are afraid to tell him to stop treating us like we do not matter. This fear is not only coming from the underclassmen . . . it is coming from all of us. Truth be told, I think that this fear is warranted because, unfortunately, he is a scary guy to have to speak to. But, as you know, when we bitch and complain and make fun of Coach Roth with each other, it is fun and it makes us laugh and for some strange reason it makes us feel good. The problem, though, is that it never leads to change. Well, we are ready for this change. As you know, Chase, Ryan, and I are graduating this year and hopefully heading off to play college ball. That means that three of you underclassmen are going to emerge as the captains and leaders of this great team next year. And, believe it or not, of the 41 of us on this team, only 15 are graduating. This means that 26 of you, and all of the players who make it to the varsity level next year, are going to have to deal with Coach Roth and his bullshit if we do not do something now. Before tomorrow's game, Chase, Ryan, and I are going to meet Coach Roth in his office and tell him everything that is bothering us and the changes that he needs to make in order for us, the team, to feel better and more excited about playing for him. If you are with me and think that this is a great idea, please give me a "Hell yeah" at the count of three.

It was clear, based on the uniform communication of "Hell yeah" on behalf of the team members, that all were in favor of Chase, Ryan, and Matt directing their complaints directly to Coach Roth.

ARTICULATED DISSENT TO THE HEAD COACH

It was 9:00 AM on Saturday morning: three hours prior to kickoff of the game, yet one hour after Coach Roth arrived at his office. It was, for one reason or another, part of his routine. Why he needed to arrive on campus four hours before each home game was an enigma to all, but, like everything else, no one questioned it. Matt, Chase, and Ryan were overtaken by a myriad of different, and conflicting, emotions that morning (about both the forthcoming game and about their forthcoming discussion with their head coach): fear, anticipation, excitement, hope, anxiety, anger, and confidence to name a few. Chase knocked on the door and, in a rather loud, agitated voice, Coach Roth told him to come in.

"Hello, Coach," greeted Chase.

"Good morning, gentlemen," replied Coach Roth. "How are my three captains feeling this morning? Are you ready to kick some ass today?"

"We are feeling great, sir," responded Ryan. "We are going to try our absolute best. We had a great week of practice and we are confident that if we keep to the game plan, we will bring another victory to our squad."

"That is what I like to hear," said Coach Roth. "So. . . what can I do you for," asked Coach Roth.

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“Well,” began Matt, “this is not an easy conversation to have, Coach, but the three of us feel that it is necessary. Let me begin by saying that the three of us love you and think that you are a coach who clearly is the best and wants the best for us.”

“I certainly don’t like where this is going, fellas,” interrupted Coach Roth.

“It’s just that our team thinks that you sometimes consider your needs before ours and put winning before all else,” claimed Matt.

“I don’t understand what you are getting at here,” Coach Roth indicated.

“Let me give you an example, Coach,” Ryan stated. “Do you remember our recent victory against Williamstown?”

“Of course,” replied Coach Roth. “Chase, here, threw for 425 yards and four touchdowns. He made the top headline in the local news and that was a day that the national scouts were in town. It is likely that this game, alone, earned him a spot in one of the top football schools.”

“Yes,” answered Ryan, “but in that game, Seth Danielson hurt his calf muscle after receiving a vicious hit on the field. After taking an injury timeout, you asked him, in front of us and the trainer, whether or not he wanted to sit out for the series. When he seemed to question if he wanted to sit out, you said, and I quote, ‘what kind of player would want to sit out when he has the chance to score on a drive like this.’ He was hurt. He could barely walk. He was afraid that he would do more damage. And the worst thing of all is that we were up by 28 points at this juncture in the game. You did not care about him. It was for the game’s statistics. You did not care about how he felt.”

“That is not true at all,” exclaimed Coach Roth.

“Did you happen to reach out to him over the course of that next week to see how his calf was healing?” asked Chase

“Well, no,” replied Coach Roth, “but I had my assistant coaches and trainers do it.”

“Seth was so furious about this decision, Coach,” said Ryan. “I really think that you should have handled this situation differently.

“So what are you saying, gentlemen, that I handled this situation poorly?” asked Coach Roth.

“This is why we are here,” responded Chase. “Since we are the three captains of this team, we assume that you respect us and think highly of us. We told the team that we were going to come speak with you about the things that we, as a team, are pretty much fed up with regarding your behaviors. As you know, we all love to play football. We love to win. But when winning becomes more important than everything else, including health and family and relationships and school and pretty much anything else in life that matters, then the glory of winning is impacted.”

“This is how I was coached when I played,” replied Coach Roth, “so I know what works and what does not work. My strategy makes you work harder and run harder and play stronger and hit better and throw longer and run faster and win by more. I am not going to stop this.”

“The problem is that we want you to stop this,” explained Ryan.

“It is absolutely killing us,” added Chase.

“I think that we do the things that you tell us and abide by your rules and demands out of fear, rather than respect, Coach Roth,” stated Matt. “The three of us are graduating in eight months. But the underclassmen will be here for another two or three years. We cannot let them suffer through this. You think that because we are football players, that your comments do not get to us. Well they do. There is a big difference between respect and fear, coach. It is time to try a different coaching strategy.

At this point in the conversation, Coach Roth had a certain look overtake his face: one that none of the three captains had ever seen. It could best be described as a face of contempt. It was clear, at least in that brief moment, that he began to see himself in a different light and through a different lens. It was, perhaps literally, the first time that any individual was ever fearless enough to directly communicate discontent to Coach Roth. Perhaps he finally realized the flaws of his ways. Perhaps he finally realized that he was not immune to imperfection. Perhaps he finally realized that it was fear, and not respect, that created the social condition of obedience on behalf of his teammates. The meeting ended when Chase indicated that it was time for his team to hit the field for pre-game stretching and practice and that he and the rest of the Cavaliers would see him in the locker room for the 11:45 pep talk.

Coach Roth shook the hand of each captain as they left his office, but no additional words were exchanged.

After a rather long and intense pre-game practice, which included strenuous drills for both offensive and defensive units, the team met in their home locker room to fix their pads and prepare for Coach Roth's pep talk. The 41-player squad gathered in their perfectly created circle, bent on one knee, as Coach Roth stood in the center. He began his pep talk by saying “I hope that you all had a great evening last night and I am looking forward to a great game today.” He continued by saying “We are going to do something a little different today.”

With their helmets off and their spirits high, Matt, Chase, and Ryan looked at each other and smiled with triumph.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the positive and negative effects of latent dissent from a sport communication perspective? Do the positive effects seem to outweigh the negative effects? Please be sure to use examples from the case study to support your major claims.
2. In order for articulated dissent to be an effective communicative tool for change within the sport world, what are the necessary prerequisite and/or co-requisite variables? Which of these variables are most important? Please be sure to use examples from the case study to support your major claims.
3. Other than the strategy used by the three team captains, what other way(s) could the team have approached Coach Roth in an effort to increase the likelihood that he would change

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his style of coaching? What about this particular strategy would have been effective and would there have been any particular negative ramifications associated with this decision?

4. Assume that Coach Roth decided to respond negatively to the articulated dissent provided by the three team captains. What could this have done to the relationship(s) between and among the head coach, the assistant coaches, and the players on the team? How could this have impacted the rest of the season?

KEY TERMS

Articulated dissent, Conflict, Latent dissent, Relationships

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