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Coach Smith

On February 23, 2009, as I walked out of McQuaid Jesuit High School's locker room after yet another disappointing ending to yet another mediocre basketball season at McQuaid, I thought about my three years on the varsity basketball team. My head coach was Coach John Smith. It was rather unbelievable to think how much I had improved individually as a shooter with Coach Smith's help. However, it was just as unbelievable to me to think how much we had failed to improve as a team. It had been one mediocre year after another. Each year, we had hopes of having a winning record and winning our district, but each year we finished with a losing record and an early exit from the state playoffs. Every year, I, along with others, believed we had enough talent to make it deep into the state tournament, leading us to conclude that the coaching was the issue. Although Coach Smith was an excellent instructor with his players, and he cared greatly about his players, he was a very ineffective head coach.

From the very first day I heard him talk about shooting during the summer after my freshman year, I knew that Coach Smith was a great shooting coach. He knows everything about footwork, form, shooting

off the dribble, and getting open. His individual coaching greatly improved my shot and made me a more efficient shooter. For instance, during my sophomore season, I developed a problem with my footwork, and I started getting called for traveling as I started to shoot during games. During each practice for about a week, Coach Smith worked with me one-on-one on my footwork. We did different drills to work on stepping into, or hopping into, my shot. He took me back to the basics of shooting and made me do drills without a ball. As the week went on, he slowly incorporated the ball and more movement in the individual drills. My footwork improved drastically, and my traveling problem went away. Coach continued to work with me individually. He would come early to practice or stay after practice to work with me on using more of my legs in my shot, speeding up my release, and getting open off of screens to create shots. Additionally, I would have frequent talks with him about shooting, and the effectiveness of his coaching showed in my shooting statistics. I went from shooting under twenty percent on three pointers my sophomore year to shooting thirty-six percent and leading the team in three pointers made my senior year. I was just one example of a player who benefited under Coach Smith's guidance and instruction. Coach Smith was an excellent shooting coach and was very successful in instructing and improving his players' individual skills.

During basketball season, all it takes is one look inside Coach Smith's office to see that he has a strong drive to find ways to improve

his coaching. Coach Smith is always looking up new basketball drills or watching game film in order to get better. For instance, I had two free periods during school on the day of the Athena game my senior year. During those two periods and during my lunch break, I happened to walk past his office, and each time he was watching film on Athena. He practically spent the whole day breaking down film in preparation for that night's game. His drive to improve also showed in practice. For instance, when I was in a shooting slump at the beginning of my junior year, my confidence was really low. The day before a big game against our conference rival Olympia, he stayed after practice with me for about twenty minutes. He shot three pointers with me, looking at everything from my footwork to my follow-through to making sure I was staying positive. Coach Smith spent many hours studying opponents and working with people in practice to try to improve his coaching and his players' individual play.

Coach Smith was very understanding and caring when it came to our schoolwork and family life. Though constantly pushing us to be at the gym or in the weight room in the off season, Coach knew what our priorities had to be and always made sure our schoolwork came first. For instance, during my senior year, I was finishing up my Notre Dame application, and it was October 31, the last day before it was due. Since it was the last day, I was pressed for time to finish the large amount of editing still to be done on my admissions essay. I talked to Coach about

it, and he was considerate enough to let me skip the conditioning session he had planned for that afternoon, so I could go home and focus on my essay. Yet, his concern for his players' academic success did not compare to his dedication to family. He always reminded us over Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks to spend as much time with our families as possible. He also made family a priority over basketball. For instance, over Christmas break my senior year, we had been in a long Christmas tournament and had been practicing a lot. Coach gave us two extra days off from practice after the tournament so that he and the rest of the team could spend more time with our families. Coach Smith had his priorities straight and knew that academics and family must be placed in front of basketball.

Though Coach Smith had a few of the necessary characteristics to be a good basketball coach in his instructing, his drive to improve, and his care for his players, he lacked the essential skills to be an effective head coach. Since the day Coach Smith was hired at McQuaid, people have questioned his ability to be the head coach at a large, all boys school with a rich athletic tradition, because he was, and some would argue still is, unproven as a head coach. Before coming to McQuaid, his only varsity head coaching experience was at a small public school that had had virtually no winning tradition in basketball, Edison High School. In his three years as head coach at Edison, Coach Smith had zero winning seasons. He even had a 3-21 record for one of the years.

Even though he was unproven, Edison, looking for a coach with a Jesuit background, hired Coach Smith, who graduated from Canisius Jesuit High School. Eight years later, he still has not proved to be a very effective head coach. He has had only one winning season, 15-11 in 2004-2005. Throughout his whole career, Coach Smith has failed to prove he can win as a head coach.

Though Coach Smith spends a lot of time watching film and scouting opponents, his ability to game plan is very poor. He always either complicates things by trying to be creative or oversimplifies things so much that the team underestimates their opponents. For instance, during my senior season, we were playing our rivals Memorial, and they had one of the best three point shooters in the conference, Steve McNarney. In our earlier matchup, we had played man to man defense and McNarney had less than ten points and no three pointers. For some unknown reason, Coach Smith decided to try to be creative and throw a zone defense at Memorial. In basketball, teams do not want to play zones against a great shooter, because shooters have an easier time finding open shots against a zone. Most of the team disagreed with Coach Smith's decision to play zone defense, but it was obviously his decision as head coach. In the first quarter alone, McNarney had five three pointers and seventeen points. Basically, the game was over. At halftime, Coach simply said, "Sorry guys. That's my fault." After we had heard that three to four times already that year, that answer had

become a little frustrating to hear. Coach Smith consistently proved that he was unable to come up with an effective game plan, and put his teams at a disadvantage even before the tip-off.

Coach Smith's inability to make appropriate adjustments during the game demonstrated how ineffective he was as an in-game coach. We could be up or down, and the only advice we would get as a team was to just go out and play harder in the second half. We never seemed to adjust. That made us prone to giving up big leads and having trouble coming from behind. For instance, we were playing Altima High School my junior year. We had a twelve point halftime lead. In the locker room, all Coach said was to keep playing hard. Altima made adjustments on both defense and offense. By the end of the third quarter, we had scored just one point in the second half, and we were suddenly losing. We eventually lost the game. It was so hard to play for Coach Smith when the other team adjusted to our style and we didn't know how to readjust. It put so much pressure on us as players not to screw up, and we lost confidence in Coach Smith. Once the confidence is lost, it is hard for the players to buy into the vision of the head coach. We lost games we should not have, like the Altima game, and we narrowly won games that should have been easy wins. Coach Smith's failure to make effective in-game adjustments caused his teams to lose confidence in him, which limited his ability to be an effective head coach.

A good head coach needs to be a good strategist, someone who can bring together everything the team worked on in practice in order to have an effective game plan. A good head coach must be able to look at all aspects of the game and come up with a strategy to win. The head coach must get all the players to buy into his or her plan. On the other hand, a good assistant coach can be a specialist and focus on one or two different skills. His job is to aid the head coach in implementing the game plan. Unfortunately, Coach Smith has not been able to be a good head coach, failing to develop an effective strategy prior to and throughout the games. However, Coach Smith has the essential characteristics of a good assistant coach: he is a shooting specialist, he has a strong drive to get better, and he sincerely cares for his players. Instead of a head coach, Coach Smith would be much more beneficial to a basketball team as an assistant coach, where he can be a perfect complement to a proven head coach.