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Aspirations Research Leaps from Classroom to Sports Arena

Kay Hyatt

College of Education & Human Development, University of Maine

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Selected News Releases

Aspirations Research Leaps from Classroom to Sports Arena

ORONO, Maine -- A new initiative from the National Center for Student Aspirations (NCSA) at the University of Maine is expanding its work in the classroom to the playing field and tackling the hotly debated issue of what's appropriate and in the best interest of young athletes.

The controversial world of sports is becoming more contentious as the intense competitive nature of college and professional athletics reach the nation's middle and high schools and put unrealistic expectations on students and coaches, according to Russ Quaglia, director of the NCSA and associate professor at UMaine. In addition,

Maine, like other states is experiencing a severe shortage of qualified coaches. Since schools are hard-pressed to find coaches with training or professional experience with students and their personal, social and academic needs, more and more coaches are coming from outside the educational system.

The combination of inexperienced coaches, over-zealous parents and kids under pressure are excluding and discouraging too many youngsters from participating in sports by emphasizing winning over fun, skills development, teamwork and sportsmanship, says Quaglia. Healthy, ambitious competition and team pride are part of a positive sports experience, he points out. But headstrong competition and antagonistic attitudes too easily get out of control and result in intractable, damaging words and actions.

"Coaches, parents and student athletes are all part of the same team and should share the same goals. However, the goals of athletes, coaches and parents are far from being aligned," he says. "Qualities such as teamwork, leadership, responsibility and respect will be valued long after the final score is forgotten."

Armed with new research to address the thorny problem, Quaglia has come up with a comprehensive program called *Teaching Heroes*. Its basic message is: "Give sports back to kids and get the role of adults in perspective."

The text- and music-based videos and instructional guide for follow-up with each group was co-authored by Quaglia and NCSA senior associate Andrea Cole. Produced with support from the Finance Authority of Maine (FAME), *Teaching Heroes* provides reflective questions and a strategy for pulling coaches, athletes and parents into a team bent on teaching, learning and modeling the many benefits and important life lessons that positive sports experiences can provide.

All of the NCSA's work centers on research about students' perspectives on their needs, lives and education. *Teaching Heroes* stems from early data collected this year through the NCSA's new

Athlete Speak Survey, initially piloted among 1,890 Maine high school varsity athletes. The survey results offer some good news, as well as some troubling dilemmas. For example:

- 90 percent of the student athletes see their coach as a positive role model.
- 86 percent say they have a strong and caring relationship with their coach.
- 97 percent think playing sports makes them a better person.

On the flip side:

- 57 percent believe their coach cares about their success in school.
- 55 percent claim practicing good sportsmanship is important.
- 83 percent believe it is more important to win than to have fun.
- 94 percent want their parents to attend their games.
- 23 percent claim their parents embarrass them when they come to their games.

This new aspirations data – particularly when combined with earlier surveys of more than 100,000 students nationwide showing that parents are strong, influential role models – sends a very powerful message. Coaches, parents and student athletes are heroes whether or not they realize it or want to be someone's champion, says Quaglia.

They are all heroes, according to Quaglia: the parents who support their student athletes in so many ways; coaches who are much more than a trainer in a kid's life; and the young athletes who are looked up to by other students.

Recognizing the tremendous educational and motivational contributions that positively focused athletic programs can make to a school, community and individuals, the NCSA and FAME teamed up to produce *Teaching Heroes*. The survey is used as a diagnostic tool to reflect what is on the minds of the athlete, and the video kit reflects that data in its strategies. Intended for use in middle schools and high schools, the program uses common language to describe and link the shared roles and goals of coaches, parents and student athletes.

"The things that really make a difference don't cost anything," says Quaglia. "A positive attitude, commitment and involvement can change the total environment of a sports program or an entire school."

For instance, the video for coaches, with the theme of making a difference, presents messages and raises questions such as:

Sports teaches – Respect, Honesty, Compassion, Fairness,
Responsibility and Courage.

Be a responsible role model. You are a hero to your players.

Establish a sense of belonging. It will strengthen your team.

When your athletes think of honesty, loyalty and compassion...

...would they think of you?

The parents' video follows the related theme of inspiring from the sideline, with points such as:

When you are at an athletic event be proud, be supportive and clap loudly.

Never lose sight of the fact it is only a game.

The parents around you think their kids are the best, too.

99% of parents are great fans. Make sure you are in that group.

Cheer for the superstars *and* the players on the bench.

And student athletes are reminded that they are making a commitment to citizenship, because:

You represent your school, your community, and your family.

Do it with pride!

Trash talk, taunting, show boating and bragging have NO place in sports.

Win with grace. Lose with dignity. Play with sportsmanship.

You are a role model on and off the field. Choose to be a good one.

Excel in both athletics and academics. It's a winning combination.

As part of its outreach mission, FAME will provide a complimentary copy of the *Teaching Heroes* kit to every school district in Maine to use in educational and reflective sessions with coaches, parents and athletes. All profits from sales of *Teaching Heroes* go back into aspirations research and programming.

(Media note: *Teaching Heroes* authors Russ Quaglia and/or Andrea Cole are available for interviews about the new aspirations initiative.

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Contact: Kay Hyatt, (207) 581-2761

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