

Best Practices for Player Tryouts: School Sports

When conducting tryouts for a school sports team, here are some best practices to consider.

1. **Remember that this may be the first time players face being cut.** Youth athletes trying out for their middle school or high school teams may have never experienced such a sink-or-swim, do-or-die, cut-and-dried experience. Recognize that many may be nervous. Do what you can to help players relax, so they can perform their best.

Before action starts, assemble the athletes as a group to explain generally what you're looking for in terms of athletic ability, character traits, chemistry and the right mix of sizes and skills for the different positions to be filled. Remind them that you want them to succeed and invite them to ask questions along the way. Set clear expectations for how the tryouts will be run (how many days/weeks, will there be multiple rounds of cuts, etc.).

2. **Do your best to be perceived as treating the players equally.** This might mean giving all of the players nametags. Then do your best to refer to all players by name (not just the ones you know already). Some people prefer to have the players wear numbers during the tryouts, and if you go this route, make sure to refer to all of the players by their numbers, as athletes will certainly notice if you are referring to some of them by name and others by number.
3. **Ease into drills and competitive situations.** Start slowly so that disparities in skill are less obvious to everyone involved in the tryout. This gives some lesser-skilled (and probably more nervous) players a chance to gain some confidence. It also reduces the chance that the lesser-skilled have a humiliating or traumatic tryout experience. That doesn't cost anyone much time, and your trained eye will soon recognize disparities in skill, anyway.
4. **Create a variety of competitive environments.** It does little good to simply assess athletic ability. You need to see who works well together, which players excel in which situations...and with which other players on their side. Make sure your assessment goes beyond an individual athlete's athletic skills. What kind of teammate will he or she be? How will he or she respond after a bad call, or after being subbed out of a game? Create situations during tryouts to assess these non-skill-based attributes.
5. **Cut as few people as possible.** The more roles you can find for more athletes, within reason, the more positive impact you can have on more youth. Yes, you may have to draw a line somewhere to keep a manageable number on a team, but beyond that, keep anyone who can contribute, learn, grow and benefit from being in your program.

The best teams always have certain players who do not fill box-scores or stat-sheets, but end up getting associated with terms like "gritty" or "character" or "glue guy." Do not underestimate their value.

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- 6. If cuts are necessary, handle them humanely.** When you have decided on your final roster, post it or distribute it in such a way that not all of the players are in one place looking at it together. This might mean posting it to a web site or emailing all of the players who tried out at the same time. In this communication let the athletes who did not make the team know you'll be reaching out to them directly for 1-on-1 conversations.

All players who try out deserve a dignified private conversation explaining why you decided to cut them. Thank them for their effort. Acknowledge what they did well. Explain how they can improve to stand a better chance next time. And, finally, if you have need of a scorekeeper, team manager, or any role that can keep them near the team and involved in your program, by all means offer the opportunity.