BUILDING AND MAINTAINING A PROGRAM

When I got the job at Jenks High School, the program was in great condition except for the rubble left behind from the firestorm that occurred when the previous head coach was removed. Assistant coaches were in limbo, the community was on pins and needles, and the players were concerned about the coaching change. With a solid background in the philosophy of education, I knew my main objectives at Jenks were to mend the fences that had been torn down with the administration and to convince parents, faculty, administration, community, and players that a rookie coach could pilot the ship by winning their trust and confidence. With these objectives in mind, the other coaches and I put together a plan and rolled up our sleeves and went to work. Eight years and seven state championships later our sleeves are still rolled up, and we are still building the tradition known as Jenks Trojan football. Jenks football teams won a lot of games before I showed up, and they will win a lot of games after I am long gone. I’m just honored that God has blessed me with being a small part of such a great tradition. I’ll share with you some important components for laying out the blueprints of a successful program.

The desire to build a successful organization must surround your football program from top to bottom or the likelihood of building a consistent program will be small. I am blessed to be served by a school board that establishes lofty expectations for all academic and athletic programs. Their decisions are student driven: They want all kids to be successful in whatever they choose to do and are willing to support programs as much as the budget will allow.
The school board also understands the advantage of having a successful football program within the community. A successful football program raises the spirit and expectations of everyone in the school and community and unites an already proud institution. At Jenks, the community support is phenomenal, and not just for football.

A school-bond proposal has never failed to pass when voted on during or after a successful football season. The financial rewards of having a successful football program are very important today when government funding for schools has been reduced in some states. The revenue generated from our football program supports other sports and other programs including Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Special Olympics. Having a school board and administration that realize the positives and support the program is vital when building a program. If the expectations and support are not present, the odds of building a successful program are slim.

While talking about expectations, beware of institutions with unrealistic expectations. Expectations must be consistent with the talent and other related resources available. The school board and administration must understand that certain schools have a talent level that wouldn’t allow Paul “Bear” Bryant to be successful. Make sure your school board and administrators have realistic expectations that consider your talent level, your opponent’s talent level, and other factors that may affect the program-building process.

“**A successful football program raises the spirit and expectations of everyone in the school and community and unites an already proud institution.**”

**PLAYER DEVELOPMENT AND PARTICIPATION**

For the most part, you have to play the hand you’re dealt when it comes to players in your system. You cannot go out and recruit players, so you must do a great job getting potential athletes interested in playing football in your system, and you must develop the skills that players already possess.

I am active in our youth football program and try to be as visible as possible to young Jenks Trojans. We organize coaching clinics for youth coaches to introduce them to our systems of offense and defense and to let them know that

---

**CREATE INTEREST**

- Get potential athletes interested in playing football in your system
- Develop the skills that players already possess
- Organize coaching clinics for youth coaches
- Organize player camps for youth football organizations
- Schedule student body meetings at intermediate and middle schools to encourage participation in the program
Youth football programs and player camps get young players interested in your football program.

they are a crucial part of our football program’s development. At one time or another, 90 percent of our seniors at Jenks played youth football in our system. I fully understand the importance of player development at a young age.

We also organize several player camps for youth football organizations. We make sure to have plenty of our most popular varsity players work the camps so that the young boys are exposed to their heroes and role models. For many young players, camp is a life-changing experience and they want to grow up and be just like their favorite Jenks Trojan player.

I also select our most popular players and schedule student body meetings at all of our intermediate and middle schools to encourage participation in our program. I present all of the summer camp opportunities and allow our varsity players to talk about the program and let the potential players understand how special it is to be a Jenks Trojan.

My philosophy has always been to promote participation more than competition throughout a young football player’s career. Walking away from a fourth-grade football season with a great love for the game of football is priceless. Walking away from the same game distraught or frustrated can turn a young man away from the sport forever. We try to maintain the most positive environment possible for youth players, easing them into the competitive phase during seventh and eighth grade. By the time they are freshmen, they are ready to compete and win.

Our numbers have increased so much at the eighth- and ninth-grade levels that we split each school from one team into two equal teams to increase player participation. The talent level and number of players allowed us to field two equally competitive teams, and we went from 30 players to nearly 60 players getting on the field. This strategy enhanced our individual class sizes greatly and kept several players in the program longer.
Make sure you have the numbers and talent to field competitive teams. Lack of competitiveness can lead to negative attitudes and outcomes because players won’t believe they can win. I allow the eighth- and ninth-grade coaches to simply practice their players for a couple of weeks and then draft their two teams just like in the NFL. This allows the coaches who are the most familiar with the players to put them in the best position to be successful.

At the sophomore and junior varsity level, get your players on the field against high-quality competition. We have both a sophomore and a junior varsity schedule to ensure that our younger, developing players get the enjoyment and competition they need to keep working hard and improving. Their practice duties usually involve going up against older, better players, so any chance we have to put them on the field against players in jerseys of another color, we do it.

When dividing the sophomore and junior varsity roster, pay careful attention to placing kids within their proper talent levels so that they have a chance to compete and improve. It does no one any good to stack a junior varsity team against a lesser sophomore team and smash them. Match up players and place them in the proper competitive environment.

Another aspect of participation and development you must consider is building depth on your team. It takes a conscientious effort to evaluate and prepare younger players to be game ready when the opportunity arises. Find ways to get second-level players valuable game reps from time to time; they are one sprained ankle or academic mishap away from playing for you. Getting that taste of playing time can spur a player’s career and development. Plan carefully and be ready to substitute developmental players into game situations that will develop their skills and their confidence for the future when you will need them.

In my eight seasons as head coach, we have graduated as few as 24 seniors to as many as 32. Attrition is a part of competitive sports. When players realize the amount of dedication and work it takes to be a varsity player, some are simply not willing to make a commitment that big. As coaches, we should do everything in our power to dangle the carrot in front of the rabbit and give players hope and encouragement to stick it out. The ability to work hard and dedicate yourself to a team project is a valuable life lesson we teach young men and one that will greatly assist them in their adult lives.
Physical development is also crucial to program growth and success. Because we must play the hand we are dealt and can’t recruit players to fit our system, we must develop them. Our strength and speed development program is available to all players in grades 1 through 12 during the off-season and throughout the summer. Younger players are simply taught the techniques and fundamentals of running and lifting; their intensity and skill level increases from year to year. By the time players are in ninth grade, they are able to do the same workouts that varsity players do.

Players develop physically at different rates, so be patient and encourage them to be diligent and stick it out. Many times I’ve seen athletes stick it out long enough to become the most consistent team players on the field because playing means a lot to them and they have sacrificed to get on the field.

**A Late Bloomer**

Andrew Spankuch is a great example of a late bloomer. As a sophomore, he was so clumsy and nonathletic that we had to protect him in practice because he could not protect himself during full-contact drills. He simply was awful—no balance, feet, or ability of any kind.

Andrew was an intelligent kid who was respectful and appreciative of the opportunity to be in the program, but he became frustrated and discouraged when the reality of his lack of ability hit him. One afternoon he came into my office to quit the team and pursue his academic career. For a minute, I thought about telling him he was making the right decision and wishing him luck and sending him on his way, but after mentally reviewing my philosophy and purpose I asked Andrew to stay with us and be our manager and filmer. I knew he was trustworthy and a hard worker and wanted to be a Trojan very badly; he was just being realistic about his ability.

Andrew agreed and did a great job with his filming and managing responsibilities. After the season ended, Andrew came into my office and wanted to give football another chance. I welcomed him back after discussing the areas he had to work on to have a chance to get on the field in the fall. Andrew went to work and made great strides during the off-season. Genetics kicked in; he gained about 30 pounds and grew about 4 inches. He was still a little clumsy, but certainly much improved. Unfortunately, Andrew blew out his knee in a full-contact practice early in the season and missed his second season of football.

Even though he was very disappointed, he continued his rehabilitation and weight training every day and was bound and determined to win a spot in his final season as a Trojan. Another two inches and another 30 pounds and Andrew Spankuch had developed into a young man and a big football player at nearly 6 feet, 4 inches tall and 240 pounds. Andrew won the starting job at left guard and was voted offensive lineman of the year at our state championship banquet. He signed his letter of intent and now attends Southeastern State University and plays center. Andrew is a perfect example of never giving up and keeping an eye on the prize.
The physical benefits of off-season training are obvious, especially for athletes who are willing to spend all four years working out with us. Those skinny little eighth and ninth graders eventually become big, strong, confident seniors.

Equally important to the physical development of athletes is their mental development. Players who dedicate themselves to the weight training and running regimen throughout the off-season and summer gain a sense of pride from working with their teammates. Giving up free time and summer time to train for football is the best team-building tool I have found. Going through the tough times together with their coaches is a time of bonding, a way to collect chips that can be cashed in during the fall when the going gets tough. Have a well organized off-season training program.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

If they are for you, they are not against you. I take this idea seriously when striving for success. Gain support for your program by becoming an integral part of your school and community.

Establish a football booster club under the parameters of making the football program better and forming an organization for the promotion of the football program in all areas of the community. The booster club is made up of people from all walks of life who work and live in the community. What better way to promote and build a program than with people who work hard to make the program better on a daily basis? They are the ambassadors of your program.

Our booster club provides extras that make a big difference in the attitude and approach of players and coaches. Team dinners or specialized equipment, you name it and we can get it if it will help our program improve and will benefit our kids.

As the head coach, be sure to build a strong working relationship between the booster club and the athletic department. Some projects will be large enough to need both athletic department and booster club money. The athletic department should always provide the basic necessities for a program, while the booster club should strive to provide items over and above the norm that will make players feel special.
COACH DEVELOPMENT

It’s not my program, it’s OUR program. Surround yourself with coaches who have the same principle-based philosophy and expectation level you require of yourself. Attitude and work ethic give you a chance to excel in coaching because knowledge of the game and teaching methods can be learned.

Let coaches know what you expect of them, and they will improve. Now that I am the head coach, I coach coaches and encourage them to lead with their personalities and use their own strengths when teaching. I have never tied my coaches’ hands. However, I do expect our philosophies and principles to be the same. Unity leads to strength and loyalty, which are vital to program development. A unified staff is a powerful teaching unit. Players witness a living example of teamwork and unity and follow right along.

You will learn a lot about your staff members after the first day of practice. Are they organized, assertive, and upbeat? Find specific areas that coaches can improve and teach them how to improve. Are their teaching methods producing the results you want? If not, offer other ideas and methods and reevaluate. Unfortunately, some coaches will not make the grade, and you will have to dismiss them. This is the worst part of my job as head coach. However as with all decisions I make, I do what is best for the program. No one wants to fire someone, but sometimes removing a coach is simply what is best for the program, and you must make the change.

WINNING ENVIRONMENT

Teaching players HOW to win is what coaching is all about. Begin by teaching teamwork. Practice teamwork, teach teamwork, talk about teamwork, and show players how playing as a team with all players executing their individual roles makes the team better than any one player can be. Search practice and game film and find examples of players making great plays. Praise them in front of the team, give awards, and brag about them. Even the smallest hints of teamwork should be brought to the front and reported. Players will begin to take pride in the team and start molding themselves into a unit.

Take every opportunity to sell your coaches to the players and sell your offensive and defensive systems and special teams plays. Players will come to believe in your systems and the coaches who teach them. Their confidence and faith in the overall system will grow and so will their efforts to build the team. Pat your players and coaches on the back when they do something well. With praise comes confidence and loyalty, and with confidence and loyalty come commitment, and with commitment comes great effort.

EFFORT is the heartbeat of any successful program. Everyone can give his best effort no matter how much or how little ability he has. Start with a simple pursuit drill that lasts only five seconds and work up. Place your players in position to give their all-out best effort for five seconds. This may take a day or a week or a month, but no matter how long it takes, do not waver from your demand of their best effort. Once the team
can go hard for a five-second interval, add another interval or two and start building their mental toughness by demanding great effort through every exercise and drill. Coach it and demand it. Without effort, your team will never succeed at a high level.

At the University of Nebraska, every member of the varsity defensive unit received a black jersey to signify the hard work and pride of the defensive unit. When the players put on their jerseys, they knew they were part of something much bigger than themselves. They played with all their hearts to ensure the success of their team. I encourage our coaches to give nicknames and special shirts for different teams within the program. For the past few years, our defense has adopted the name the Wolf Pack, and each member wears a special T-shirt to signify his pride and pursuit of excellence.

With the help of the booster club, I started another tradition to award seniors their jerseys at the football banquet each winter. It’s a small gift, but is significant. The players who choose to stick with our football program and make it better get to take their jerseys with them. It means a lot to the players and helps them remember the dedication, pride, and hard work it takes to be a Jenks Trojan.

One thing I can say about our program at Jenks is that when a team plays us, they are in for a battle. We may not win every contest, but our opponents will have to play very, very well to beat us. This is part of a great tradition, the idea that when you play our team you will have to play your best or lose. The consistency that comes from executing a system that every player, coach, and fan believes in is like having a 12th man on the field. Every time we take the field we believe that we will win the game no matter who the opponent is. This is the definition of tradition. It takes years of building and winning to reach this position, but with continued focus and direction you can achieve a proud tradition.

**Coach’s Keys to Success**

1. Make sure the expectations of your institution are high but realistic.
2. Be creative in developing ways to attract players to your program. You need good numbers to ensure program growth and improvement.
3. Have a highly structured off-season workout program for all ages.
4. Organize a booster club and use it to acquire the special things your players and program need. Surround yourself with great people who will be ambassadors for your program.
5. Develop your coaching staff and put them in position to be great teachers. A united staff is a powerful resource.
6. Create a winning environment by finding small successes and bringing them to light with praise. Preach and teach teamwork, effort, and unity.
7. Build a tradition by developing a high level of consistency through teamwork and effort.
Allan Trimble is the author of *Coaching Football Successfully*. Trimble has been the head coach of the Jenks High School football team in Oklahoma since 1996, boasting a 111-9 record and six consecutive Class 6A state championship titles, which is a class record. Over the course of nine seasons his teams have amassed a total of seven state championships with a 32-2 career playoff record. Trimble’s teams have also set records for overall winning streaks (38) and consecutive playoff victories (25).

Throughout his 15-year coaching career, Trimble has produced more than 25 Division I football players and has been recognized with Coach of the Year honors from Sporting News and American Football Monthly; he also received USA Today’s Most Caring Coach award. In 2001 he was named Russell Athletic National Coach of the Year. Trimble is a member of the American Football Coaches Association, Oklahoma Coaches Association, and Oklahoma Football Coaches Association.

To order a copy of the book *Coaching Football Successfully*, click [here](#) or call toll-free at 800-747-4457.