

# Coach

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Jeff Janssen

# Getting The Most From Your Assistants

## 12 essentials for effective assistant coaches

By **JEFF JANSSEN**, Janssen Sports Leadership Center

**A**lthough their pay may not always reflect it, effective assistant coaches are vital to any program's success. The late Hall of Fame N.C. State women's basketball coach Kay Yow said, "When a person becomes a head coach, there is nothing more critical than the staff that you hire to work with you."

### 12 Essentials of Effective Assistant Coaches

In ascending order, here are the 12 most frequently mentioned qualities that head coaches want to see in their assistant coaches.

#### 12. Compatible Philosophy

Head coaches want assistant coaches whose overall philosophies are compatible with theirs. While the assistants don't have to agree with everything the head coach does, it is important to have similar thinking on core principles. Incompatible philosophies are the recipe for disaster, resentment and frustration.

If you discover that your philosophies don't match on the front end, save yourself the trouble and don't work together. If you discover a mismatch after working together for a while, have an open discussion about it, and look to amicably go your separate ways at the end of the season or earlier if realistically possible. Compatible core philosophies are a must for an effective working relationship.

#### 11. Willingness To Learn

Head coaches want assistants who are inquisitive and have a great desire to learn. They understand that assistants may not have the complete knowledge base and experience in some areas, but they do want people who have a yearning to grow, develop and improve.

Many younger assistants are in an apprenticeship mode to be a head coach. They want to develop and gain new skills as they become more well-rounded. As a head coach, give them challenges and responsibilities that will help them grow and mature into effective head coaches.

#### 10. Ethical & Professional

Head coaches want assistants who act with integrity and are focused on doing the right things in the right way. They want ethical assistants who represent themselves and their program in a professional manner. One sportswriter likened hiring people with a history of unethical acts to getting a cobra as a pet. Sooner or later, it will come back to bite you.

#### 9. Honesty

Head coaches expressed a desire to have assistants who were willing to tell them the truth, even if those views disagreed with their opinion. Most head coaches indicate that they do not want a bunch of "yes" people around them who only tell them what they want to hear.

"People who say yes to you all the time are, in my opinion, insulting you. They assume you are either too immature or unstable or egotistical to handle the truth," says Tennessee women's basketball coach Pat Summitt.

While most head coaches say they welcome and desire dissenting opinions, many assistants feel otherwise. It is difficult to disagree with the head coach if you are not made to feel that your input is welcome. One college assistant coach told me of a situation where some parents told her why their daughter and many others were not signing with the school. Thinking that the head coach would like to know the reasons why the players were not signing, the assistant approached



the head coach with the information. Instead of being open to it, the head coach immediately became defensive and basically told the assistant that she was wrong in no uncertain terms.

If you are a head coach, be careful not to shoot the messenger when you don't like the message. If you do, the messenger will be more likely to withhold crucial information the next time.

### **8. Great Teacher**

Head coaches want their assistants to be excellent teachers of the game. It isn't enough to know the game or have played it at a high level, but head coaches want assistants who can effectively teach and transfer their knowledge and insights to the athletes.

Baseball coach Joe Buchanan of Council Grove High School (Kan.) writes, "I want assistants who are good classroom teachers. If they are particular about their teaching assignment, they make good coaches. If they are teaching only to coach, or if they teach poorly, I usually don't want them."

### **7. Initiative**

Head coaches really want their assistants to take the initiative to do what needs to be done. Instead of waiting for the head coach to tell them what to do, they want assistants who think a step ahead and take care of things on their own without much oversight or prodding.

As Defiance College (Ohio), volleyball coach Deb Sazama writes, "I want someone to think one step ahead of me. If something needs to be done, I would like my assistant to get to it before I have to."

### **6. Organized & Dependable**

Head coaches must be able to depend on their assistant coaches. They like assistants who are well-organized and reliable with the information and things they need, when they need them. Many coaches designate portions of their responsibilities to their assistants such as travel, community service, equipment, scouting, recruiting, etc. When the head coach puts an assistant in charge of a specific area, he or she expects that the assistant will do a quality job with it.

Assistants need to be diligent and thorough in their assigned areas so that they can earn and maintain the head coach's trust.

### **5. Enthusiastic Positive Attitude**

Head coaches want assistants who bring their passion, excitement, energy and enthusiasm to the program. They want positive people who have a real passion for coaching and people.

Not only is the assistant's positive attitude important for the athletes but some head coaches also mentioned how important it was to have optimistic assistants for themselves. It is easy as a head coach to get frustrated and discouraged when the team is not responding well or has lost a few games. Some assistants are good at refocusing the head coach in private so that the coach can

be mentally and physically rejuvenated when he or she is in front of the team and public.

### **4. Hard Worker**

Head coaches want assistants who willingly put in the hard work necessary to build and maintain a successful program. They want assistants who are as committed and dedicated as they are. In fact, several head coaches indicate that they want assistant coaches who aspire to be head coaches one day. They feel that assistant coaches who want to be head coaches some day will be much more willing to work hard and pay their dues.

### **3. People Skills & Communicator**

Head coaches want assistants who have great people skills. Assistants often have the tough job of being a link between the head coach and the athletes. It is vital to have great listening and communication skills to handle this role effectively.

Further, good people skills are absolutely vital in the college recruiting process. Assistants often are the ones who forge and cultivate the strong relationships with prospective recruits on the phone. Good assistants must have the people skills to get to know what is important for both the recruit and the recruit's parents. They must have the ability to listen intently as well as the communication skills to sell the benefits that the recruit is looking for.

### **2. Knowledge Of The Game**

Head coaches want assistants who have a solid knowledge of their sport. They want assistants who have the competence to teach skills and help them create effective game plans. Many coaches also expressed an interest in having an assistant with specialized knowledge in a certain area of the game.

Good head coaches attempt to assemble a staff that complements them. They can put their ego in check and look to hire people who are better than they are in specific areas. As Summitt writes in her excellent book, "Reach for the Summit," about former assistant coach Mickie DeMoss, "Mickie was better than I was...You should have no fear of surrounding yourself with people who are better than you."

### **1. Loyalty**

Not surprisingly, the No. 1 quality that head coaches want from their assistants is loyalty. Head coaches want assistants who are loyal to them and the program. Because head coaches are often on the defensive when it comes to fans, media, administrators and sometimes their own athletes, they need to have an inner circle of confidants who they can trust completely. Good assistants will disagree with the head coach in private but remain steadfastly loyal to the head coach in public. **CAD**

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*For more info on developing leaders, team building, and mental toughness, visit Jeff Janssen's websites at [www.ChampionshipCoachesNetwork.com](http://www.ChampionshipCoachesNetwork.com) and [www.JeffJanssen.com](http://www.JeffJanssen.com)*