

THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



937 Blowout Wins or Greater Opportunities?

Every year, I'll catch at least one story of a high school sports team running up an enormous score against a completely overmatched opponent. Parental outrage always follows, and coaches are criticized for abusing a team that had no chance to win. I'm Jerry Roberts, and I've got a story on that today, with a very different ending. That's next, on The Extra Point.

High school sports and strong teams taking advantage of lesser teams. It happened a few days ago in Michigan when a star player scored 16 goals in the first half of a soccer game, against a winless opponent. In doing so, he set state and national records for most goals in a high school game. The outrage happened, the coach apologized, and the star player kept his record.

These stories make me think of a game played many years ago, where two high school basketball teams had no business being on the same court. I don't recall the names involved, but we'll say one team was powerful Wilson High, undefeated, and needing a win to become the top ranked team in the state playoffs.

Their opponent was Johnson High, a very small school that hadn't won a game in three years. The first time the two schools had met that year, Wilson won by 75 points on its home court. Everybody figured it would go that way again in the Johnson gym.

A few days before the game, Coach Allen of Wilson called Coach Palmer of Johnson, and outlined an idea he had. He said, "Coach, we have to win this game for playoff purposes, but I have an offer for you that I think will benefit both my kids and yours. Mike, our best player, needs 12 points to win the scoring title, and I'll play him until he gets those points. Other than that, what if I play my third-string guys?"

Coach Palmer said, "Well, my kids don't need

any charity." Allen replied, "It's not charity. My third-string players almost never get in, and well, your kids haven't been in a close game all season. I think it might be interesting if we let them go at it. Further, imagine all these kids going home and telling their parents and friends about this. We'll get a whole bunch of new people out to see the game."

The two men agreed. Players on both teams talked it up to people they knew, and at game time, the stands were full on both sides, with people excited over how the game might go.

Mike, the top scorer, was in for less than four minutes when he scored his 12th point. Then, he was replaced. At the end of the first half, Wilson led Johnson by only four points. Coach Allen had to win the game, but hoped his third-stringers could extend the lead so he wouldn't have to insert his starters to assure the victory.

At the beginning of the fourth quarter, Johnson actually took the lead by a single point. It was their first lead all year, and the fans cheered so loud the gym walls seemed to shake. Allen didn't put the starters in, and Wilson pulled away at the end, winning by eight. Both coaches were sweaty and exhausted when it was over, and had used every bit of strategy they knew to lead their teams.

Later, Allen would say that his best memory of the game was seeing his starters and second-stringers screaming support for the guys on the court. They were cheering for them, coaching them during timeouts, and were totally engaged in the game. At the final buzzer, Coach Palmer went up to Coach Allen and embraced him, thanking him for making a great experience possible.

(Con't.)

Every week I see high school and college scores, and there are plenty of games where one team wins by 50 or 60 points, or more, and some player sets a record for this or that in the blowout win. I always think about the Wilson-Johnson game, and how all these other coaches are missing a big opportunity.

To me, Coach Allen showed real leadership. He knew the win was important, but running up a big score on a weak opponent had no value. If Mike scored 70 or 80 points on Johnson, what would it really matter?

His leadership gave Johnson a real game, where they had a chance to win. He gave his players a real game, where the outcome wasn't guaranteed. They would have to fight for the victory. He gave fans a real game, and parents had a chance to see their kids seriously compete.

There are a lot of takeaways here. I think it comes down to this: When all is said and done, what lessons will we leave behind for the next generation of leaders who follow?

That's the Extra Point. Be responsible and make something good happen today. For 93.3 and the Ray Gibson Show, I'm Jerry Roberts.

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