



by Jeff Janssen

SIX WAYS TO WIN WITH BETTER TEAM CAPTAINS

Jeff Janssen is the Director of the University of North Carolina Leadership Academy. He helps coaches and athletes develop the team chemistry, mental toughness, and leadership skills necessary to win championships. This article is based on Jeff's latest book, *The Team Captain's Leadership Manual* (www.jeffjanssen.com).

How important are effective team captains/leaders to your success and sanity as a coach?

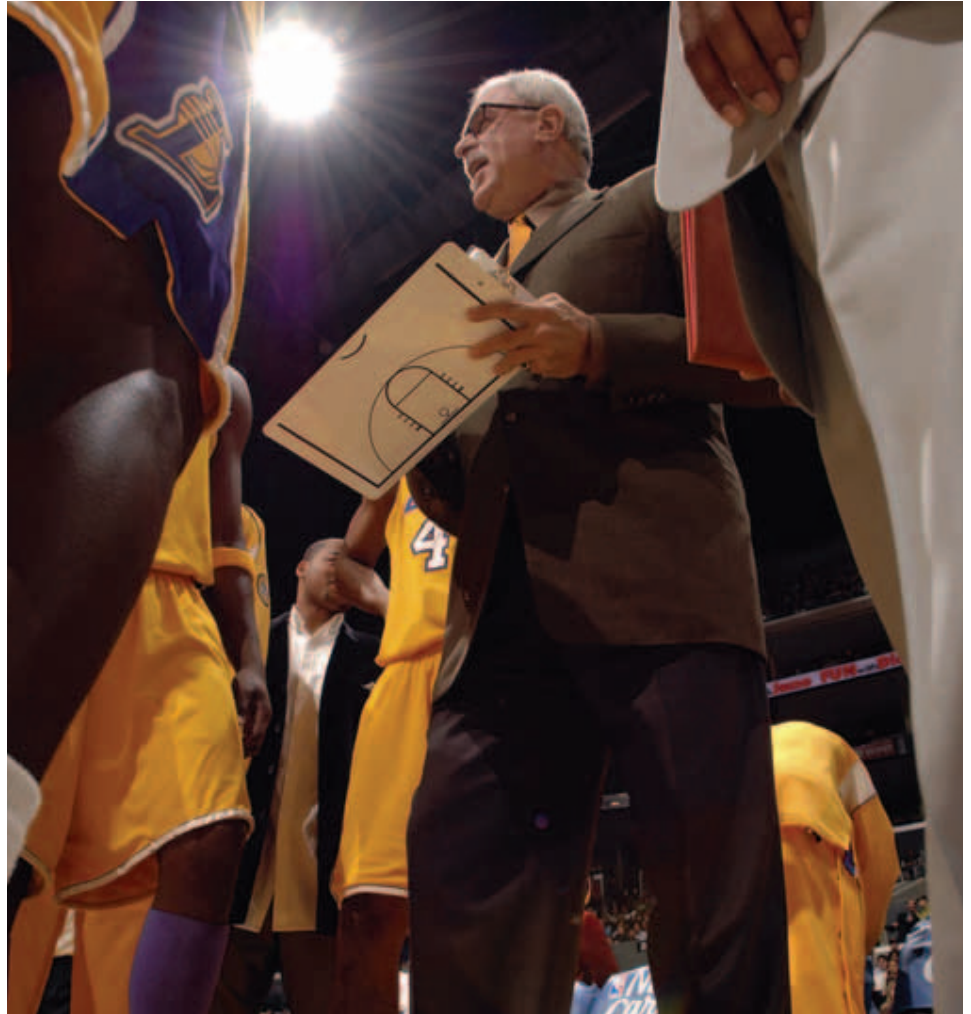
Duke basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski puts it best when he says: "Talent is important. But the single most important ingredient after you get the talent is internal leadership. It's not the coaches as much as one single person or people on the team, who set higher standards than that team would normally set for itself. I really believe that that's been ultimately important for us."

As you look at your team, do you have the responsible and respected team leaders you need to succeed? Do your leaders consistently hold themselves AND their teammates accountable? Do your team leaders understand, embrace, and embody the values and philosophy of your program? Are they your voice in the locker room and on the weekends when you're not there?

As Hall of Fame North Carolina State women's basketball coach Kay Yow reminds us: "The quality of your team leaders can make or break your season."

Because your captains are the heart and soul of your team, they are not a luxury, but a vital necessity to your program's success. Why?

Because it's your team leaders, who impact all the important "intangibles" that determine winning and losing - attitude,



chemistry, commitment, confidence, coachability, mental toughness, etc.

In the words of four-time Super Bowl winning coach Chuck Noll: "On every team there is a core group that sets the tone for everyone else. If the tone is positive you have half the battle won. If it is negative, you are beaten before you even walk out on the field."

Who are the core leaders on your? Are you confident in their ability to effectively lead your team? Will they set the kind of tone you need to win on and off the court?

Here are six critical ways that developing ef-

fective team captains/leaders will help you win more games.

EFFECTIVE TEAM CAPTAINS

1. ENSURE HIGH STANDARDS AND A STRONG WORK ETHIC

Without effective team leaders, mediocrity is the goal of the team. The team motto becomes "Do just enough to get by", and "That's good enough." No one steps up and sets the tone for the rest of the team to follow. Further, when some players inevitably slack off and cut corners, no one is willing to constructively confront

them on it and let them know that their laziness is unacceptable and detrimental to the team.

Great team leaders set and maintain the standards for everyone else to follow. They consistently give it their all and demand that their teammates do the same. This is especially important when you have newcomers joining the team on a regular basis. The rookies often look to their veteran teammates to determine the standards of the team. If the leaders are slacking off and cutting corners, it is very easy for the rookies to do the same.

"The second I let down, particularly if I'm perceived as the leader of my team, I give others an opening to let down as well. Why not? If the person out front takes a day off or doesn't play hard, why should anyone else?" Michael Jordan

2. KEEP YOUR TEAM FROM CRUMBLING UNDER PRESSURE AND ADVERSITY

Without a team leader, teams often crumble under pressure and adversity. Players quickly get frustrated with opponents, officials, teammates, and themselves and lose their composure. They get distracted by their past mistakes and worry about making future errors. Further, when teams fall apart they tend to blame each other which distracts, divides, and destroys your team. Without a team leader, your players isolate themselves from the team instead of pulling together and staying tough. This lack of leadership and mental toughness during adversity often forces you to burn precious time-outs and make unwanted substitutions during the game. Worse, your team ends up beating itself because they self-destruct rather than staying tough and forcing your opponents to beat you. You can likely trace many of your losses back to the lack of ineffective team leaders stepping up and refocusing the team during critical stretches.

Effective team leaders help their teammates weather the inevitable storms of adversity that occur during games and throughout the season. When adversity strikes and the other team goes on an 8-0 run, great leaders maintain their own composure which keeps their teammates under control. They then can refocus the team back on the task at hand. Good team leaders are a calming force, who are able to help their teammates adjust and refocus.

"Young players are leaders only when they are playing well... that's not leadership.

Anyone can lead the league in high fives when things are going well. But, during adversity, is when you need leaders in your group..." Rick Pitino, University of Louisville basketball coach.

3. BUILD BETTER TEAM CHEMISTRY

Effective team leaders promote a positive sense of team chemistry. They welcome and take care of the new members of your team so the younger players feel accepted and have someone to turn to should something go wrong. Effective team leaders prevent cliques from developing as they look to break down barriers, unify their teammates, and rally them around a common goal.

"If you want to build an atmosphere in which everybody pulls together to win, then you, as a leader have to recognize that it all starts with you. It starts with your attitude, your commitment, your caring, your passion for excellence, your dedication to winning. It starts with the example you set." Pat Williams, Senior V.President Orlando Magic

4. HELP YOU TAKE THE PULSE OF TEAM

If you don't have a good leader you can trust, you might miss some important things happening with your players and team. You might not know why a certain player all of a sudden isn't playing well or why another might not be communicating with you any more. Further, it might seem like you have lost your players' enthusiasm but you aren't sure why.

Effective team leaders help keep you connected to your team. They keep you informed about how players might be doing, who is struggling, and if there is any dissension brewing amongst the team. Not only do great team leaders keep you up to date on the pulse of the team, they can also provide you with input on changes you might be contemplating or ones you have already instituted.

5. MINIMIZE AND MANAGE CONFLICT

Additionally, good team leaders will help you manage the inevitable conflict that occurs on every team between players, coaches, parents, and others. They can help their teammates better understand why they are getting limited playing time, thus preventing them from running to their parents and having them call you to complain about it. They can often handle and even solve a lot of problems before you even have to get involved. This frees up your time to focus on what you do best - coaching. Good leaders then make your job easier as a coach by preventing, minimizing, and handling a significant portion of the typical problems that beset teams, so you don't have to.

"During the championship years, the most important leaders were Bill Cartwright and Michael Jordan. I relied on them to solve minor problems and give me an accurate reading of what was going on with the team." Phil Jackson, former Chicago Bulls coach.

6. ARE YOUR BEST INSURANCE AGAINST STUPIDITY

Finally, good leaders are your best insurance policy against your athletes making stupid decisions in the community that could tarnish you and your program. Good leaders will help you control and curb the common off the court temptations and problems that often end up as the talk of the town or embarrassing headlines in the local and even national media. Minimizing these problems alone will provide you with many more restful evenings.

This positive policing role is especially important because as a coach you can only be with your athletes so many hours of the day. Obviously you get to spend time with them at practice, but the rest of the day they have a variety of choices which you cannot constantly watch and monitor, nor should you want or have to. However, great team leaders tend to be around their teammates more and can be a positive influence on them. This is especially true on weekend evenings when players are often tempted to do things that could potentially have negative effects on themselves and the team, not to mention your program's reputation. Great team leaders look out for their teammates and are willing to constructively confront them when necessary.

"The entire aim of our policies at Tennessee is to get our players to discipline each other... We have evolved a system in which I don't have to do a whole lot of punishing, penalizing, or pushing them. Our upperclassmen become the disciplinarians of our team instead of me." Pat Summitt, women's basketball coach, University of Tennessee.

As you can see with the above six ways, your captain's leadership will contribute much more to your team's success than their physical skills ever will. However, if you want your captains to be extensions of you out on the floor, you must invest the time to extend yourself to them. Share your philosophy with them, let them know what you expect, and communicate with them often.

RATE YOUR CAPTAINS

If you would like to find out how your current and/or prospective captains rate as leaders, visit <http://www.jeffjanssen.com/coaching/evaluation2.html> to take the Team Leadership Evaluation.