Pahokee success:

it's a lot more than speed.

Pahokee Speed and Success is about Expectations, Work ethic, Role models – and Rabbits

Fifteen ideas for success … for coaches and classroom educators

January 1, 2011: I tossed the snow-shovel in the garage, and pointed the van toward southern Florida, to see if young athletes really do chase rabbits in the sugar fields as the story goes.
http://sports.espn.go.com/espnmag/story?id=3286059
Of course, there were a couple rabbit hunts as the tall stalks burned, but I gained more lessons in five days than I had hoped for.



Pahokee and its rival, Belle Glade, lie between the southern tip of Lake Okeechobee, the everglades, and the sugar-cane fields where, fifty years ago, ancestors were enslaved at the point of a gun (yes, that's fifty, not 150 years – my first lesson). Pahokee has a population of 4000, a high school enrollment of 560 in four grades, median income under $20,000. Yet the football program has produced six state championships, 36 NFL players, and more than 200 student-athletes who earned college scholarships.

Notwithstanding the impressive list of champions and NFL'ers, college attendance is their greatest source of pride.

I got dizzy watching two rival teams run up and down the court in a basketball game that featured nothing but fast breaks. The term 'breakaway' doesn't fit, because all ten players arrive at the basket at the same time. Centers are just as fast as guards, although the guards have agility beyond imagination. I guess, guarding someone who is running at 4.5 speed is commonplace after you've caught a dozen rabbits in a day.

Each player going for a layup is fearless driving to the basket through five opponents braced for contact. If there is no major pile-up on the floor or no free throws, all ten players sprint to the other basket at the same speed, and this continues the entire game. I couldn't tell if they can shoot 3's; it was all fast breaks and layups.

They brag, "We're fast because we chase rabbits." Actually, they catch them, too ... the backs and receivers, that is. Linemen? Not so much. But, the real lessons about speed? It is all about their Lesson **1)** **expectations, plus personal contact with adults who care, and a proud tradition of hard work**.

How exactly do they get so fast, and why is their football program so successful? After all, Florida has great football in every class, and the Pahokee weight room doesn't have elaborate equipment like many schools.

Genetics comes to mind first, and of course, many of these young athletes are as gifted for speed and strength as they are deprived of economic benefits. You can see it in younger athletes who have not trained with weights yet. A tall, thin 14 year-old basketball wizard is 6'6" and exceptionally fast, considering his rapid growth. His thighs are so skinny, the knees have a greater diameter, but this dude can sprint the length of the court by the time you pronounce his name. And he keeps it up the entire game, catching up to fast break attempts, and blocking layups all night.

Lesson 2)**"He hasn't lifted weights yet**," according to his uncle. **"That will come, but he sprints every day."** Actually, sprinting adds speed to any genetic base, so coaches need not dwell on the question of whether nature or nurture contributes more. Our job is to nurture.

That's where semi-retired Coach Don Thompson has contributed his soft-spoken encouragement for the greater part of six decades, as a player, a head coach, and now an assistant. Coach-T makes sure he has 3)**"constructive personal contact"** with individual athletes every day, an important lesson he'd pass on to educators in any field.

Lesson 4)**"My job is to encourage** the boys in the weight room and outside as they run their sprints." He times them every day in the 40-yard dash, and records their times, just as bench press max might be recorded in other programs. 5) **The entire coaching staff is passionately involved,** challenging athletes at every station. They don't send players off to see a strength coach. Each one is there every day, constantly reminding players:

6)***"speed is the objective in Pahokee."***



What motivates an athlete to sprint year-round? Why is a 6'6" center so challenged to block shots that he runs relentlessly, even chasing after a long pass when centers in the NBA might take a breather? Perhaps because he isn't there yet and wants to be.

The week I visited Pahokee, the tradition of successful, caring adults was characterized by a Pahokee alum named Chico, a former college player with a Master's degree who is now the school's Computer Systems Engineer. He trains alongside the high school players and wins bench-press contests or sprint races daily. Respect is therefore a given. "It's our culture," he said. "Kids in youth sports see it right away when they come to the gym to work out with the varsity.
7)**If you want to play for Pahokee, you better get faster. Work your**

butt off in the weight room, and sprint every day, because Pahokee teams are all about speed."



[8] **Chico is joined by other alums** who come back often from college and the NFL to show youngsters what it takes to succeed. This tradition would serve any educational activity well: successful alums working alongside young students. But sadly, our educational elite are not taking lessons in Pahokee. When athletic programs succeed where economic and demographic conditions say it's not likely, no one asks how can we make our academic programs as attractive and successful as the athletic programs?

Lesson [9] **Most daily sprints are competitive.** They race each other or run pass routes against defenders who stick with them like glue. They must make their best fake and explode with a burst of speed, or they won't get open. The older athletes aren't timid about knocking down a receiver who has his head down while running for a pass. "They have to learn some hard lessons," one explained.



Some see harder lessons each day of course, living in homes where plywood replaces glass windows, and air conditioning for the 100° summer nights is nothing but a dream.

After watching four basketball games, I am no longer shocked as I was the first day, to see how hard they compete -- harder than teams I've seen in other sports. Why? [10]**It's their way of life. It's how they win championships and college scholarships.**

Coach-T provides another key to athletic development, [11]"**At the youth level, our football players are involved in several other sports. We ask them all to run track, too.** Some don't, of course, but they'll chase rabbits and sprint against the stop watch." Athleticism should be developed this way all over the country: less specialization at young ages, and participation in several sports. But Pahokee success depends more than others on all-around athletes, because there are so few students in town.



One athlete smiled with pride as he explained that his regimen for the day was common among peers. He lifted weights for an hour, ran sprints and caught passes; then it was home for dinner, and back to school for basketball practice later that evening.

Pahokee and Belle Glade Central win state football championships in their respective divisions like they're going out of style, but Coach-T [12]**takes greater pride in the advancement of alumni to college.** "Our scholarships have actually totaled into the millions of dollars, so we believe the investment in athletics has a great return for the school and community."

His son, Blaze Thompson is now the head coach, and because report cards just came out, and he knows how each boy has been doing, Lesson [13]**he stands in the middle of the school thoroughfare, where every player must show him their results.** "Nice job. Great improvement," he'll say to one, and for the next boy who shows him the card without looking up, the coach might say, "We've got to get to work right away." He knows their past academic performance as well as he knows their football stats.

Practically the entire senior class of football players will go to college on scholarship each year, according to Coach-T, "Not all Division-1, of course, some to D2 or D3, but [14]**we find a place for all of them." The long list of Pahokee players who have earned college scholarships is posted prominently in the locker room** next to that special list of 36 NFL'ers and pictures of the state champion teams – all this in case a youngster forgets why everyone around him is working so hard.

As Coach-T timed players in the forty, one speedy young running back (an 8th grader) ran more like a high school senior. When Chico told him his picture might go online, he seemed surprised. "Really," he exclaimed. "You can do that?!?"

With a title like Computer Systems Engineer,
Chico is asked, "Ain't that a white man's job?"
He punches the boy in the shoulder and replies

(Lesson 15) ***"No way . . .***

"Study. Work hard, and you can do anything you want. You can even be President of the United States."

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"Yes, you can"

– Barack Obama

