

The Art of High School Sports Banquets

The High School Sports Banquet – the conclusion to a season of success or the opportunity to move on. How do you define this special night?

- As a student, a sport banquet may seem exciting or just one more night of complete embarrassment.
- For the parent, this is banquet may seem like one of those “proud –have the video recorder rolling – look at my kid moments,” or it may just be one more thing on your overloaded schedule.
- For the coach, this is the part of the season you enjoy or you hate because it means you have to stand in front of your team AND their parents and talk for a long time!

Sport banquets...love them or leave them!

This simple handout is a reminder that the value of a sports banquet is greater than you may understand. It is during the banquet that seasons are summed up and dreams are encouraged or crushed! As a coach and a former player, I have sat through dozens of banquets. I’ve witnessed some awesome experiences and I’ve cringed in horror and the disappointment of others.

I’ve celebrated and thanked coaches...and I’ve walked away from banquets pondering – “Coach, what were you thinking?!” I’ve seen my own children face disappointment and I’ve seen other children experience hope. I then wondered, has anyone ever given coaches a suggestion for how to conduct a sports banquet? Do coaches know the value and reason for a sports banquet?

This is just a simple starting point and a reminder that there is more you can do in creating a memorable and inspiring moment in the life of a young person.

Communication with your players and parents is crucial. Do not rely upon word of mouth, or your players passing along the important information.

Clear Expectations for the event:

- What time are you starting?
- What should you wear?
- What you can bring?
- Put ending time to your banquet, so that people know exactly when you will finish. A great movie has a beginning and ending time, a great book as an exact number of pages to the end of the book. A banquet should not begin when you feel like it and end with a “?.”

You have set a date, a time, a location, and you have clearly communicated this to the parents and players.

Value of a Banquet - If you don’t make it a big deal – it won’t be a big deal!

Celebration and Reflection:

This is the last time you will have all the parents and all your players in one place during the season. Through the season, various parents will miss games; you may have an injured player, sick player, vacationing parent/player, etc. So keep in mind, this is an important time with everyone together.

I'm assuming that you should have had a preseason meeting, with expectations, vision, and direction for your team. The banquet is now the measuring stick for what happened at the beginning of the season through the end of the season. If you didn't have that preseason meeting with expectations and vision, make sure it happens next season. A good leader has a vision and knows how to cast it in a positive manner.

A good program will identify some type(s) of growth from the season. What were your goals for the season? Now is the time to share some of those goals, and more importantly celebrate your accomplished goals. DO NOT linger on the things you DIDN'T do.

Value of a Player

Make sure that all players are valued by you. This is not just a varsity banquet, it is a team banquet. People should know that your youth, middle school, JV, and high school team are one unit. What happens in elementary matters for the varsity program too.

Make sure you thank everyone! Principal, athletic director, the janitor (by name), bus drivers, managers, and then with a BIG thanks – the parents and players. Consider all who played a part in the success of your season. For example, I witnessed an 8th grade basketball coach give the 5th and 6th grade coaches (who had coached these same boys years before) at the banquet a piece of the championship net in 8th grade. This coach acknowledged all who played a part of making this team successful.

You should know your players at the beginning of the season, and through the season, so that at the end of the season your personal comments really do make sense. (Example, a player "being injured" is the main thing mentioned about a particular player at the banquet. However, the player didn't get injured until the next of the last game, and he never missed that final game due to the injury. So why mention this injury?) Find the positive in each player and highlight this moment/trait/character.

Get organized

- Have an order for what you were going to say.
- Know and say the first and last name of each player, manager, staff person. Make sure everyone gets recognized!
 - Nicknames are okay to refer to, but use their first name.
- Highlight and emphasize three key things about each player. Keep it short!
 - Stats are good, but they are not everything. Look for highlights that show the character and growth of an individual.
- Do not belittle other coaches, programs, or your players. Example given an award to a player because they made a dumb mistake or made a funny comment. You can have a fun banquet without belittling your players.
- Make sure each player gets the same value time. Do not linger too long on one player, and avoid repeating stats and comments about certain players.

Write it all down. Having it written down will help you avoid being sidetracked and chasing rabbit holes.

KEEP IT BRIEF!

Key Thoughts:

Don't crush the kids Dream! You may be “realistic” about playing opportunities for next year, college, etc. but the banquet is not the place to share your opinion about a player’s future. Encourage your players to follow their dreams, don’t make promises, just encourage.

Highlight team accomplishments. While sharing the team accomplishment, make sure you don’t confuse or bore the parents with inside jokes, or inside stats that no one understands.

Involve the seniors: Have each senior take 30 seconds to share what really mattered to them, what they learned, and a thank you to the parents. Make sure you have those seniors write down what they are going to share, and make sure you read it a day before the banquet.

Enjoy the night – keep it brief – and make it something that everyone looks forward to!