

We Are Student-Athlete Leaders:

Can You See Us and Can You Hear Us?

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High school sport holds a special place the lives of student-athletes, in our schools, and our communities. It has the power to bring people together and help us, as adolescents, grow, develop, and escape from the stressors of our daily lives. We are currently senior high school student-athletes, we each play multiple sports, we have been given roles as captains of our teams, we have leadership responsibilities in our schools and communities, and we serve as representatives on the Student Advisory Committee for our state high school association. Over the past four years, we have lived the ups and downs as student-athlete leaders and gained so much from our experiences. We want other student-athletes to get these same benefits from playing high school sport. To make this happen, we need adults to see us and to hear us as leaders, not just as followers of adults.

Why is it Important to See and Hear Student-Athlete Leaders

We believe that being seen and listened to as leaders can have a positive impact across teams, schools, and communities. If our peers and teammates get to see us and hear as leaders, we can truly change the atmosphere of a sports team and the individuals who are a part of that team. As peer leaders, we can help to set the tone for the team's discipline, teamwork, work ethic, and overall attitude for the entirety of the season. Our actions and attitude, if supported, can help to inspire others and mentor future leaders. Being seen and listened to by teammates makes us feel worthy and gives a sense of collective ownership on our teams. Additionally, as student-athletes, we feel that we are often held to a higher standard than other students. No matter where you go, you represent your sport, your team, your school, and your community. When coaches, teachers, and administrators understand the pressure and responsibilities that come with our roles, we feel encouraged to carry ourselves with pride, discipline, and a desire to continue to grow as both a person and as a teammate. Finally, we believe that student-athletes must

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be heard and seen as leaders in high school sports because they are the future of high school sport. By creating a space where student-athletes feel comfortable leading others, we can collectively make high school sport better for the next student and the next generation.

Our Ups and Downs of Being Seen and Heard as Student-Athlete Leaders

Having someone who supports you and truly believes in you is an amazing feeling. For us, this support was the key for us striving to become better leaders each day. It is easy for us to identify one example each of having an adult who has provided us with real leadership opportunities, has developed real relationships with us, and has kept it real by providing authentic support, feedback, and confidence to lead on our teams and in our schools:

I had a coach who trusted me as a leader. He allowed me to hold player-led meetings. There are times when a team needs to talk openly without coaches present, and my coach recognized that. He trusted me enough to lead those meetings on my own, without even asking what the discussion would be about. I would simply tell him I needed time with the team, and he would make it happen. That level of trust showed me what real leadership looks like.

My former Athletic Director truly listened to me. He believed from the day I stepped foot into the doors of my high school. From the numerous talks in his office or the simple smiles or high fives in the hallway, he has been able to see the true leader within me. He has been able to provide me guidance, life lessons, and constant support through every adversity or battle I have had to face along the way.

It was just the other day, but I truly believe that this will be an impactful moment in my life. I was rushing to get my lunch at school because I knew the line would be a mile long. I was laughing and smiling, putting my backpack down on my seat and getting my ID card out to go check out lunch, when I saw him. He was a shy, awkward kid, a freshman, who I briefly met at the beginning of the year. I saw him outside in the courtyard area, sitting by himself and looking like he held the weight of the world on his shoulders. All of a sudden, my heart felt heavy. I went up to the line, grabbed my lunch, and I went outside and sat across from him at the table. We talked and laughed, and I remember it being one of the quickest lunch periods ever. The next day, I ran into my principal in the hallway. She stopped me and said she saw me at lunch the previous day. She told me how proud of me she was because I set the example for other kids and have a gift of making people feel like they matter. It really hit me that even the smallest acts of kindness can make such a difference. By having someone notice such a small moment and believing in me, I feel empowered and a new sense of drive in what I can do for others.

On the other hand, we have also each experienced what it is like not to be seen and listened to as athletes and leaders. As we reflect, we know that these adults probably have not purposefully tried to ignore us or limit us, and we do know that we learned from these moments. Yet, we feel like we could have been supported more by our coaches and teachers during these moments:

I once had a teacher who believed I was “taking on too much.” Looking back on it now, I can understand why she felt that way, she was just looking out for me. But at that point, she was blunt in the way she shared this with me. I felt discouraged, like she really did not believe in what I could do. It was hard for me to deal with because I have never felt that lack of support before. I cried and felt defeated, but it also gave me a sense of purpose. From then on, I want to prove that I could be something MORE than what she thought I could be.


Since sixth grade, I found a true passion for a sport. I fell in love with it instantly when I stepped onto the court or put on my game day shoes. But as time grew on and constant reps, practices, and games dragged on, I began to lose a love for the sport. My junior year was one of the toughest seasons that I have had to battle through with numerous mental blocks, and I felt like I had no support. I wanted to play, I wanted to get better, and I wanted to be a leader on my team, but I felt like my coach didn't have my back. As my senior year approached, I decided that it would be best if I let go of the sport I used to love and focus on my future. Yes, I was able to continue my legacy as a leader within my school and community, but I feel like the coach and team lost a leader.

For one of my sports, our workouts are so intense that athletes started getting injured. I am a team leader, and I tried to talk to my coach, to discuss if we needed to focus more on drills instead of constant sprinting, but he didn't listen. I knew our training wasn't helping us, but I didn't know how to speak up effectively at the time. Eventually, I got hurt too. I had feared that we needed a change, and I wish I could we could have been on the same page, but it was too late. It taught me that leadership sometimes means having the courage to speak up, even when it's uncomfortable.

Recommendations for Seeing and Hearing Student-Athlete Leaders

We hope that our experiences and our stories can provide some encouragement for high school coaches, teachers, and administrators to really think about how they can see student-athletes and listen to student-athletes as leaders in sport and in life. We have three suggestions to help to create a culture where student-athlete leaders can grow. First, please remember that we see and hear everything our adult leaders do. We want adults to lead with effort, teamwork, and integrity. Coaches, administrators, and parents should always remember the importance of a positive attitude and sportsmanship through respect, responsibility, courage, and composure. As teenagers, we learn from them, and we follow them. Second, adults can trust us to lead! We need a foundation of trust. If we have trusting relationships with our coaches and administrators, we see a clearer picture of what leadership is and what leadership can be. Then, it is much easier for us to step up and lead when we know we are supported. Finally, we think true leadership develops through experience, and sometimes that means learning from mistakes. When it comes to leadership, want a focus on growth and character instead of on the team's wins and losses. We value and strive for effort, teamwork, and integrity as leaders, but we are still learning, we are bound to make mistakes. We want adults to teach student-athletes how to use leadership skills in tough situations, provide us with real opportunities to take responsibility, and encourage us to have voice and speak our minds to make a difference within our school and sports team. We think that this helps to build student-athletes' confidence to step up as leaders, and develop the mindsets needed to lead on and off the playing field, inside and outside of the classroom.

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