

Brining Your Athletic Handbook into the 21st Century

Like many athletic administrators, our athletic department has employed an athletic handbook for all coaches and athletic staff members. Over the years the handbook has evolved and changed with the times. Sections have been added and deleted. Forms have been updated and improved. As policies changed, new ones worked their way into the handbook. New types of information from the state and national levels have been included as needed. Old and outdated materials were kept in the handbook longer than needed and eventually were weeded out and eliminated over time.

The method for making a coaching handbook that has worked best for us in the past has been a three ring binder. Often the different sections and special documents were color coded. Changes could be made fairly quickly and easily by pulling old information and replacing it with updated information. Many times there were problems with getting all the information out to every staff member in a timely manner. Sometimes new coaches came and went and never fully utilized their handbook to help lighten their administrative load. The time and effort in producing, copying, modifying and re-distributing the handbook to a large coaching staff became a hardship for the administration in both time and manpower. Updates were done every two years instead of yearly in order to save both time and money. Sometimes information was not shared in the most timely manner.

Like all good things, the paper era has come to an end in our athletic department. We have chosen to produce an athletic handbook in a more efficient manner by employing simple technology available to almost every athletic administrator. All one needs to produce an electronic handbook for your coaches and/or athletes is a computer, a flash drive and a supply of compact discs. The last piece of the puzzle would be purchase software packages such as Macromedia Dreamweaver and Fireworks. Another software package that could be used would be the Microsoft Front Page program. Although used primarily for web design, these programs could also be helpful in producing a functional interactive compact disc. They are excellent tools that will help you produce an attractive and useful product. You might want to consult your technology department for assistance in the purchase and use of these types of programs. Many school districts have sight licenses for any or all of these programs.

The computer you choose should be equipped with Microsoft Word and Excel. It should be able to read and copy any document in PDF format. The computer should also be capable of reading and burning compact discs. The basic copy that is used to produce your handbook will be kept on a single flash drive and stored in a safe place. Any document that is produced or PDF file that is obtained should be stored in one place for safe keeping. The handbook that is produced will always be generated from the original document on your flash drive. As documents become outdated, they can be changed on the flash drive and then reproduced on a copied compact disc. Updates from year to year become quick and easy. A new coaching or athletic handbook can be burned in minutes. Distribution to interested parties can be done in great numbers and in a minimal time frame. The completed document can even be linked to a website for maximum effect. Files can be copied from the handbook and distributed in paper form, faxed and/or e-mailed in a matter of seconds. The distribution lists can be endless and the time and effort minimal. Your entire department can access information in seconds.

When setting up an athletic handbook, it is important that the vast majority of the material can be produced in a format that cannot be changed or altered without permission. The use of PDF files fits the bill completely. Most forms, documents, policies and other general information will change very little over time. Original documents are usually produced in Word or Excel and then saved in PDF format. The coaching handbook will be primarily completed with PDF documents. By keeping the original document on your flash drive, you can always go back and make simple changes on the original. If you want documents that your staff can use as produced, simply put them in your electronic handbook in their original format. You can still keep the original in the event that you want to update the document at a later date. Once all changes have been made, a new PDF file can be produced to take the place of the old document. If your computer does not have a conversion program to PDF, one can be obtained for a minimal price. Check with the technology staff in your building and they might even hook you up with a simple PDF conversion program for free!

If you want to produce compact discs with your school logo or other distinctive decoration, many computers are now equipped with Light Scribe technology. This allows you to produce very attractive discs for a few extra dollars. Special discs are needed when producing this type of product.

Once all the basic ingredients are in place, the final decision you must make is what items you want in your handbook. Once the items are determined, a complete table of contents should be produced. Many of your staff members will consult this page first and then can quickly access the information needed to complete their tasks. We chose 14 topics for our athletic handbook. It was determined that every type of information a coach would need could be placed in one of those categories.

The first category was athletic information. We have a student athletic handbook in our department. Years ago we printed hundreds of these booklets every year and handed them to our student-athletes. Today the document is in PDF format and placed on our high school website. A copy of the document is also included in our electronic coaching handbook. Parents and athletes now have instant access.

The second category is the most popular with the coaching staff. Our second section contains every form that coaches could ever need. Most are in PDF format, but some (eligibility and inventory) are in Excel format to allow the coach to download and use the document directly. By keeping the document in Excel format the coach can also e-mail the completed document directly to my office and save both paper and time. This also assists me in being able to file and maintain accurate records.

Our third area is one both coaches and parents ask about frequently. The third section contains our written athletic policies. Many time questions arise about our policy on travel, sportsmanship, awards and other related areas. We find it very convenient to be able to access this information quickly and share it in both a paper and electronic format. Much of the information is also contained in the student athletic handbook, but having the complete document available for review is often helpful.

The fourth area of the handbook is the awards section. In this section all of our awards criteria and Hall of Fame information are contained. Most of the material is in PDF format, but our awards nomination forms are in Excel to allow coaches to fill them out and e-mail to me quickly. Many time questions arise about criteria for awards. It is extremely easy to simply pull a PDF file out of the handbook and discuss it with a parent or athlete. Often a quick e-mail of a document can also provide the answer to most questions in a timely manner.

Our athletic booster club is very active and a major part of our athletic funding strategy. Because of this, we have a section in our handbook to address the booster club. A booster club constitution is available in PDF format. We also include booster membership forms and booster club request forms in both PDF and Word formats. Many of our parents find it quite convenient to access these documents from our coaching staff or from me in an electronic format. We feel by offering another method to get information out, the booster club has become more active and our coaches are reaping the benefits.

The sixth section of our handbook is simply referred to as our coaching manual. This section is a depository for just about any information that we feel does not fit into one of the other sections. This section is also the one that is updated the most on a yearly basis. Some of the information included in this portion of the handbook includes a coaching staff roster, rules meeting dates, mentorship information, parent pre-season meeting guidelines, information about hazing and a number of other items. Over the years, as new information is deemed relevant, it is often included in this section. We always try to distribute the new information via e-mail to the coaching staff first and then included in the handbook for later use by all stakeholders.

The seventh section is one we feel very strongly about including. This section is entitled Gender Equity. We include information on the components of Title IX, compliance information, checklists and any other information that will help our coaches, players, parents and staff to understand the strategies we must all employ to insure gender equity and compliance with the law.

Our next section contains all information from our state association. Over the years the materials from the state have been converted from hard copy to electronic format. Many of the documents our coaches need are available on the web in both a secure format for athletic administrators and a non-secure format on the state association web site. We try to update by-laws, dates, physical examination forms and other pertinent information. Each year we copy the information that is provided for us and convert it to PDF format and place it in our handbooks. We also try to make the same information available to all of our parents and athletes by linking it to the school website.

The next two sections are given to coaches for the use of our parents. We include all NCAA information we can find in our ninth section. This includes information about the Clearinghouse. Much of the information comes from the NCAA website and can be copied and/or linked every year. The tenth section includes parent information about accessing our web information. Also included are materials that coaches will discuss with parents in our annual pre-season meetings.

Our next section is vital to any coaching handbook. It is the rudder that drives the ship that is our athletic department. We include the philosophy and objectives of our athletic department in this section. All too often we get caught up in the wins, losses and game management. We keep this information as part of our handbook to remind coaches, parents and players what we believe to be our core principles. Any other documents that can help emphasize what we believe are included in this section. Our basic philosophy does not change, but documentation to support our ideals can always be added to this section of the handbook.

Risk management is the theme of our next section. We have established an emergency chain of command document that is reviewed and shared with our coaches and athletic training staff on a yearly basis. Over time we have also developed cautionary statements for every sport. These are excellent tools that can be used by coaches in their pre-season meetings. Also included is information on legal liability that is shared with every coach in our pre-season coaching meetings. Finally, we have developed a set of checklists that coaches can employ as they inspect their facilities. The athletic administrator can also use the same forms and pass along facility needs to the maintenance department in a simple and easy to understand format. This also allows a method for filing past inspections for reference. Every effort must be made to minimize risk in athletics.

We are blessed with a great athletic training staff. We constantly strive to make their jobs easier and prevent problems and misunderstandings. We have a section in our handbook on sports medicine. This section includes a sports medicine handbook as well as information on handling blood spills. Our sports medicine handbook is updated yearly to provide the most accurate information to our coaches. Any new information we receive from our state association, the NFHS or the CDC that is related to issues that could affect our student athletes is kept in a folder in this section of the handbook.

Finally, our last section is dedicated to information our school district makes available to our parents and student athletes. Our district code of conduct and all related forms are contained in this section. We also have a folder relative to the administration and completion of all summer camps for our coaches and parents to review. New materials can be added and/or linked to our website immediately.

Our coaching handbook is in a constant state of flux. Changes in the world of athletics happen on a daily basis. We feel the electronic coaching handbook will enable us to meet the needs of our athletic department for today and the future. Any change or addition to the handbook will be saved to the flash drive that contains our master copy. We immediately e-mail the change to every member of our staff. Finally we note the change on a list in our master folder. When a new year rolls around, we simply include the changes that have been noted during the year, adjust yearly information to documents as needed and produce the updated master document for the new athletic year. Once the master is completed it is simply a matter of burning an updated disc for all of our staff members. So whether you have a staff of 10 or a staff of 100, your yearly cost is minimal. Coaches can then keep the disc or download it to a flash drive and/or computer. This method allows coaches to have instant access to all materials they need to complete their duties. They can then share that information with parents and athletes in a timely manner. It is our hope that by freeing up the time we once use pushing paper, more time can be spent with our student athletes.