

Coaching Moments Create a Culture of Mentoring

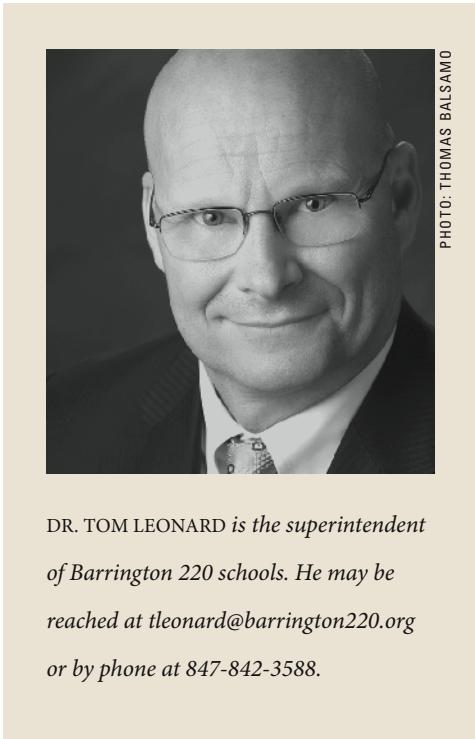
My fifth year out of college found me teaching math in the Crystal Lake Central and South high schools. I considered myself a proficient teacher, but there were still a few students I could not motivate. Granted, the ambiguous Law of Sines in trigonometry is not the most exciting topic to 16 year olds. Determined to reach them, I asked my students, “Who is the most motivating teacher or coach you’ve ever had?” ¶ A few names popped up, but one was mentioned most often: Bill Mack, the long-time varsity football coach at Crystal Lake Central High School. Although I had never played football, I asked Coach Mack if I could work with him in the fall as a volunteer assistant. He quizzed me about football and I replied honestly that I understood little about the game. However, I told him I was good at math and I would gladly keep statistics for the team. He agreed, reserving my seat on the sidelines where I could observe him as he mentored and coached his young athletes.

MY PLAN TOOK AN UNEXPECTED turn that summer when two of Coach Mack’s assistants resigned. Coach Mack called to tell me I would now be paid to coach the varsity running backs and outside linebackers. Practice started in two weeks, so I spent every morning for the next 14 days learning from Coach Mack what I needed to know to survive. After two weeks, I wasn’t exactly Vince Lombardi but the season began anyway.

I struggled through, faked a lot, and watched the coach motivate his young protégés like I had never seen anyone do before or since. Coach Mack was amazingly cool, always the perfect gentleman, and he operated with a laser-like focus on football. So much so that, occasionally, he would nearly veer off the road while diagramming plays

on the windshield of his car. Once, after Coach Mack drew our entire playoff game plan on paper napkins while eating breakfast, he made the mistake of leaving them on the restaurant table. It was interesting explaining to the Crystal Lake Police why grown men were knee deep digging through a dumpster at 2 a.m.

I worked with the coach for almost six years until he retired from high school football and went on to coach at the college level. Eventually, my high school players really thought I knew what I was doing. Occasionally, one would ask, “Hey coach, what position did you play in high school?” I’d give him the cool Bill Mack smile and say “tenor sax.” The player would typically walk away confused, not understanding that marching band provided my only experience on



DR. TOM LEONARD is the superintendent of Barrington 220 schools. He may be reached at tleonard@barrington220.org or by phone at 847-842-3588.

a high school football field.

Coach Mack probably never realized how much of a mentor he was to me and hundreds of other students. Yes, he taught us some football; more importantly, he taught us how to be a person of integrity, how to set goals and the value of hard work.

A new home field

When I first came to Barrington High School in 2001, one of my first tasks was to hire a head football coach. Several staff members hoped I would take a chance on a youthful assistant in the program. I remember interviewing that young man, who told me the person he most admired was his college coach at North Central, Bill Mack. I knew we were on the right track hiring Joe Sanchez, who is still the varsity football coach at Barrington High School.

Barrington 220 is filled with mentoring teachers and coaches who inspire young minds every day. Many legends have paved the way in Barrington 220, such as Nancy Benson (first