

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF OPTIMUM PHYSICAL HEALTH

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Numerous studies and statistics are available concerning the effects of drugs and alcohol. Abstaining from using drugs and alcohol will increase the quality of your overall health and decrease your chances of medical complications and disease. But for athletes in particular, it has been proven that avoiding drugs and alcohol will allow them to reach their maximum physical potential on a consistent basis. In addition, the psychological rewards gained are even more powerful. I learned just how powerful this advantage could be during my first year as soccer coach of the women's team at Wittenberg University.

When I first came to Wittenberg, I inherited a program that required some attitude adjustment and maintenance. Few people had high expectations for the program during my first year as the coach. Among those who did not anticipate positive results from our program were our opponents.

Early in the rebuilding process, I felt that it was crucial to communicate to my players the expectations I had for them regarding their health habits and the benefits that would result from staying away from drugs and alcohol. The team understood that we did not have outstanding talent, and that if we were going to be successful, we needed to make a commitment to ourselves to refrain from using these harmful substances. This particular commitment is not easy to achieve at the university level because of the social pressures that are prominent in this culture. If our team would commit to this lifestyle we would have the upper edge, both physically and mentally over our opponents.

I recall one particular game when our commitment was rewarded. We were playing an away match against a regionally ranked team and, up to that point in our season, had not been playing well. No one could have predicted that we would come out on top that day. While we had been training hard and had received thorough scouting reports, we just didn't have the talent to match up with our opponent. Just before kickoff and prior to my pre-game talk, one of my players requested to address the team. She stood up and told the team, "I was recruited by this school (our opponent), and when I came for my overnight campus visit, I stayed with some of the soccer players the night before one of their games. We were out all night long at a team party where many of their players were drinking and smoking. I am positive that things haven't changed, and since this is the case, we have got to use this to our advantage today." I decided that this story would serve as the pre-game motivational speech for the team.

The confidence that my team displayed on that particular day was the best I had seen all season long. I firmly believe that this confidence was a result of the psychological edge that my players gained by realizing that their fitness and health were at a higher level than their opponent's. There is no question in my mind that our commitment to staying away from drugs and alcohol, and the psychological advantage that we gained from that commitment, are the reasons we pulled off the biggest upset of our season.

To be successful at any level of soccer, players must make a commitment to themselves to lead healthy, responsible lifestyles. Players must remember that success is not measured by how well they perform in comparison to others. Success is measured by how well they do in relation to what they are *capable* of doing.