

Learning by Example

by SELENA ROBERTS

The crib-sheet culprits at work during a high school exam are generally discreet—steal a peek at an answer here, glance at a formula there—before they are snagged by a teacher with Ben Stein’s voice, slapped with an F and suspended. But when a recent test site was the football field and the offender was a faculty member called Coach, the punishment required further review. On Oct. 22, under the lights of a Friday night in central Connecticut, Manchester High receiver Marquis Jimenez lost the team’s list of coded plays off his armband sometime before the half, which ended in a 14–14 tie. The piece of paper wound up in the hands of Southington High’s rookie coach, D.J. Hernandez, a celebrity in area football circles: A three-sport star at Bristol Central High, he was UConn’s captain in 2007 and ’08, and his brother, Aaron, is a star tight end for the Patriots. Big-time profile, big-time hire at Southington. “That’s why this situation has legs,” says Southington principal Martin Semmel. “Because of who he is.” Or is it because of what he did? During the second half Manchester coach Marco Pizzoferrato noticed that every time his quarterback called signals at the line, Hernandez would look down at his clipboard, where, visible on game film, he had attached Jimenez’s lost play sheet. Hernandez made use of the lost list—he claims on only four plays in the third quarter—and Southington went on to win 28–14.

A swift penalty for a tainted victory would have seemed elementary, an instant teaching moment. But more than two weeks unfolded before Southington hit Hernandez with a one-game suspension—which didn’t stop the Blue Knights (8–1) from overwhelming East Hartford (3–7) last Friday 52–13. In a statement Hernandez said, “I have had the opportunity to reflect on this entire situation, and I understand by using the card I did not set a good example for the young men I coach.” The use of *reflection* was odd, as if Hernandez didn’t know he was wrong from the instant he picked up the cheat sheet. “What people have missed is the kind of person D.J. Hernandez is, a person with a big heart who is not the win-at-all-cost coach he has been made out to be,” says Semmel. “He’s a first-year coach who made a mistake.”

There is no reason to demonize Hernandez, but this can’t be dismissed as a rookie error. This is a statement about a high school landscape that has gone from Rockwell’s nostalgic realism to Dali’s warped imagery as sports have become increasingly professionalized. Preps are not a purist’s hideaway, not when ESPN has moved its cameras onto the fields to broadcast more than a dozen games this year, nor when MTV2 has its lenses focused on high school players for



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a series called *The Ride*, which began last week. High school is no longer a place for the undiscovered idols of tomorrow, not with agents prowling the playgrounds and parents clipping coupons to pay as much as \$400 to place their teen’s athletic profile on Internet recruiting services such as SportsForce.

It’s hard enough for coaches to keep high school players from imitating the pro way of life, but some field lessons are easy. Manchester’s Pizzoferrato will pull his players from a game for showboating, like the cornerback who recently mimicked the championship-belt celebration of Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers. “If it’s on TV and it’s a highlight there, they think that must be how the game is played,” Pizzoferrato says. “Sometimes high school players have a tough time differentiating between right and wrong.” The ethical lines also grow blurrier at the higher levels of sport. New England coach Bill Belichick paid a hefty fine but never missed a game after the film noir revelations of *Spygate*. The Bush Push in 2005—when Southern Cal running back Reggie Bush gave QB Matt Leinart an illegal shove into the end zone to beat Notre Dame—was lauded as a heads-up move by everyone, including Irish coach Charlie Weis. Whether it’s Derek Jeter’s thespian work in September, writhing after a pitch he was *not* hit by, or serial floppers seeking foul calls in the NBA, the images make an impression on the young—coaches as well as kids.

Pizzoferrato, 36, is a cancer survivor and father of two sets of twins. “I know it’s not all about winning,” he says. But his belief is also grounded in the leadership of his principal, Kevin O’Donnell, who handed me a newspaper photo from February with the caption: “East Catholic wins thanks to Manchester’s grasp of sportsmanship.” East Catholic’s wrestling team was well ahead on points but ran out of wrestlers for the final four matches and was about to lose by default. Manchester coach Lou LaGuardia decided to forfeit the remaining matches, believing East Catholic deserved to win. “I’m confident in what my coaches would have done [in Hernandez’s situation],” says O’Donnell.

If the ethical violation is so clear, if Southington has admitted to cribbing Manchester’s plays, why hasn’t the punishment been resolved? The Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference will review reports from both schools on Nov. 18. Will the CIAC recommend more punitive action, like a forfeit of the game? No one knows, in part because of the initial reaction from CIAC member Larry Williams, who told the AP, “It’s what we call ethics between coaches and good sportsmanship. I don’t think it’s cheating per se.” How can a governing body of high school sports hedge on something like this? Maybe another case of watching too much TV. □

Talk Back

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