



LET'S CAPTURE THOSE TEACHABLE MOMENTS

by Brent D. Bradford

As educators, we are often encouraged to lead extra-curricular activities for students. Whether it is leading a jazz band, organizing a science club, coaching a soccer team or teaching an after-school art group, delightful outcomes can be experienced and opportunities exist to provide students with quality learning experiences outside regular classroom hours. During my career, I spent several years coaching a variety of extra-curricular individual and team sports in elementary and junior high school, and several situations arose which provided opportunities to teach life-long lessons to my student-athletes. I refer to these opportunities as “teachable moments.” It is during these teachable moments that we can truly educate, encourage and inspire!

The purpose of this article is three-fold. First, I wish to share two stories about how teachable moments presented themselves during school athletic events. Second, I hope that you reflect on your extra-curricular experiences and take some time to jot down the “teachable moments” you took advantage of when they presented themselves. Third, it would be so beneficial for us to read some of your reflective stories of captured teachable moments as I believe teaching is a profession that benefits greatly when we share purposefully amongst ourselves. What better way to share with each other than through Canadian Teacher Magazine!

The following two stories have been on my mind from the time they occurred. When I think about capturing teachable moments during extra-curricular activities, these two stories share First Prize!

STORY #1: FIRST PLACE TROPHY, MEDALS AND PHOTO... TO NOTHING

During an elementary school track meet, our school's relay team earned its way to the finals after winning several races. Our runners (ranging from grades 4 to 6) were proficient baton passers and extremely quick around the track. As the final race approached, the runners became focused. They were excited! From what I remember, they anticipated a win without being overconfident. What they did not expect, however, was a learning experience that they would most likely remember for a long time that did not include winning!

As the race began, our first runner gained a gigantic lead and the following runners kept that lead. After our seventh runner passed the baton to the final runner, our lead grew to just over a half lap. Our team's families were cheering loudly. I was so proud of them all. Our final runner, who was by far the most explosive, was set on being first through the finish line. He was determined as he closed in on the final straight stretch.

As he ran around the last corner of the track, now about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a lap ahead of the second place team, he headed straight for the finish line. We could all sense a win coming! As seconds passed by, he ran across the finish line and raised his arms as if he were reaching for the sky. Our team of runners began to hug each other and raise their arms proudly while looking for their families in the stands.

As they congratulated each other, I could not help but be proud of what

they had accomplished from all their hard work and dedication throughout the past few months. I took time to shake the hands of the co-coaches who had volunteered their time so willingly during the months leading up to the final race. “We did it!” the runners yelled over and over as the other teams made their way through the finish line. All that was needed to complete the “Championship Day” was to collect the trophy and the first place medals and to take the winning team photo.

As our team began to collect their bags and meet up with their families, I was called over to the judges' area. I walked over with the other co-coaches. They explained to us that our final runner was disqualified as he had stepped on the line, interfering with the team in the next lane (who was well over a half lap behind him). Although we pointed out, more than once, that there was no runner near our leader in the next lane, and that he didn't step into the other lane, just on the line, the team of judges stood firm with their decision.

At that moment, the most difficult job of my day presented itself, and it was not trying to figure out why the judges decided the runners' fate. It was that I needed to turn around and inform our runners about the decision even as their high-fives and cheers were still in full force.

After thanking the judges for their consideration of changing the decision (which held firm), I made my way to our student-athletes. I asked them and their families to sit down near our designated area. I began to explain the decision and the fact that we were leaving the track meet with no championship trophy, no medals and no winning team photo. As my explanation continued, heads were dropping, family members were consoling their student-athletes, and a few tears were falling, especially from our quickest runner who had “stepped on the line.”

As I completed my explanation, answered questions, and stopped a few family members from going to the judges' area to “share their thoughts,” we decided as a school team to chalk this experience up to a life lesson. We discussed questions such as (1) What was the true objective of the track meet? and (2) What did we gain from earning our way to the finals? Of course, for Question #1, winning would usually be the first answer, however, our runners came up with some extremely mature responses such as how the judges' decision had no connection to how they performed after gaining such an enormous lead. I recall clearly the runners making comments such as, “Although we may have stepped on the line, we were still at least a half lap ahead. That should make us happy, right?” and “Let's walk out of here proud everyone! We got a great experience!”

*The student-athletes were proud of themselves!
The families were proud of their student-athletes!
I was proud of them all!
It was truly a winning team—without a trophy!*

After our discussion, and after congratulating the winning team while they were receiving the trophy and medals, we walked away from the track meet with

a life lesson—much can be gained from winning, but much can also be gained from not, if those teachable moments are captured. Although that team went on to win a few track meets after that day, they truly believed they gained more from “not winning” for “stepping on the line.” On that particular day, a unique teachable moment presented itself and a team came together!

STORY #2: RUNNING THROUGH THE WOODS

One fall afternoon, a large number of student-athletes were participating in a cross-country run while I was enjoying some time catching up with my colleagues from other schools. As the afternoon turned into early evening, the majority of the races had finished and no issues had arisen thus far. However, during one of the final races, I heard my name being called over the loud speaker. After receiving a few comical comments from other coaches and a few runners letting me know I was called to the principal’s office, I made my way to the finish line area.

When I arrived, I noticed that one of my student-athletes was sitting on a bench hunched over looking sad. I walked up to him prior to speaking to the organizers and asked him what was going on. He did not say much, so I walked over to the organizers’ table. I was told that this particular runner “cheated” by running through the woods en route to finishing well ahead of the other runners. After hearing this news, I looked over at the student and thought to myself that it could not be true. I thought, “This individual is not the type of person who would attempt something like that.”

I walked over to him again, all the while hearing others whispering the word “cheater.” I asked him what happened and why he was choosing not to talk. He seemed to be getting more and more upset and wanted nothing but to get on the bus and go home. However, after a few moments of sitting next to him and chatting with some others, he began to tell his story.

What had happened was that as runners were crossing the finish line, this particular student-athlete ran through in a Top 10 place although he was obviously not a gifted runner with superior athletic ability—it seemed apparent to the organizers that he could not have placed so high, as he was hunched over trying to catch his breath while the others seemed capable of running the course again. The organizers were quick to make the assumption that he had cheated by running through the woods, as more athletic runners were well behind him. Therefore, they told him to go sit on the bench nearby as they shared what had happened with others and that’s when they called me.

It turned out that he did not cheat. He did not run through the woods. At the time he was accused of cheating, he was actually finishing from the previous

race. He was so behind, he was finishing with the next race’s runners! However, he did not have the chance to tell his side of the story as the organizers seemed to have their minds made up and were quick to share the news. He became embarrassed quickly and did not want more attention directed toward him, so he decided to go sit down.

Participating in his first cross-country run and being accused of running through the woods on the same day provided a unique teachable moment. As his teacher and coach, I explained to him (1) how the organizers came to their conclusions (without placing blame), (2) how and why fellow student-athletes passing by jumped so quickly to thoughtless accusations, and (3) how proud I was of him for finishing his first cross-country run that he had prepared so hard for. In fact, it was his first school athletic experience. As a result of our discussion, he didn’t give up, and our whole team supported him in running four more cross-country races that year, and our team grew stronger! I believe there are those who would have never recuperated from a situation like he experienced. That day, a unique teachable moment presented itself and a new student-athlete discovered what “team support” means.

Whether we are teaching Kindergarten, Grade 5, Junior High School, Art Clubs, Jazz Bands, Volleyball Teams, Science Clubs, etc., we are all on the same journey of educating tomorrow’s leaders while playing an integral part in helping them find their niche in life. And, although the primary responsibility of teaching is centred in the classroom, plenty of learning occurs outside regular classroom hours. Therefore, let’s continue to capture those teachable moments that present themselves during extra-curricular activities whether they be intramurals, band trips or science fairs.

I hope that you take some time to reflect on the teachable moments your students learned from during the extra-curricular activities that you have led throughout your teaching career. Likewise, throughout the next few months, capture the teachable moments that present themselves and ensure your students gain from them as you EDUCATE, ENCOURAGE and INSPIRE! And after doing so, remember to share those experiences with other educators.

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—Rachel Gibbs, student

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