**For high school teams, digital technology can lead to communication barrier**

Jerry Ulmer, The Oregonian,

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Hillsboro boys basketball coach Ryan Svenson, talking with his team in a timeout during a recent game against Century, said that players communicated more easily during his playing days. - (Doug Beghtel/The Oregonian)

As Hillsboro's boys basketball team boards the bus for a road game, the Spartans make sure they have everything they need. Uniforms, check. Bag of basketballs, check. Water bottles, check.

But there is one thing they won't be using on the trip: their cell phones.

As an assistant coach walks down the aisle of the bus, players drop their cell phones in his backpack. Phones are prohibited on road trips this season, a new policy of coach Ryan Svenson.

"At first we were all kind of opposed to it," Hillsboro senior Jack Merrill said. "Coach wanted it to be a team-bonding time, so we aren't just connected to the outside world when we're getting ready for games. As the season has gone on, it hasn't been that bad. It's pretty fun for bus rides. I think it has helped."

In a world where texting and 140-character Twitter messages have taken the place of face-to-face conversations -- or even phone conversations -- for many teenagers, some high school coaches are growing increasingly wary of the impact that digital media has on their athletes and teams.

The ability to communicate face to face, rather than through short messages punched out on cell phones, is integral in the team dynamic, and coaches are concerned that such skills are being stunted by technology.

"No question. I think it's a huge deal," said Svenson, 38. "Sports is still a little bit different, a little bit old school. You have to be able to communicate in those older ways. If you don't have that practice, it does pose some challenges.

"When I was in school, I sure seem to remember, on the field, on the court, guys communicated more frequently, more easily, than they do now. To me, that's the biggest challenge as a basketball coach is to get guys to communicate on the floor."

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Nearly 90 percent of older teens (ages 14-17) have a cell phone and 31 percent use a smartphone, according to a 2012 study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Text messaging has become the dominant mode of communication among teens. According to the Pew survey, 63 percent say they use text messaging to communicate every day, compared to 39 percent who use voice calls, 35 percent who socialize in person outside of school and 29 percent who exchange messages on social network sites.

Lori Kelman -- founder of Enhancing Teen Communication, a nationwide program that aims to move teens away from texting and improve their face-to-face oral and written skills -- says that teens often hide behind digital media.

"The ability to communicate effectively face-to-face for many young people is falling by the wayside," Kelman said. "They are simply choosing not to communicate face-to-face. As a result, many teens aren't learning verbal diplomacy or how to resolve conflict by talking things out."

She says the use of digital media could keep some teens from developing the critical interpersonal skills that are fostered in team sports activities, or worse, it could cause some to shy away from such social activities altogether.

"It's through those face-to-face experiences that teens build self-confidence, learn how to resolve a conflict and learn to cope with success or defeat," she said. "It's scary to think that some teens could actually start to look at digital media as an extracurricular activity akin to a team sport simply because it presents the illusion of interacting with others in a personal way."

South Medford girls basketball coach Tom Cole -- executive director of Kids Unlimited, a youth development agency -- said the team dynamic is at risk from eroding communication skills.

"As a coach, you stress to your team the value of communication," Cole said. "But because their larger part of social communication has been limited to that of a phone or some device, those kinds of lessons don't resonate the same way. They don't get reinforced. There's no question that texting has compromised that.

"As we try to cultivate leadership, and we remove the element of that verbal communication, it makes it very difficult and maybe even awkward because they don't practice those skills enough."

Cole said he came to that realization during a team meeting four years ago when he noticed that players sitting in the same room were exchanging information on their phones but weren't talking with one another. Suddenly, he said, it became clearer as to why players struggled to communicate on the court.

"They couldn't exert that kind of energy, but they could sit across from one another and have conversations with their thumbs," Cole said. "They don't have honest face-to-face dialogue anymore as much as they did 10 years ago, or even five years ago. They're much more dialed in to these short updates, as opposed to actually sharing their feelings and having to be accountable to responses."

Former Aloha football coach Chris Casey has been an outspoken critic of the impact of digital media on face-to-face communication among athletes and coaches. He has been known to make his players speak in complete sentences, unlike much of digital communication, and refuses to talk with anyone wearing earphones.

"They take them out right and left when they see me coming," said Casey, who is starting the new football program at George Fox University.

Casey said that technology isn't inherently bad, "but if anybody can tell me that we're doing better with the things that sports teaches, life lesson things, because of technology, they're nuts. People are always in their own world and it unintentionally takes away from the team concept."

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Casey said he doesn't use text messages, Twitter or Facebook. But many coaches have embraced digital media as a way of getting messages to players, such as changes in practice times or scheduling meetings on short notice.

Some coaches use it to provide inspiration. Svenson texts a "thought of the day" each morning to his players. Oregon City girls basketball coach Kurt Guelsdorf often passes along motivational sayings on his Twitter account.

But coaches can also run the risk of having messages misunderstood if they rely too heavily on digital media.

"I can send a text that says, 'Bring a bag of balls to the gym,'" Cole said, "and it can be construed that I'm upset that they haven't brought the bag of balls to the gym, when that's not true."

Guelsdorf also is conscious of that potential pitfall.

"Just like we want the kids to do any major communication face to face, we want our coaches to follow the same rules," Guelsdorf said. "We try to use it for information. It's a great way to be able to reach 10 people at one time."

Coaches pick their spots in when to prohibit their players from using cell phones. Casey banned phones from early morning until late at night during Aloha's summer team camps at Gold Beach. Cole said he met a coach during an East Coast tournament who collected players' phones every night.

"I think the reason I haven't done that is I think there are some real unclear lines about what is the responsibility of a coach versus a parent," Cole said. "When they're traveling, that's a medium to have entertainment, as well. I have not picked that battle."

For Hillsboro's boys basketball team, Svenson believed the time was right to draw a line. And he is pleased with the results so far.

"We haven't heard one complaint, one moan, one groan," Svenson said. "I think it's helped that camaraderie and getting ready for the game. If nothing else, to have that 30, 40 minutes to spend talking to each other and enjoying each other's company."

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