

Targeted Symbolic Rewards

What coaches reinforce has a better likelihood of getting done because it sets expectations for players. However, external rewards can undercut internal motivation, especially when players know the reward before the act (this is called “contingent reward” and should be avoided).

Targeted symbolic rewards are a tool to reinforce desired actions you want from players without undercutting internal motivation. A symbolic reward is not something of value in and of itself, but something that represents a sentiment (i.e. a game ball, lollipop, picking the music to play at next practice, etc.). After games or practices, recognize players using a targeted symbolic reward for valuable, unsung activities. Some examples of actions to hand out targeted symbolic rewards for:

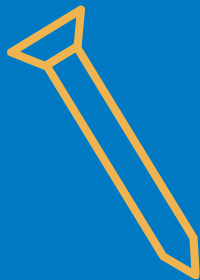
- Marking opponents on defense
- Hustling after loose balls
- Supporting a teammate
- Bringing positive energy
- Sharing about themselves
- Overcoming a mistake and hanging in there
- Being graceful in defeat
- Using self-regulation to calm emotions in a heated moment



Targeted symbolic rewards work best when coaches thoughtfully target actions and behaviors they want to see more from players. By rewarding actions that are a result of effort rather than talent, coaches will see more effort and avoid making less talented players feel like they haven’t accomplished anything. Coaches should also ensure that they find reasons to give out an award to each player - look for what they are doing right and reward it. Ultimately, targeted symbolic rewards can help coaches build a positive sports culture where all players develop life skills while also growing as competitors.

Here are a couple of real life examples of coaches who have used targeted symbolic rewards:

John Buxton, former Headmaster at Culver Academies (IN), used lollipops as targeted symbolic rewards. After games he'd identify a handful of players who did something he wanted to see more of and would give them a lollipop. He'd highlight how their actions contributed to the teams success, i.e. "Sam, I appreciated you backing up third base on the triple in the 5th inning. You had to be alert and run a long way and that's exactly the kind of thinking and hustle we need to be the best we can as a team."



Greg Siino, a coach in Roseville, CA, used "The Golden Spike Award". He'd give out a railroad spike after each game and have his players visualize a train ride from California to New York. He'd highlight how the track guides the train and how the spikes typically go unnoticed - but without them, the track would fall apart. He'd give this award out to someone who, without calling attention to themselves, did something to build up the team or build up a teammate.



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