

In our school athletes run the show.

Edgar Gutierrez
Winner, 2008 PCA Triple-Impact
Competitor Scholarship

3.4 Using Your Power to Improve Your School Community

With 12 All-Star appearances, 12 Gold Glove Awards, four National League batting titles, and 3,000 hits, Roberto Clemente was one of the greatest baseball players ever. But what people remember most about Clemente is his work off the field.

On New Year's Eve, 1972, Clemente boarded a plane loaded with food, clothing, and medical supplies bound for Nicaragua, which had experienced a devastating earthquake. The loaded-down plane Clemente boarded didn't inspire confidence, but he told his wife, "When your time comes, it comes... And babies are dying. They need these supplies."

Shortly after take-off, the plane crashed in the ocean, killing all five on board. Because of Clemente's courage and sacrifice, high schools, stadiums, bridges, hospitals, and Major League Baseball's humanitarian award bear his name. What does Clemente's story have to do with you?

■ Athletes Have Power

Many high school athletes have status because of what they do on the field. Unfortunately, in many schools a "jock culture" exists in which athletes use their status and influence

solely for their own benefit. Whether you realize it or not, you have an incredible opportunity to wield your power on campus in productive ways to make your life and the lives of others around you better.

■ Mentor Younger Athletes

If you reach out to less skilled or younger teammates, or to JV athletes if you are on varsity, you will have a huge impact on how they feel about themselves and on their confidence on the playing field. They may also remember and appreciate your kindness for a lifetime. This might entail simply saying hello to them, showing interest in them on campus or before practice, or "taking them under your wing" to mentor them throughout the season.

■ Include the Excluded

High school is a difficult time for many students who feel alienated from the school community. Students, including athletes, often break into cliques that leave many teens feeling isolated and left out. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Joe Ehrmann, a former NFL Pro Bowl lineman who is now a high school football coach in Baltimore, was the subject of a book by Jeffrey Marx called *Season of Life*. Ehrmann's team has a rule: Nobody eats alone.

If a member of the Gilman Greyhounds football team, often one of the top teams in the country, sees a student eating by himself in the cafeteria, he is required to go and sit with the student or invite him to join the player at his table. Athletes at Gilman make the school better by including those who might otherwise be excluded.

Think about it: when a friend is kind to you, it's nice. When a high-status person you don't know well is kind to you, it can change your entire feeling about school.

■ Help Create an Anti-Bullying Culture

Half of all students report being bullied at some point by the time they leave high school. Ninety percent of gay teens say they were bullied in the previous year. Many say bullying – exerting power through violence, threat of violence,

name-calling, insults, gossip, putdowns, trying to damage a person's relationships, or cyberbullying – is the biggest problem in their lives.

The negative impact of bullying – for the bullied, for bullies, and for bystanders – can be long lasting and sometimes tragic. Here are some ideas to help create a bully-free school culture.

- **Set an Example.** Sometimes athletes bully teammates or other kids. So look at your own behavior, and if you are bullying someone, stop. If you have friends who bully, let them know you think bullying is an act of weakness, and that true strength is demonstrated by treating every student in the school with respect.

- **Respond.** If you see someone bullying another student, here are some things you can do that won't escalate the problem.

- Don't use or threaten the use of force. This often makes things worse. Trust me on this.
- Assess the situation to see if you can say something without putting yourself or others in danger. You might simply ask a question such as "What's going on?" A question can be disarming and more effective than aggressively confronting a bully.
- Talk with a trusted school official about the best way to solve this situation.
- Offer your support to the bullied student and let him know you don't approve of the way he is being treated. This literally can be life saving, as bullied individuals often feel very alone and despairing.

- **Join School-Wide Anti-Bullying Efforts.** Many schools have anti-bullying initiatives, and some state laws require them. If your school has one, get involved with it. If not, talk with school administrators to see if one can be started. Having athletes involved in leadership positions can help such an effort succeed.

Bullying is not even good for the bully. Bullying does not help people develop strong relationships or succeed in life. Having a strong anti-bullying culture in your school can help bullies correct their behavior before it ruins their lives.

■ Support Other School Activities

Many school activities do not draw the kind of crowds sporting events draw. Athletes showing up at a play or a concert can mean a lot to the involved students. Having the varsity support the JV team, or the boys' team support the girls' team in the same sport (and vice versa) is also a great program builder.

■ Get Involved in Community Service

A life lived only for oneself is a lonely life. People who help others tend to be happier and more successful than people who don't. High school is a great place to begin a life of serving others, and it can help bring the school community together.

If there is already a school-wide community service initiative, get involved with it. If there isn't such an initiative, consider starting one, and involve non-athletes to help break down divisions within the school.

Fortunately, examples abound of high school community service projects:

- Organize canned food drives for homeless shelters
- Collect stuffed animals for a children's hospital
- Volunteer with Special Olympics or Ronald McDonald House
- Hold sports clinics for younger athletes
- Coach or officiate games of younger athletes
- Visit the elderly in retirement communities

■ Student-Athlete Council

Get involved with your school's student-athlete council to give feedback to the administration and initiate and plan activities. If your school doesn't have one, talk with the athletic director to see about starting one.

■ Athletes and Their Legacies

One of Roberto Clemente's friends remembered him this way. "I think the bottom line for him was trying to show other[s] ... if you dedicate yourself to a cause, you can be a winner."

When you are done with your sport, how will others – teammates, opponents, the excluded classmate, the grade-schooler who showed up to your game, your parents – remember you? Use Exercise 9 on the following page to identify how you will make a difference in your school community.

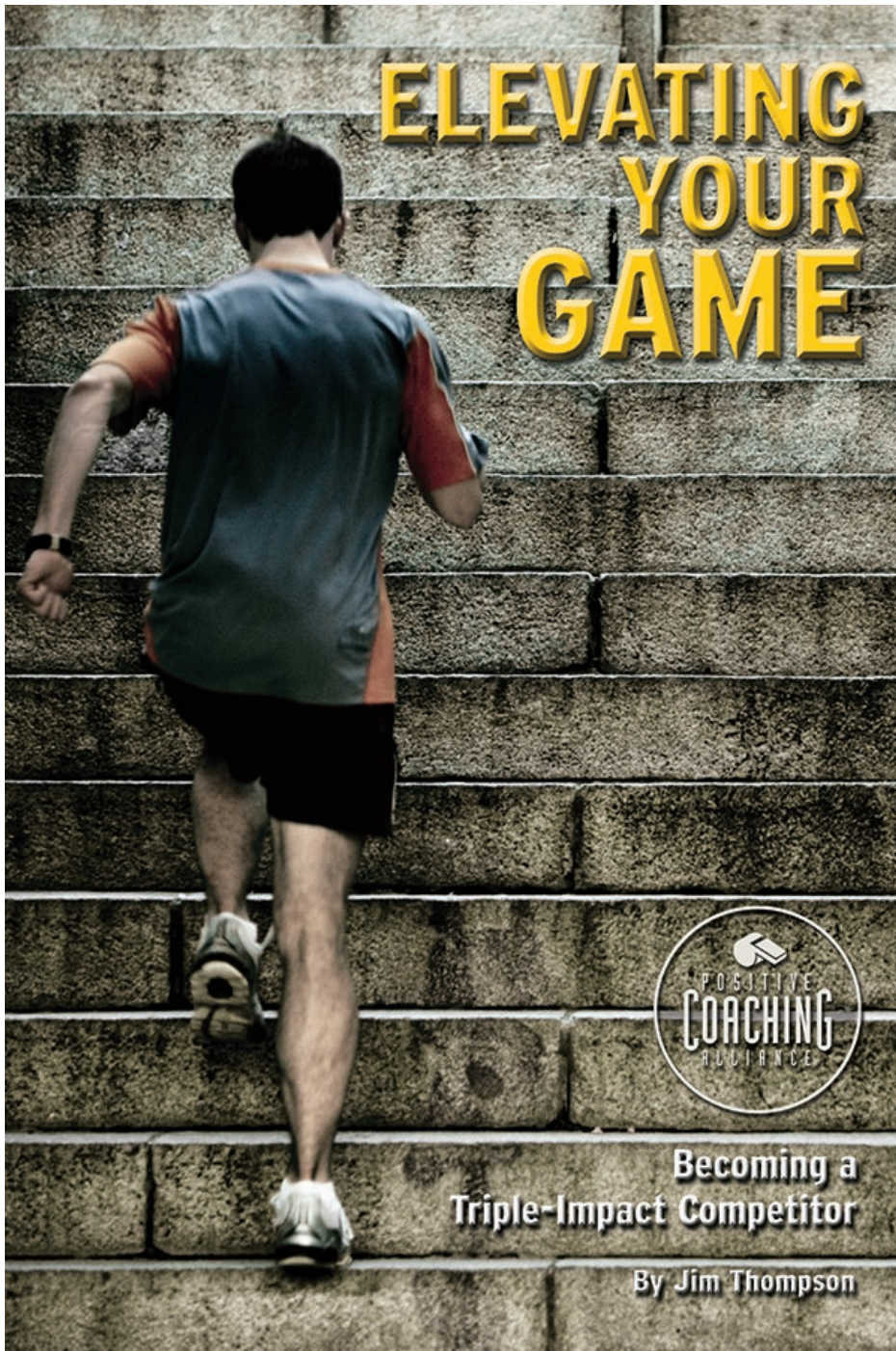
Exercise 9: Making Your School Community Better

Triple-Impact Competitors recognize the power and influence they have as athletes and seek ways to improve their school community. There are a number of ways, large and small, that you can wield your status and influence to make your school a better place. These include:

- Mentoring, coaching, or running clinics for younger athletes.
- Including classmates who otherwise feel excluded. Like Joe Ehrmann says, "No one eats alone."
- Getting involved with anti-bullying activities.
- Supporting other classmates' activities by showing up and cheering them on. This works best at events few attend, like junior varsity games.
- Participating in community service activities as a team or on your own.

1. List what you, your team, or you and a group of teammates can do this season to make a positive contribution to your school community.

2. Create an action plan. As you do, talk to your coach. Bring this topic up at a team meeting. Involve teammates. You'll make a bigger impact with more people involved. Then follow through and make it happen.



**BETTER ATHLETES
BETTER PEOPLE**

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