

Learning My True Desires

By Megan Sparks

After graduating from college with a degree in education and having and enjoying a job as a high school math teacher for a few years, people assumed (myself included) that I knew what I wanted to do as my “dream job.” My husband often asks me, “if I could pick any job to go back to work to what would I most want to do?” For many years I was ambivalent about the answer and had no real desire about jobs. I would answer vaguely that I would find a job as a teacher, either math or physical education, depending on the availability. I assumed once my kids were a little bit older I would get back into the classroom and out of the house. I knew I wanted to work rather than stay home forever in order to help support our family but thought I would be content in a lot of jobs. But going through the process, classes, coursework, and soul searching of the journey of getting my Master of Arts in Education (MAED), I have realized that not only am I eager to get back to work and to be presented with intellectual and emotional challenges but I also feel more in-tune with my “dream job.”

Although I still don't have a specific position or school or location, I am absolutely certain that if I have my pick of jobs I want to be in the realm of sports more than anything else. I want to be the recreation organizer, the swimming coach, or the physical education teacher. And I know the manner in which I will approach that job. I want to accept the challenge of teaching our youth, and maybe even adults, about the endless options of recreation and necessary knowledge of nutrition. I want to help build enthusiasm for health and fitness. I want to move away from maintaining the status quo and help innovate and apply new ideas and new research. And most importantly I want to impact people's lives by helping them gain knowledge, skills, and confidence to be successful throughout their life, both in health and other areas of life. A number of courses from the MAED program have made a lasting impact on helping me recognize these great desires within myself.

One of the classes that made me recognize my passion for cutting edge research on sports and fitness was Physical Bases of Coaching (KIN 856). During this class I was fascinated to read about the current trends in coaching and nutrition. Many of the concepts, such as dynamic stretching, I had heard of before and even used but I didn't fully understand the research and rationale behind it. As I was led through many research articles and explanations of stretching,

supplements, nutrition, and more, I developed an even larger thirst of knowledge in this field. With each new piece of knowledge that I received I quickly began putting it to work. Sometimes I would create lesson plans in my head of how I would organize a sports practice. Other times I would analyze how an “expert” is running their class or practice and decide how I disagree or agree with the methods being used. And other times I would search for more articles to help me understand new concepts that help me develop a deeper understanding of the field of sports.

This class also helped reinforce the idea and skills of digging through information. In any topic there will be at least two view points as to what is the correct answer or approach. The same is true in the field of sports and nutrition. Often times, four articles on the same topic all recommend different approaches as the best. However, Scott Riewald, the instructor, reinforced within us not that he had the only right answer but instead methods for how to go about deciding and developing your individual opinion. In many of the assignments he clearly asked us to sift through research and decide what we agreed with. This helped us build the skills to ask questions, compare ideas, and develop solid rationale to back up our beliefs. For example, as I worked on a supplement brochure to present to high school athletes I had to sift through pros and cons for supplements and consider the age I was gearing it towards as well as my personal coaching philosophy. As I decided how I wanted to present supplements to my athletes I had to have not only rationale as to what supplements would be appropriate but also why I believed many supplements aren't appropriate at the high school level. This approach to supplements will probably differ from many other coaches. However, the important part is not forcing everyone to agree with you but being able to address all sides of the argument with rationale data rather than saying “just because.”

At the same time I was also taking Psychology of Classroom Discipline (CEP 883). As a coach, so many of the ideas of controlling a classroom taught in this class should and can be tied into running a team. This class focused not only on how to manage difficult students but more importantly, what a teacher can do to set a classroom up for success. Too often behavior problems in classrooms are looked at as a result of a student's inability or lack of desire to behave. I really like the idea of first focusing on all the necessities a teacher can do to make a well-managed classroom rather than blaming students. Topics such as being organized, clear, and concise were suggestions as to how to prepare for a well-run classroom. These three

concepts can be easily transferred to the need for a coach to be organized, clear, and concise while preparing for a practice or game. Another suggestion for managing classrooms was to make sure you, as a teacher, are enthusiastic, interactive, and providing a variety of learning settings. Again, focusing on what a teacher can do rather than what a student didn't do.

As a parent I can tell my kids are more engaged in a sports practice or any adult when the adult cares about what they are doing, provides interaction more than just talking, and changes activities at a pace that fits their attention span. I know my kids have the ability to behave and try new things as long as they are presented in an appropriate manner. The idea of preparing myself as a coach or teacher in order for my students to have success really hit home with me. I now want to be able to go out there and give it my all for the kids I am teaching. This includes being prepared with age appropriate skills and activities, having enthusiasm and interest in the sports as well as the kids, and developing clear routines and expectations.

Many similar ideas to the psychology of how children learn was continued in another course that grabbed my attention, the Psychosocial Bases of Coaching (KIN 855). This class continued to focus on how to help kids succeed in school, sports, and life by discussing a lot about internal versus external motivation as well as appropriate expectation for different age levels. Although this class's focus was on motivation in sports, I couldn't help but to see the tie in to the need for internal motivation in all areas of life. One of the reasons that working with youth in the recreation field is so appealing to me is because of the ability to tie in so many life skills into a non-traditional classroom setting. And this was one more example. If I can help teach athletes to be internally motivated on the playing field, learn good problems solving skills, and build self-confidence, these athletes will go into adulthood as with a stronger work ethic and ability to cope with real life.

This class also helped me think about how important it is to put our natural need for competition in check, especially in the field of sports. Too often coaches, teachers, and parents feel get caught up in sports being competitive and forget about all the other benefits. This class helped me develop a large list of reasons as to why too much competition and too much pushing can be harmful at young ages. This motivated me to not only want to develop more recreational focused sports programs in order to break our current trend of competition at early ages but also to mentally put together data and rationale as to the best approaches to youth sports.

The one class that has helped me put all these ideas and information together and try to finesse my ideas is Creativity in Teaching and Learning (CEP 818). This class took us through seven steps to use in order to take a basic idea and turn it into something creative by combining one idea and transferring it to other areas. The biggest creative step in which I really learned from was embodied thinking. I believe that I previously thought in one direction, I thought about what I would think or want. By reading about and discussing embodied thinking in this class I learned to look from a variety of directions not only from what I think but what others might think. This applies in so many instances. As a coach or teacher it is important to think about how students might view instruction or activities as well as environmental factors such as groupings or weather. I use embodied thinking to appeal to more senses to help make my students and athletes more successful. This can also be used in struggling athletes, instead of feeling like “I explained this three times what is there not to get,” I can see a benefit in considering that if there is a struggle the athlete might be viewing the instructions differently than I believe I am presenting them. By using embodied thinking to consider what they are feeling or thinking I can help solve a problem faster and avoid over reacting or generalizing.

I have learned through this journey that I like feeling prepared. I like having plans in order, back up plans made, materials out, but even more importantly research, statistics, and articles to help back up any questioning that might occur. I want to be able to have full faith and confidence in my strong values for what I feel the direction of sports should be and the methods I have chosen to use. The Masters of Arts in Education degree from Michigan State University, specifically the four courses I discussed above, has really guided me to explore, develop, research, and refine these ideas and confidence.

Overall the content and process of the courses that I have taken have made me a more confident scholar. I feel I will greatly benefit from this in the future. I have also realized that more than my ability to do a good job at everything I do, I want to do it the right way and in a creative way. I feel I have learned the skill to research and discern the most appropriate content to use and have gained the skills to take the content and turn it into a new approach. I want to take the skills I have learned and use creative thinking to think out of the box when ideas are presented. This might come in the form of designing unique team building approaches or helping problem solving a budget issues. Most importantly, I am no longer content in saying “I

am not sure,” or “this is what has always been done.” Instead, I want to work within an ever evolving chain of improvement to develop youth recreation in schools or parks that help foster life skills and meet youth’s developmental needs using current research and unique approaches.