

Player Pep Talks

Excerpted from *Shooting in the Dark: Tales of Coaching and Leadership* by Jim Thompson



I read once about a veteran player for the New York Knicks who took notes every time Head Coach Pat Riley gave a pre-game pep talk. He was interested in becoming a head coach and wanted to learn from a master. He was amazed to discover that Riley had a different speech for every game!

I decided that I would try to emulate Pat Riley in that one respect at least. I had the advantage of having only 24 games for which to prepare motivational talks compared to his 82 (not including the NBA playoffs).

Late in the 1994-95 season, with three games left, I called Jenny, Colleen and Shauna aside after practice. These three juniors would be co-captains of the team the next season and I wanted them to begin thinking about how they would provide leadership to their teammates next year. I explained to them that we had three conference games left and we needed to win two of the three in order to qualify for the CCS (Central Coast Section) playoffs, something the Fremont Girls had done only once before.

I told the girls that I tried to think of something to motivate the team before each game and I would do that for these three games as well, but that this time I'd like their help. They were going to be captains next year and these games meant the difference between going to CCS or not. I asked each of them to take one of the games and prepare a little talk that would help the team do its best. Colleen immediately said "I'll take Homestead!" which was our next game, and by far the strongest team we played all year.

In the locker room before the Homestead game I gave my little pep talk and then, as I did before every game, I asked if anyone else had anything they wanted to say. Usually this had been met by silence. This time Colleen indicated that she wanted to say something. Since she was sitting with the players facing me, I was able to watch the reaction of her teammates. When she started talking, the eyes of several of the players got very big. This was something new and she had their total attention.

To my amazement she started talking about how Buster Douglas had been given no chance against Mike Tyson in their heavyweight championship boxing match. But Douglas believed that if he could just keep going back at Tyson and never give up, he could beat him. And he did. When Colleen ended by saying that we needed to go out against Homestead, a team that had soundly trounced us in our first game against them, and just keep going at them like Buster Douglas did, there was total silence in the locker room. It was awesome.

It was also humbling for me. As much pride as I took in my motivational speeches, Colleen's was much better than mine. We ended up losing to Homestead by seven points, significantly better than we had done before (or than almost anyone else had done against them that year, either). And with Shauna and Jenny responsible for the pre-game inspiration, we won our last two games and qualified for the CCS playoffs.