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Viking Hero Reader Program: Allowing Student Athletes to Make a Worthy Contribution to Their Community

Don Wilson

Society today always seems to find a way to highlight the most negative aspects of our lives. We cannot escape the gloom and doom presented to us in every newspaper or television news program. It is a time when a show like *Jerry Springer*, showing the worst side of society, is one of the most popular on television. Even sports programs have begun to show the worst side of athletics. Recently, during one of these negative reports on ESPN, a group of athletes in Michigan was being focused on for some illegal activities. However, to the surprise of many, the commentators briefly shifted their focus to another group of athletes in a small town in Michigan. Marysville, a small community centered around a high school and its sports programs, was sitting in the national spotlight because of a group of remarkable athletes. Surprisingly, these athletes were being recognized for participating in a reading program on a program that exclusively covers sports, not for having outstanding athletic abilities. Moreover, a few months ago, the *Detroit Free Press* ran an article by Mick McCabe covering this same small community and its academic athletes. Sadly, "Academic athlete" seems like an oxymoron in society today with all of the coverage of highly-paid athletes with criminal records; however, this small

town's student athletes shifted this negative conception to a positive one, even if only for a brief moment.

I am lucky enough to have had the opportunity to become a football coach in this quiet community. While attending classes at Central Michigan University, I would drive two and a half hours to get home for our Friday night games. Four years ago, I had a schedule which allowed me to make it to Thursday night practices and have all day Friday to break down some game films. One Friday morning I showed up to watch films. I stopped in to see Jim Venia, the athletic director and head football coach at Marysville. While in his office, he told me about a reading program involving athletes and elementary students that he had read about in a coaching magazine. He asked me if I thought the reading program would be a good idea. Of course, I did. I realized how much this program would do for the younger kids in the community. Jim had also contacted Andrea Quain, a second-grade teacher at one of the district's three elementary schools, with the idea. When I asked Jim why he had contacted Andrea, he told me, "I contacted her for two reasons really: one, she played softball for me in high school; and two, I knew she was a young teacher who wouldn't be afraid of trying

something new." By the time I returned home the following week, the Viking Hero Readers program had already been initiated. Four years later, the program is a huge success and has spread to multiple grade levels in all three of the elementary schools. It has also spread to almost every other sports program in the high school, including baseball, volleyball, and both boys' and girls' basketball teams, to name a few.

The Viking Hero Readers program is really quite simple. Student athletes from the local high school travel to the local elementary schools where they read to and are read to by the elementary students. Jim Venia said, "We started the program for three reasons: first, to increase reading involvement at both levels; second, because there seems to be a lack of heroes today; and third, because the program gives every athlete, starter or not, an equal chance to be a hero in the eyes of the younger students."

Every student athlete of the 48-member team voluntarily participated in the reading program this past year, with different players getting a chance to go every week.

The program has become a Friday morning frenzy in Marysville when the three local elementary schools are full of anxious and excited young students. Meanwhile, the high school is preparing to release a group of varsity football players and cheerleaders during a school-wide study period to car pool with each other for the short trip to the elementary schools. Up to about twenty student athletes are allowed to go each week depending on how many of the elementary teachers have signed up to participate in the program for that specific week. Usually about six to eight students travel to each of the three elementary schools. The student athletes meet outside Jim Venia's office to receive their assigned reading and school placements. The student athletes arrive to see the children lining the windows in anticipation of their arrival. The athletes check in at the office before going to their assigned classrooms. Commonly, two athletes go

to each room; however, if the demand is high, only one student will go to each room. During one of these reading visits a few years ago, I was lucky enough to tag along and watch the players read to the children. While I was there, Mrs. Maxwell, a first-grade teacher at Gardens Elementary, told me how much she loves watching the children get so excited.

In the *Free Press* article, Andrea Quain said, "These kids put them on a pedestal," while Angie Luciani, also an elementary teacher in the district, added, "They get very excited to see them" (McCabe 10D).

The athletes begin by introducing themselves and then briefly showing off their shiny silver and navy blue Viking helmets before taking a few questions from the children. Questions range from inquiries about what position the athlete plays or if they get nervous in front of the big crowds to questions about how much a player weighs. Cheerleaders usually get asked if they get nervous in front of the crowd, too. Frequently, they are talked into performing one of their cheers for the class. A few minutes later, the athlete begins reading a book that was selected by the teacher or the class the previous day. The athletes receive the books at the high school in time to look them over and briefly practice before leaving for the elementary schools. The student athletes read the books and then, time permitting, allow the children to read back to them. When the 45 minutes of allotted time has almost expired, the children have the student athletes sign their autograph books and thank them for coming to read.

Greg Morenko, a Marysville graduate and former reader, said, "You cannot imagine how it feels to have all of those little eyes focused on you. It is awesome to feel so important. It's like I'm a superhero or something." Every student athlete of the 48-member team voluntarily participated in the reading program this past year, with different players getting a chance to go every week. Approximately two hundred high school student athletes have participated in this program over the past four years.

This program benefits both of the active participants. The high school student athletes get an understanding of how important they are to other people. Some of these teenagers say that they have never felt as important as they do when they are with the elementary students. This program offers an added boost in self-esteem in a time when self-esteem issues are at the heart of some of the problems teens face. The student athletes also get a clear understanding of the positive impact they are having as role models for the next generation when they see how excited the children are to read back to them. For some of these high school students, this program is getting them to stand in front of a group of people and do something they normally would not do for any reason, read. At the same time, the elementary students are learning how important reading and academics in general really are. Want proof? Elementary students' standardized test scores have steadily increased since the inception of this program four years ago. The district would not release test scores to me; however, they did show me that one of the elementary schools had received the Golden Apple award for significantly increasing MEAP scores this year. That award brought a \$50,000 reward from the state.

Elementary students' standardized test scores have steadily increased since the inception of this program four years ago.

Shortly after the ESPN footage was aired, *Detroit Free Press* columnist Mick McCabe wrote the article covering this reading program. In it, he commented on how refreshing it is to see our younger generations making such a valuable contribution to the community. Proudly, I am a member of the coaching staff that teaches our community's young athletes more than how to play sports. Teaching students how to be a role model and a successful person after high school is a large part of what we do every day. This reading program has been a large part of that effort. As a coach, I notice a large amount of negativity towards these very young student athletes. They are unfairly scru-

tinized in every detail of their life. As a future teacher, it makes me ill to see the large amount of negative press that teens have recently received.

The ESPN and *Free Press* reports have finally given us something positive to show each other in the wake of all of the negative press. Finally, we see a group of teenagers being recognized for having a positive impact on their community.

There are more stories like this out there; society only needs to open its eyes and look for them. Given the chance, teenagers can become successful contributors to making this world a little better. Give them an opportunity to achieve greatness, and they will rarely let you down!

Works Cited

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About the Author

Don Wilson is a student teacher at Farwell High School. He will graduate from Central Michigan University in August 2001 with a teaching degree.