

Turning Boys Into Men: The Incentive-Based System in Urban Meyer's Plan to Win

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This paper examines the incentive-based system of Urban Meyer, head football coach at The Ohio State University. Personal discussions with this coach and members of his football staff took place following a review of his methods as described in biographical and media reports, and were compared with the approaches used by other successful coaches as documented in coaching research. Meyer has created clear guidelines and expectations for behaviors that players must consistently display to be recognized as successful team members and leaders. He also has developed a comprehensive set of processes to promote the development and adherence to those desired behaviors. This examination of Meyer's approach focuses on the connection between the three levels (Blue, Red and Gold) of his incentive-based system and the three phases of a rite of passage (separation, transformation, and reincorporation) associated with them. The system rewards more grownup behaviors with greater status and privileges befitting the increasingly mature individual. A case is made that coaches can employ such a rites of passage framework as part of a comprehensive philosophy about turning boys into men, thus encouraging successful outcomes both on and off the field.

Keywords: coaching, leadership, incentive systems, rites of passage

Society has provided children no rituals by which they become members of the tribe, of the community. All children need to be twice born, to learn to function rationally in the present world, leaving childhood behind.

Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, (1988, p.8)

A scant three months after Urban Meyer took over the reins as head coach of The Ohio State University's football program in early 2012, an article describing his incentive-based system made the local paper. Three color-coded stages—Blue, Red, and Gold—were used to describe a ladder of privileges climbed by players as they displayed more mature behavior both on the field and off. In the words of Coach Meyer at that time:

Blue stands for child, which means ill-equipped, defiant, disinterested. So if you're in blue, we don't think very highly of you, and we make that very clear. And every freshman who comes into the program is blue, for example... . Guys who are red get nicer gear. If they want to change numbers, if they want

to get a visor, if they want to move off campus, the answer for them then is maybe. You get up to gold, you do what you've got to do because gold means you're a grown man. We don't tell you when to study, things like that. Gold means you deserve to be treated like a man (May, 2012).

It would be hard to argue against anything that Urban Meyer does, at least from a win-loss standpoint. He coached two national football championship teams at the University of Florida during the 2006 and 2008 seasons, and then led the 2014 Ohio State University Buckeyes to the first-ever College Football Playoff National Championship. If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, then Urban Meyer has feasted royally over the course of his career.

A previous article on the altruistic leadership strategies of Jim Tressel (Miller & Carpenter, 2009), another Ohio State coach with a national championship tucked into his belt, had been written as a rejoinder to the "winning is everything" philosophy that often seems to permeate the motivations of coaches. Winning championships, it was argued, can coexist alongside more unselfish goals

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that include core values, interpersonal care and concern, and compassion for the well-being of young athletes.

The present article examines Urban Meyer's leadership style from a similar standpoint. That is, the activities this football coach has undertaken as part of his competitive doctrine surround a holistic approach to player development. Coach Meyer's methods largely hinge on an incentive-based system that is intended to turn boys into men. Bearing remarkable similarity to a modern day rite of passage, the three phase incentive-based system is argued to contain significant implications for successful player behavior both on and off the field. While his coaching philosophy has been amply described in various biographical and media reports, the personal discussions with this coach and the members of his football staff were instrumental in fleshing out the details of the incentive-based system and its transformational impact on his players.

In some very interesting ways, this sort of approach becomes an extension of books and articles that focus on the role of coach in positive youth development activities, whereby participation in sports can be seen as directly linked to preparation for successful adulthood. For instance, one study of very experienced and highly successful coaches at the high school level revealed that these coaches do not distinguish between their specific performance enhancement strategies and the teaching of more generalized life skills (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007). At the same time, however, the degree of association between coaching activities and positive youth development may very much be in the eye of the beholder. One study conducted by Camiré, Forneris, and Trudel (2012) for example reported significant differences between stakeholder perceptions of this relationship, with high school coaches reporting the strongest beliefs about their ability to influence positive youth development, followed by youth athletes, and school administrators (principals, assistant principals, and athletic directors) perceiving the least amount of connection between coaching efforts and positive youth development.

Effective Coaching Practices

The literature characterizes effective coaching practices as a "complex mix of art and science" (Gilbert, Nater, Siwik, & Gallimore, 2010). While there is widespread support for some variation of the "4 C's" of coaching—competence, confidence, connection, and character/caring—reliable and valid measures of these variables remain lacking (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). As a result, although case studies of extraordinarily successful coaches exist, what exactly constitutes an effective coach remains somewhat open to debate.

The available literature suggests that effective coaching certainly is a multidimensional construct. For example, Pete Carroll's success at both the college (coach of one BCS National Football Championship team at the University of Southern California) and professional

levels (coach of one Super Bowl Championship with the Seattle Seahawks) of American football seemed to be predicated on factors related to self-knowledge, self-confidence, and optimism (Voight & Carroll 2006), backed up by the ability "to be true to oneself as a coach" (Gilbert, 2006). By comparison, Wang and Straub (2012) developed a set of eight categories or themes regarding the coaching behaviors of Anson Dorrance (coach of 21 NCAA men's soccer championships at the University of North Carolina), many of which focused on attention to competitive behaviors, the elite athlete, and creating and maintaining a positive team environment.

The characteristics of effective coaching within the realm of high performance women's sports is just as complex. Take for example the description of Pat Summit (coach of eight NCAA women's basketball championships at the University of Tennessee), whose coaching style was reported to have involved high degrees of instructional behavior (supplying technical and tactical information) and praise offered to her players within a high intensity environment (Becker & Wisberg, 2008). This might be compared and contrasted with the description of Russ Rose (coach of six NCAA women's volleyball championships), who focused heavily on team member accountability, attention to detail, and high quality practice performance (Yukelson & Rose, 2014).

A related set of literature examines coaching leadership. In addition to the altruistic leadership style mentioned above, the coaching literature includes servant leadership, transactional leadership, transformational leadership, the multidimensional model of leadership, and the cognitive-mediational model of leadership (Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2010; Vella & Perlman, 2014). Each of these leadership models delineate distinct yet related pathways for coaches to increase athletes' potential for peak performance.

The notion that a coach participates in the athlete's growth and development as a human being while simultaneously attempting to advance that athlete's accomplishments within his sport is common in this literature. According to Denison and colleagues (2015),

All coaching contexts, whether grassroots or high performance, can be said to be developmental. No matter an athlete's age or level of performance, a coach should be dedicated to developing bodies—athletes—to be able to do something more or better. For this reason, what occurs in training spaces—coaches' practices—and how those practices are supported by various technologies, is critical to examine (p. 72).

These authors asserted that the coach functions largely as a change agent, and often as not is driven by a set of relational ethics that respects the athlete as a whole person. Restated for present purposes, the ethical coach is at all times cognizant of the messages she or he is communicating about expectations for exemplary performance both on and off the field.

Meyer's Blue-Red-Gold Incentive-Based System

The Blue-Red-Gold (BRG) incentive-based system is a key component of Urban Meyer's Plan to Win, a competitiveness doctrine that was originally written during his first head coaching position at Bowling Green State University, and then subsequently modified through his stints at University of Utah and University of Florida (Martin, 2008). Consisting of one hundred plus pages, the Plan to Win is a fairly wide-ranging document based on a set of core values for players that includes behavioral commandments (honesty, respect for women, no drugs, no stealing, and no weapons) and a strong emphasis on classroom success.

The BRG system is a comprehensive player motivation system that contains a variety of inputs and outcomes. For example, the Ohio State Student Athlete Support Services Office uses an attitude and effort grading system to rank players in addition to providing grade point average information. At the same time, off-field behaviors also can and do affect player status within the BRG incentive system. According to Brian Voltolini, OSU's Director of Football Operations, the philosophy underpinning the system is "act like a man and be treated like a man" (personal communication, May 5, 2013). In short, this meritocracy rewards increasingly mature behaviors on and off the field.

Every player starts with a Blue designation. This level is defined by student athletes in need of critical academic attention. Within this status, there are eight hours of mandatory tutoring per week, and zero tolerance for unexcused absences from classes. Advancement to Red is associated mainly by a marked reduction in academic difficulties such as failing grades and poor absenteeism, and a corresponding increase in more mature behaviors related to rule adherence. Mandatory tutoring drops to six hours per week, and students in this status are allowed two unexcused absences from class before disciplinary action begins. Although this represents real progress, the perception is that players with the Red designation are still trying to figure out how to be a responsible adult within a college environment. Gold status is the pinnacle in the incentive-based program. Using coaching parlance here, this reflects the student athlete who is a "grown ass man" (personal communication, Urban Meyer, April 29, 2013). Tutor sessions are strictly on a volunteer basis, and Gold players are allowed three unexcused absences from class before disciplinary action begins.

Player adherence to academic demands and behavioral expectations are closely monitored across all status levels, with swift and meaningful consequences meted out for infractions. Penalties for more academic-oriented difficulties include Super Tuesdays, which involves study time starting at 6:00 a.m., and Night Shift, a series of 8:00–10:00 p.m. Friday night study time periods. The consequences for poor behavioral choices—thought to be a reflection of immaturity—include such punitive actions

as Dawn Patrol, which involves 6:00 a.m. gatherings that require players to perform such menial tasks as cleaning the locker room, weight room, player lounge, etc. under the supervision of the position coach, strength coach, or at times both of those members of the coaching staff.

Players are introduced to the BRG system at the first team meeting each January for the midyear arrivals and June for the regular recruiting class. Every August there is a specific team meeting in which the policies manual is distributed and the BRG system is discussed within the larger Plan to Win framework. A printed version of the manual also is given to players' parents/guardians at a mandatory parents meeting held on the morning of the Spring Game. Parents are seen as playing a critical role, especially in helping to "coach the effort."

Transitions in status (up or down) are handled by the entire coaching staff. The coaches meet as a group every week to discuss player progress and deliberate possible transitions. Position coaches are most likely to be the ones to nominate players for advancement through the BRG levels. When the coaches decide to promote a player, an announcement is made to the entire team in the form of a "graduation ceremony" that recognizes the newfound status of the player.

Other Supports for the BRG System

A number of additional program components have been put into place to support the BRG system. This includes the Champions Club, which consists of quarterly award ceremonies throughout the year. Chief accomplishments recognized during the Champions Club banquet include 100% promptness at all required workouts and 0% discipline and academic issues. In addition to verbal acknowledgment at the banquet, other rewards include steak dinners (versus the hot dogs given to players not receiving such recognition) and better athletic clothing and other gear. Players of any status can be highlighted in this manner, but more likely are at the Red or Gold level, and a consistent presence in the Champions Club can help players move up through the BRG system.

In addition, there is a Leadership Committee comprised of players who are hand selected by Urban Meyer and strength coach Mickey Marotti. While players on the Leadership Committee typically have attained Red or Gold status, athletes at the Blue level have been included previously. Hence, this group includes players at any academic rank (freshmen through seniors) who either are designated as current team leaders or are being groomed for that sort of role in the future due to perceived leadership potential. The primary function of this group is to serve as a court of peers, as the coaching staff takes player infractions to this committee for advice on possible actions. The motto here is "your teammates decide your fate."

Further, there is a "Big Brothers" program whereby upperclassmen are assigned to freshmen at the first team meeting in August. Black stripes that serve as a sign of

neophyte status are placed on the helmets of freshman players by the Big Brother, who subsequently is expected to serve as an informal mentor. Upon the recommendation of each freshman player's position coach, the black stripe is removed as a "battlefield promotion" by the Big Brother.

Rites of Passage and the BRG Incentive-Based System

As depicted in Figure 1, it is possible to consider the BRG incentive-based system as a rite of passage. The literature on rites of passage (also known as rituals of initiation) identifies three main phases through which children become adults: separation, transformation, and reincorporation. Initially conceptualized as a process used in premodern cultures to confer adulthood status on initiates, the term 'rites of passage' is used to describe how any society (or subgroup) creates a meaningful transition for members to assume the role of prosocial adult (van Gennep, 1960).

The rite of passage begins with a separation phase, one that marks the beginning movement out of the individual's childhood status. Next, the transformation phase involves a "betwixt and between" period of uncertainty characterized by vacillation back and forth from less mature to more mature behaviors. Finally, the reincorporation phase represents the individual's integration of all new attitudes, values and behaviors required of successful adulthood status.

The BRG incentive-based system mirrors the rites of passage conceptual framework by placing players in one of three categories or levels (Blue, Red, Gold) based on certain markers of maturity and performance. Blue is equated with the status of a young child and, as such, beginning movement out of this status parallels the "separation" component of the rite of passage. In turn, Red is equated with a middle stage, similar to the "betwixt and between" state of adolescence that is marked by a "transformative" stage of development. Finally, Gold status represents the adult stage of development and is associated with all of the privileges and responsibilities associated with this marker of full maturity.

Creating an Environment for Winning National Championships (and the Game of Life)

Although there are variations on the three-part structure of the rite of passage, there is overwhelming acceptance of their historical importance, especially in terms of its use to preserve and protect the sanctity of the group. As well, the present implications regarding the almost complete absence of separation, transformation, and reincorporation experiences in contemporary society are uniformly bemoaned (Driver, 1991). Here, it is thought that the lack of formal rites of passage for today's young people create situations where there are few if any clear expectations and little or no information provided to youth about how to behave in a prosocial manner.

As a result, violence, drug and alcohol use, gang involvement, and bullying and delinquency become the misguided substitute behaviors young people employ as attempts to create rites of passage for themselves. In response, programs and initiatives that focus on a framework that delivers separation, transformation, and reincorporation experiences have been heralded as ways to intervene in the lives of young people who need assistance to make a more successful transition into adulthood (Blumenkrantz & Gavazzi, 1993).

Player placement in each of the three BRG system categories specifies both the privileges and the responsibilities that are associated with the level of success players have had in meeting academic goals and behavioral standards. In brief, when the demand for more mature behavior is met, the player is given access to greater rewards and an accompanying increase in freedom from restrictions. And this is exactly why the BRG system is so successful in creating a team atmosphere that is conducive to winning national championships. The expectations are clear about what it means to grow up in the eyes of the coaching staff, and the behaviors that players must enact to achieve that status are well-defined.

In the context of promoting increasingly more mature and responsible behaviors, coaches become powerful male role models to their players (and for some, the first male authoritative figures they have ever known). For this

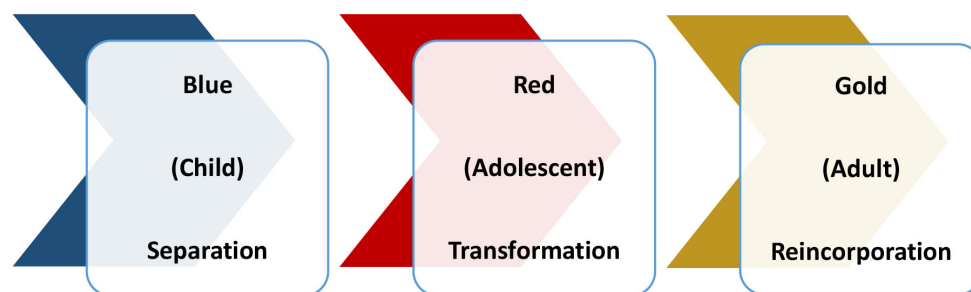


Figure 1 — Conceptualizing the BRG Incentive Program as a Rite of Passage

reason, the concept of family becomes a very powerful theme for the coach that focuses specifically on helping players to discover and embrace manhood. In the preface to Martin's (2008) book about Meyer, the coach himself is quoted as saying that his idea of the football family "reaches far beyond just the huddle to include parents, children, spouses, girlfriends, brothers, sisters, and grandparents of players, coaches, and administrators (p. xi)." Coach Meyer goes on to say that the players remain part of that family long after graduation, and if they "become the best husbands and fathers they can be, then we have won at the game of life (p. xii)."

Summary and Recommendations

With its heavy focus on positive reinforcement for desirable behavior and concurrent negative reinforcement for that which is deemed inappropriate, much of what constitutes the BRG system would seem to fall squarely inside of an operant conditioning framework (Chance, 2014). To this end, Urban Meyer's methods would seem to target all four types of behavior—social, learning, motor, and champion—that Huber (2013) discussed as being critical components of a successful operant conditioning approach to coaching athletes. At the same time, a higher reliance on extrinsic rewards can become part of more controlling motivational strategies, which when employed by coaches have been shown to interfere with the development of autonomy, competence and relatedness in athletes (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2009).

Much of my own work as a scholar and clinician involves a targeted focus on the ways that families influence the health and well-being of their child and adolescent members (cf. Gavazzi, 2010; 2011). Families are thought to function best when they are able to balance the need for closeness and intimacy (i.e., togetherness) with the ability for each member to experience an age appropriate sense of individuality and autonomy (i.e., separateness). Hence, my own research findings and experiences as a family therapist lead me to believe that the potential translation of the overall BRG system—as seemingly heavily weighted as it is on extrinsic methods that enforce the togetherness component of team membership—to positive outcomes beyond being successful at playing college sports would seem to be predicated on the degree to which autonomy is fostered through the buildup of intrinsically motivated behavior.

In an interview conducted in part to share a summary of this article's main points, Coach Meyer agreed wholeheartedly with the assumption that extrinsic motivation is a necessary but not sufficient component of turning boys into men.

This is an extremely important point. When you do something that a good husband or a good father is supposed to do, you don't have someone handing you a reward. That has to come from somewhere inside.

And we try to help players develop that ability by repeatedly modeling the behaviors of good fathers and husbands. For example, we regularly put on Family Night dinners so that players are exposed to the coaches, their spouses, and their children, and how they act around their loved ones. (personal communication, June 18, 2015)

Beyond modeling appropriate behaviors that can become internalized by his players, Coach Meyer went on to discuss the importance of a more spiritual component to this work as well. Here, much of the discussion centered on "setting the table" for players to understand the importance of living a life in service to things greater than themselves. Of course, other highly successful coaches have implicitly or explicitly referenced the more transcendent aspects of this kind of work with players. Witness especially individuals such as Phil Jackson, the coach of 11 National Basketball Association championship teams, whose coaching activities invariably are described in "Zen like" language (Jackson, 2014).

Hence, coaches who are looking to impact the lives of their players off the field and beyond their playing days will have to incorporate these sorts of additional activities if they are to achieve longer-lasting results aimed at turning boys into men. That said, the incentive-based methodology incorporated by Urban Meyer does provide a clear blueprint for coaches at all levels who wish to make a more immediate impact on player development both on and off the field. Even on a surface level, the use of a tiered approach to earning privileges if and when increasingly positive behavior is displayed by team members should allow a coaching staff to communicate directly and effectively about how success is defined and, by extension, what will be incentivized. All within a context that makes sense of rewards and consequences from the standpoint of learning life lessons.

Coaches who intuitively gravitate toward the use of ceremonies to mark player transitions to the next level will find even deeper personal connections to be made here. Various forms of "battlefield promotions" have been used to pump up players (and soldiers) for millennia. Simply put, it's a formula that works. Rituals that indicate a successful transition to a more advanced level carry great psychological meaning and generate intense emotional states for coaches, players, and families alike. These are the sorts of intangible experiences that student athletes will remember for the rest of their lives.

In the public's eye, there is at least one visible example of a rite of passage having been adopted by a sports team, albeit for ceremonial purposes. The All Blacks New Zealand rugby team—discussed as one of the most successful sports organizations in the world (Johnson, Martin, Palmer, Watson, & Ramsey, 2013)—performs the Haka dance of the Polynesian Maori tribe as part of their pregame activities. The Haka is used by the Maori to signify a given youth's readiness to become an adult, and involves a great deal of chanting and physical movements that are warlike in nature. The All Blacks

have made the Haka part of the traditions and values of their team culture, which includes a significant nod to the multicultural composition of its roster.

Interestingly, an emerging body of work has underscored the importance of rites of passage in the lives of African American youth (Alford, 2007; Gavazzi, Alford, & McKenry, 1996), who typically comprise a significant percentage of any given American football team's roster. Often as not such culturally specific programming contains an emphasis on skill acquisition and value clarification surrounding respect of self and others that contribute to the development and maintenance of prosocial behavior (Alford, 2003). In a similar vein, the creation of a team culture that focused on respect-based competencies would help to cultivate the minority youth's overall holistic well-being while fostering a sense of interconnectedness both to the team specifically and the institution of higher learning more generally. Clearly, more work is needed to understand the degree to which the use of rites-based initiatives may provide specific additional support to minority team members both on the field and off.

In sum, it is believed that coaches can employ a rites of passage framework to emphasize team success within a more comprehensive philosophy for turning boys into men. The quote at the beginning of this paper from American scholar Joseph Campbell centers attention on just how critical an activity this is for young males in contemporary society. In the absence of clear messages from society about how to behave as a responsible adult, sports can play an essential role in this socialization process. In this way of thinking, coaches become the male role models—the community elders, if you will—who help to shape and guide these young men during some of the most critical moments of their life's journey.

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