

# Tackling His Biggest Challenge

## Former NFL player dedicates his life to building characters of young athletes

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PROFILE: YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

—**Joe Ehrmann** had it all. He was captain of the NFL's Baltimore Colts, he had money, and he had women.

Ehrmann, a defensive lineman, was "the man." Or at least so he thought.

But it wasn't until the death of his 18-year-old brother from cancer that Ehrmann learned what being a "man" really meant.

At the conclusion of his brother's funeral service, Ehrmann stood next to the open grave as he watched everyone turn and walk away. He began to question his purpose in life.

"Do you just live, have some good times, some bad times, die and everyone walks away?" he thought to himself.

He realized none of his superficial accomplishments and macho posturing of being a pro athlete meant a thing. He had to have more. He needed to build relationships and to break the yoke of the myths of masculinity - that brute force equals power; that keeping sensitive feelings bottled inside is a badge of courage; that sexual conquest is what defines a man.

He shared his transformation from a self-absorbed pro athlete to rebirth as an inner-city minister, teacher, coaching mentor and motivator at Saturday's "Character Combine" at Folsom High School.

He was the chief attraction of a morning workshop dedicated to helping area coaches focus on developing well-rounded athletes who can put learning to love ahead of the needing to win.

The event, organized and sponsored by Capital Christian High School, was free to male and female high school and youth coaches and drew 242 attendees.

Ehrmann, a defensive coordinator at Gilman High School in Baltimore whom Parade magazine called the "Most Important Coach in America," said students are taught from a young age that if they lack athletic ability, they don't measure up to other males.

"Sports have become a defining attribute for men, unfortunately," Ehrmann said.

Ehrmann stressed that coaches need to send the message to youths that success is not gauged by personal accomplishments, victories or whom they have vanquished. The true measure of a young man is how he handles relationships and the impact he has on his teammates, fellow students and those in the community.

"What would happen in Sacramento if we raised a whole generation of boys to love and be loved, to connect?" Ehrmann said. "There is the potential to spark life into these kids. The potential to change all of Sacramento by teaching kids to become part of a team and a community."

Ehrmann didn't limit his message to on-field sportsmanship. He said coaches should take the initiative through their own behavior and teachings to influence and guide athletes off the field. He mentioned simple things, such as showing an athlete the proper way to treat a date during homecoming. "You have one of the most responsible positions in society," Ehrmann told the coaches.



Jim Thompson, founder of the Positive Coaching Alliance, also spoke of how sports provides coaches the chance to teach core values in a more personalized setting than the classroom.

"You can best teach character on the playing field, using sports to teach life lessons," Thompson said.

Al Toney, Hiram Johnson High School's boys basketball and track coach, found the presentations inspiring and useful.

"It puts some things in my mind on what to do with my guys," Toney said.



Jim Thompson  
Founder of the Positive Coaching Alliance

Toney said many coaches still come from an old-school sports environment and need to adapt to a new generation of athletes.

While some high school athletes are learning that it's OK to express their feelings and talk about their insecurities, Toney said most still need to be coaxed into how to "verbalize."

"Kids are taught differently now, not just to focus on sports but the aspect of character," Toney said.

It seemed only fitting that one of the most respected coaches in the area, Cordova High baseball coach Guy Anderson, received a lifetime achievement award for his 35 years of service to the Lancers' athletic program and Rancho Cordova community.

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