

Yorkton Stories

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The challenge: motivating youth

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Dick DeRyk

In September of 2023, Jason Payne was one of the inaugural recipients of the Yorkton Lions Support for Sports Award presented by the Yorkton Sports Hall of Fame to those who have made significant contributions to sports locally, but who may not qualify or may not have been nominated for induction. Jason was born and raised in Windsor, Nova Scotia, started his teaching career in Vancouver in 2002, and moved to Yorkton two years later to be closer to his wife's family in Stockholm, Saskatchewan. He has taught at the Yorkton Regional High School since then. But his involvement with youth and sports has expanded greatly beyond the boundaries of the school. His dedication to high school sports is unquestioned. He has coached the Varsity boys basketball team for all his years at Yorkton Regional, leading the team to successful seasons, a gold in 2006 and bronzes in 2012 and 2013. And, they appeared in seven Saskatchewan high school basketball provincial finals between 2003 and 2018. He coached age level under 15 and under 17 provincial basketball, youth and high school football, and youth hockey, soccer, and lacrosse.

In 2016, Jason helped found the Yorkton Blue Jays Club basketball program, providing Yorkton and area youth with an opportunity to learn fundamentals, improve decision making, and experience competitive basketball in a fun environment. The program has flourished tremendously, growing from three teams and 30 athletes in 2016 to seven teams and 90 young basketball players in 2023. As Jason states on his website, thegrowthmindset.ca quote, In 2018 I nearly hung up my whistle. I was burnt out by the demands of coaching. I chose a different path. Instead of quitting, I focused on the holistic development of my athletes and building environments based on high performance. It has made all the difference, end of quote.

Next was the pursuit of a Masters of Science in Sport and Performance Psychology in 2021. As he explains in our podcast, Covid provided both the means and the time to do that online. We talked with Jason about the online newsletter he publishes that is read by more than 1,700 coaches worldwide. We talk about motivating young athletes and motivating young people in school. We talk about motivating young people to prepare for adult life.

You've had a busy career in Yorkton for the last 22 years, both teaching and working with a number of sports organizations and teams, both at the high school and in the community. Have you always had an interest in sport?

Jason Payne

Yeah, I definitely grew up around sport. My dad was a high school coach in Nova Scotia, and so spent a lot of time with his athletes and his teams growing up. And those were my heroes, really

were the guys that played hockey for him or ran track. So definitely sport has been a part of my life since I was knee-high.

Dick DeRyk

In particular, you've been very active in in basketball. You don't look like a basketball player, they tend to be a little taller. What attracted you to basketball?

Jason Payne

Not really sure. I had a really good teacher in my junior high, was a former Olympian. His name was Ross Quackenbush. His dad, Max, was a defenseman with the Bruins in the 50s and 60s. And he just had a way of selling the game that, you know, it became something I was interested in. And I think there's something kind of addictive about the process, basketball is not a sport that you show up and you get good at because you've grown and you're stronger. It takes time and practice. And I think for me, I loved that process of working and trying to get better and watching the ball go through the net and all those things that really became addictive for me in high school and junior high and kind of spent my time trying to master those skills.

Dick DeRyk

You played basketball at high school?

Jason Payne

Yep, played high school. I was a decent high school player, not tall enough or fast enough to play past that.

Dick DeRyk

Your dad played a fairly significant role in your development as both a teacher and someone interested in sports psychology. And that goes back with him, as I understand it, like 50 years or more.

Jason Payne

Yeah, my dad coached track and field and hockey at high school level in Nova Scotia, starting, I think, in 1969. And he retired after 43 years of teaching, which is categorically insane. But he continued coaching probably until he passed away in December. He was probably working with athletes until he turned 78 or so, at which point he had Parkinson's. And at a certain point it just became a little more. He ended up in assisted living for the last few years of his life. But he definitely had a huge role in kind of shaping my philosophy as an educator, as a coach, and then ultimately in sort of adopting the importance of sports psychology as well. I can think back to track practices in the mid-80s when he was doing relaxation and visualization techniques with us at track practice. And you know, that that would have been pretty cutting-edge stuff in in 1985. So yeah, he's had a big role in kind of who I am and where I continue to work towards.

Dick DeRyk

Now, back in that time, 70s, 80s, sports psychology was not something you heard about. Maybe Wayne Gretzky and Michael Jordan had sports psychologists, but it wasn't as upfront and well known as it is these days when every athlete you know has a team around them, including sports psychologists, right? What brought him to that?

Jason Payne

Well, I think that he was a different kind of coach at that era, period. I mean, I think that lots of the coaches in those days were the more transactional type, where lots of yelling, screaming, discipline. That was never my dad's style. He was an athlete-centered coach, and he was always looking for an edge to help athletes bring out their best performance, and sport psychology was something that he sort of fell into. And I think it was something he dedicated quite a bit of his learning to through that time. And I mean, it definitely, you're right, it wasn't something that would have been very common in that time. I mean, even the industry currently in North America, there are 1,040 certified mental performance consultants. So, you know, there are more people involved in it, but it's certainly not a huge, it's not a massive industry at this point yet.

Dick DeRyk

The work that you're doing at the school, you teach classes?

Jason Payne

Yes. I do some Personal Fitness and some Phys Ed, some History, History 20, so World War One, World War Two, and then some Psychology.

Dick DeRyk

You also are still coaching, both at the school and with community organizations?

Jason Payne

Yeah, I work with the Yorkton Blue Jays, which Jessica Kyle and I founded in 2016, and then work with Golden Ticket Sports across the province, and my role with them is sort of the mental performance, doing some work with their athletes on the floor and in the classroom, and then helping develop their coaches.

Dick DeRyk

You went back to school and got a master's in Sports and Performance Psychology. You're applying that obviously locally, but you also mentioned you're doing some work in Regina. How widespread are you practicing that?

Jason Payne

Well, I'm still in the process of completing my certification. The degree took me two years. I started in 2019 and finished in the summer of 2021. It was actually awesome during Covid because I couldn't go anywhere, so I just did classes, which was great. And since then I've been working on getting the certification, which has had more hoops and obstacles and turns than just about anything, but I seem to be heading towards the finish line of that. Zoom is a wonderful tool. So I've been working with a pro basketball player from Hong Kong for a while, lots of youth athletes kind of across the province, some hockey players, some basketball players, connected with coaches across North America through it. So it's certainly going to be the next stage of my career moving forward. The internet is a great place for that because I don't necessarily have to move to a larger center.

Dick DeRyk

You can do it from anywhere.

Jason Payne

Yeah.

Dick DeRyk

You're also doing a newsletter. Widespread?

Jason Payne

Yeah, yeah. I have I think there's about 1,700 subscribers from all over the world. And it's kind of neat to get every once in a while, you get an email from somebody. I got an email a couple weeks ago from somebody who works at a school in Dubai just saying how much they have appreciated the newsletter and they talk about it in the staff room and things like that. So it's kind of cool to reach out and you know have a way to impact people that we'll probably never meet.

Dick DeRyk

And the newsletter covers what basically current topics related to sports and psychology?

Jason Payne: 11:49

Primarily, how coaches can use it. I think that, if there's only a thousand people who are certified to professionally do it, then to have it be meaningful, coaches need to have a basic understanding of the skills and how they can help their athletes. So that's just sort of the void I've tried to fill because there isn't a whole lot of training for coaches on anything outside of Xs and Os, really. And I think that you know our kids today need more training on the soft skills than they're getting anywhere. So I think that any of those things we can do to help that out is a benefit.

Dick DeRyk

Is this subscription-based or free?

Jason Payne

It's free.

Dick DeRyk

And how do people sign up?

Jason Payne

Competitiveadvantage.ca will take you to a sign-up page and then read all 95 issues of it. So, if you're so inclined.

Dick DeRyk

And how often are they're coming out?

Jason Payne

Usually right now, weekly. During high school basketball season, it is bi-weekly at best, but I try and get something out. The writing process is something I've enjoyed, and actually I think it helps me clarify my thinking sometimes on the topics that I'm writing about. So it's a helpful activity that way.

Dick DeRyk

When you work with kids locally, what are the major things that are holding them back, not physically but mentally, to be more successful than perhaps they are?

Jason Payne: 13:19

Sport-wise, I would say there's a few main obstacles. I think number one is athlete identity, is a really big one. I think that for too many young people they get tied up in their sport defining who they are. And that when you play poorly and you are a hockey player, for instance, not somebody who plays hockey. When you turn every game into a referendum on the person that you are, it adds an awful lot of pressure. And I think that there's a tremendous amount of pressure placed on young people in sport today because there's so much pressure to advance, advance, advance. There's only so many seats available at the next level, how are you going to? And I think that at the end of the day, there are only 17 kids from Saskatchewan in the NHL right now. So if the goal of an athlete and a parent and the only measuring stick is how far you make it, then you're probably going to fall short of that.

So helping them understand that you know they are more than just an athlete, they're more than just who they are on the ice, the field, or the court. I think it's a real challenge, and I think it's one that's fed by people who are trying to really promote and profit off youth sport, which is bad in Canada and is absolutely awful in the United States. It's parents trying to help their kid advance and not miss out, but not understanding that it's the stuff along the way, you know, how do we improve and lose and still lose with dignity and pride, or take away the things that are beneficial from sport that don't really even involve money or opportunities. So I think helping them reframe the things that are going on so that it isn't a referendum on who they are as a person is a big challenge for sure.

Dick DeRyk

In other words, there's nothing wrong with doing it for fun.

Jason Payne

Yeah, well, and then even if it is competitive and you're trying to push for as far as you want, saying I did all that I could do and it wasn't good enough, but along the way I did this and this and this. And none of it means I failed. It means that it didn't work this time.

If I look back on the things that I learned in my time in sport, I don't remember whether I scored 30 points or three in most of our games. I mean, it was 35 years ago at this point, but I remember the times that we spent in the van on the way home. I remember you know the teammates that we had, and those are the things that I think we really need to stress more with our young athletes. And you know, how can we help make them better people as coaches instead of worrying so much about whether or not they're moving on to play post-secondary.

In 23 years at the Regional, I've had one kid go to the U of R to play, and one kid go to UNB, and then a couple kids play a little college. So if the measuring stick for me as a coach is how many kids I'm moving on to play post-secondary basketball, I've failed miserably, but I look around and I teach with lots of them and I see them running businesses and working for the city, and that's a source of pride. They've taken the things they learned in sport and gone on to build great lives for themselves, and that's what it's about.

Dick DeRyk

Do you keep in touch with your high school buddies from Nova Scotia days who were coached by your dad?

Jason Payne

Yeah.

Dick DeRyk

And where have they gone?

Jason Payne

Nova Scotia is a little bit like Yorkton, in that lots of people leave. So they're kind of spread out all over western Canada, eastern Canada. I had some who are in Toronto, Vancouver. I mean we don't get together often. I'm heading home this summer for a little bit and having my dad's memorial in July. So I'm hoping to get to see quite a few of them then. It would be really nice to touch base and talk about the good old days.

Dick DeRyk

Have they gone on professionally in sports, any of them?

Jason Payne

Yeah, I would say I played with one guy who went to St. Mary's and won a national championship in basketball there. He's now a businessman, so he'd be the furthest that way.

Dick DeRyk

Do the same principles apply in school as they do in sport?

Jason Payne

One hundred per cent. And I think that that's what kind of drew me in. Probably the best team I coached at the Regional was 2018, and we won our region, we made Hoopla, we ended up winning our first game, we lost the semifinal to the champs, and then lost in a bronze medal to Holy Cross from Saskatoon.

And that team was gritty, tough, all the things that you want as a coach, but they were also really hard to coach, and I've had these conversations with them, so they know. And that really pushed me to take a different tact. And I think that as time was going on, my timeouts became less and less, and my talks with the team became less and less about tactics and tactical aspects of the game. It became more about handling the ups and downs of competition and how do we treat each other well, how do we function at a high level as a group of people.

And then when I got into more of the studying, I started to see immediately the crossover between sport and life, and that if as a coach I could teach my kids skills to help them handle those things in competition, those things would translate to when life was hard, also. There's a direct correlation. I mean, I think the other part for me was that I was doing some therapy of my own at that point, and you know, the thing that my therapist was telling me was the exact same thing as I was learning in class, and it's like all of this is interrelated. So, like I said, the kids need the work on the soft skills and human skills, and they need to understand how to handle the ups and downs

of life, and these are skills that'll help them in competition where hopefully it's something they're super engaged in, and then it's my job to help make them make the connection. That these things will help them when they face challenges in life outside of sport.

Dick DeRyk

What are the barriers that kids are facing these days? I mean, we hear about screen time and we hear about kids being disengaged.

Jason Payne

There's a lot of challenges for kids today. I really think that, my children are a little older, and I think the challenges they dealt with were one thing, and I think a generation later, it's at a whole different level. I think that there's more pressure on kids on all levels today than I've noticed in my 25 years of teaching. Pressure to do well in school for those that are inclined, pressure to make teams, pressure to, you know, for kids that are engaged in things, life's stressful because it's super busy and they've got commitments on all sides. There's this activity, this activity, this activity, yet I also still need to do really well on my test on Monday.

I think that pressure combined with the screen time, combined with social media, I think the underreported part of the screen time isn't so much the time they spend on the screen, though it certainly does impact them. It's the lack of sleep. I think that this generation functions on less sleep than most likely any generation in human history. And you know, we hear lots about youth anxiety, and I think that that some of that's related to social media, some of that's also related to the fact that they don't sleep eight hours. And I think that compounding that is that they live in a society where parents at some level aren't holding their kids accountable. Certainly not in the way that your generation or mine was. Education doesn't hold them accountable in the same way.

The expectation, certainly when I was in school, was that school was first and that whatever the message was from school, it wasn't questioned. It was the teacher was right and you needed to do what, and now that's not the case. You know, I think I see lots of kids who are disengaged from school, and it's explained. You know, parents who allow their child to stay home because of whatever, when they need that structure. They need, at the end of the day, education, the goal of it is to help them prepare to succeed in the world. And I also think that at the same time, education has to recognize that the kids aren't buying what we're selling right now either, and that we need to make some changes along those lines. But it's very difficult in the educational climate that we live in right now, where funding is extremely limited and class sizes are huge. It's kind of compounding all of it.

So, you know, to get back to the question, I think that there are a lot of challenges that kids are dealing with. And I think that some of these skills that they're learning, I hope they can take back and sort of improve their lives a little bit. Things like focus and how to improve that, and understanding that anxiety is a state that's natural instead of something that needs to be medicated and avoided. I mean, there's a difference between a generalized anxiety disorder and feeling anxiety. Feeling anxious is totally normal, and we need to normalize it more and not run from it in those moments, whether it's a presentation or a test or a game. We have to face those fears because otherwise they don't go anywhere. So there's definitely challenges, and I think that we have our work cut out for us, for sure, as a society, as a community, they're big challenges.

Dick DeRyk

There are some who would say that you're very old-fashioned in your approach to this and your outlook.

Jason Payne

Maybe. I'm old, that's okay.

Dick DeRyk

Because it seems to me that a lot of what is happening in all sorts of human life endeavors gets accepted and becomes the norm and there's not a whole lot of pressure to change back to a more structured or a more disciplined, whether it's a school environment, a sports environment or a home environment.

Jason Payne

I think there's an interesting, you know, the pendulum and all those things that shift. I hope we are at this point of the pendulum where it's going to start with its own momentum come back towards something that does involve more structure, discipline and rigidity because I don't think, certainly not in the education world, I think if you talk to anybody in our world right now, it's not working. It might be old school, but I think that if holding them accountable is old school, then yeah, I'm old school. So I mean I don't think allowing them to do things on their terms has worked very well in our building. And I don't know that in society it's a reflection of what the world's going to look like. I don't know too many employers who are okay with people not showing up for work, and if they are, then it's on them.

My thought on kids has always been that they're kind of like water. Water will run to the easiest point. And I think that kids do that right now because they're allowed to. And that's not to say that we don't have changes to make. I think if you look at, you know, modern education isn't super different in its structure than it was when you were in school, you know, 30 years ago?

Dick DeRyk

(Laughter) Thank you.

Jason Payne

Yeah. And I think that there is a real need for there to be a modernized approach to it, but I think that that's a super difficult challenge when you're looking at a publicly funded institution. And I mean, I think we could have similar arguments about healthcare, you know, like it's a challenge, and we do need to find a way to engage them and while at the same time holding them accountable. So I mean I think it's a kind of a blend of an old school and a new school approach. I don't really think of myself as the teachers I had in high school who it was their way or the highway. I just think that it's not super productive at the moment the way we're trying to do things.

Dick DeRyk

If you had a message, a single message for parents, what would it be?

Jason Payne

Let your kid fail. Parents today are obsessed with trying to prevent their children from failing. And I don't necessarily mean in school, like a grade. I mean allowing them to try something that they

care about and fail at it. There's so much that we learn out of that, and then encourage them to keep going. I think that that's what's going to generate the grit that we need in our society and in our community. Like I'm not suggesting letting them fail and flail away and struggle at it, support them, help them, get them the support they need. But I think that clearing away, you know, the term is the bulldozer parent, I see it often and I think that ultimately most of the people that are going to try and work with your child, whether it's an educator or a coach, they want what's best for your kid, whether it always appears that way or they perceive it that way.

I mean, ultimately for me, I don't really judge the success of a team until five or six years later. I can look at that group from 2018 that was hard to coach, and I can go, hey, that's awesome. This kid's doing this, and this kid's doing this, and this, and they pulled it together. So I think that for me the message is, let them fail. Support them, hug them, tell them you love them, and send them right back out to fail again. No shame in that. God knows, I mean, like I failed a million times.

Dick DeRyk

We all have, I think.

Jason Payne

Yeah. I keep going to play golf every week and I fail at that every time.

Dick DeRyk

So your own kids, would they agree with you on everything? Did they push back at all when they were younger?

Jason Payne

My son, sure, at some points. I think like many young men, thought that he knew better. I mean, his goals were also somewhat aligned. He was a really good basketball player, a really good football player while at his time here. So he wanted the best that he could do in those things. And when he played for me, he felt very comfortable expressing his ideas and on the basketball court or whatever. And my answer generally to him at that point was, well, when it's your team, you can do whatever the hell you want. So yeah, I mean, he certainly pushed back. That's his job as a teenager, too, right? So now, he's doing great.

Dick DeRyk

Is it different, the reaction you get from boys and girls?

Jason Payne

Coaching and teaching boys and girls is very different for sure, especially coaching. Coaching girls, they're motivated by different things. So the social aspect of sport for girls is priority. Whereas for guys, the competition is, and so when you're coaching young ladies, you need to make sure that you're building in ways for them to have that social connection and making sure that as a coach, you monitor and nurture that social connection because that can absolutely derail your season if it doesn't click. Whereas for boys, the competition's the key, and it needs to be addressed. Conflict works a little easier in a guy's team than a girl's typically, at least in my experience.

Dick DeRyk

When you say competition is key, is it winning?

Jason Payne

Testing themselves I think is the key for young men. I think they want to get out there and see what they can do, I think is their key, their driving factor. Whereas I find for young ladies, it's more how do we click together and function together as a team where a group of guys who don't necessarily get along off the court can function well on the floor. I find with a group of high school young ladies, you better make sure they get along, at least can function together in the same room.

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