

Developing a sound working relationship with a new coaching staff

I was approached a year or so ago by Sportsturf and asked to present a year in review of my experience with our new coaching staff here at Michigan State University. Last fall I hesitated to submit an article because I did not feel I had achieved the results I had strived for over that 10-month period. I felt that after a second season with the new football staff, I could speak with confidence on how we achieve success on and off the field together. After 18 months, we have achieved a working environment that I am proud to be a part of. The following describes some of the ways in which we achieved this environment.

A change in coaching staff brings new challenges and opportunities to create new and stronger relations. Through this experience, I reaffirmed my belief that we can't have great fields without the support of the coaching staff and support of the athletic administration. I am blessed to have three great people to work for in those regards: head football coach Mark Dantonio, director of football operations Tim Allen, and senior associate athletic director Greg Ianni. The expectation is always to have safe, playable, and aesthetically pleasing facilities whether it is the practice facilities or Spartan Stadium.

(L to R): Director of Football Operations Tim Allen, Senior Associate Athletic Director Greg Ianni, Amy Fouty, CSFM, and Coach Mark Dantonio.



That sounds simple enough but it can be a challenge.

So how have we overcome these challenges and come to the positive and successful working environment we have today?

goals and reassessing strategies to meet the needs of the program. Tim Allen and I have organized and created schedules to outline how we can incorporate maintenance needs, practice times, camp use, and conditioning, to best maximize use of the

bility to be proactive in communicating and organizing how things need to occur for the success of the operation as needed for the success of the team, i.e., so there are no surprises. I am often teased by Tim Allen that I am a “little grass coach,” who develops a yearly training program and then game plans for the success of the fields for the season. I appreciate that, as I like to think in agronomic terms; we train hard in the off season by planning best management and cultural practices, study our opponents, know diseases and pests, and then fight through adversity (basically Mother Nature) to be the best we can be each week for the team.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the importance of having a big picture-oriented administrator such as Greg Ianni in this whole process. Right from the beginning the focus was on developing a structure where we work together to create success on and off the field. At Michigan State, our Spartan Stadium field is not just a football field; it represents our history as the first land grant institution in the United States and our College of Agriculture and Natural Resources’ proud tradition. I depend on Greg for the support to manage that responsibility while meeting the needs of the football program. It is critical to our success with the facilities that our relationships are based upon trust, cooperation, and organization.

If I want to be considered an expert in my field, and a part of the team, I have to conduct myself as such to gain respect for our work and our profession. That means proactive communication to develop, trust and understanding, and to deliver the best fields possible for the team in that schedule. I accept the challenge with a positive attitude and look forward to the challenge of each season. That is what has helped to create a successful, sound, and a positive work environment here at Michigan State. ■

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Spartan Stadium, pride of Michigan State University.

I think back to my first meeting with Coach Dantonio and how I immediately felt that I was dealing with a person who cared about how important the details are to true success. I watched his interviews and studied him before our first meeting so I could better understand his perspective. He complimented my work from the film he had seen and conversations he had with others and I guaranteed him that my operation would do whatever we could to support the success of the program. I imparted to him I could not promise that things would be perfect all the time, but we would strive for that kind of consistency and he was very accepting of our best efforts. Throughout that first year, it was sometimes hard to understand exactly what they needed and it was hard to stay a step ahead of their requests. There were times that we all were frustrated, but we chalked it up to a learning curve year and moved forward. There is no “us versus them”—we are all a part of the program.

From the start of the second season we focused on a better structure, developing

facilities and efficiently maintain the facilities with our small staff size. I typically get the upcoming year’s schedule in January and I insert times for maintenance activities to occur on the master schedule and have them approved by the football staff so that we are all on the same page. Planning together out of season reduces the likelihood of problems throughout the year.

Another new thing we discussed in the off season for this year to manage wear areas more effectively was to map areas of use for summer camps and team periods to more evenly distribute wear patterns on our two outdoor practice fields. This is something the coaching staff schedules each week and has managed very successfully by moving their drills off the playing surface and rotating team periods around the fields on a specific schedule.

Proactive planning and conversation will lead to a more positive and understanding working relationship. I try to keep in mind my operation is a small cog in a large machine, and it is my responsi-