

LIBRARIAN IN THE HUDDLE

*Student Book Clubs for Athletes,
Leaders, and Reluctant Readers*

Jessica Fitzpatrick

biggioismyhero@gmail.com

You might not think of the school library when you think of high school football, especially high school football in Texas. However, at Mayde Creek High School we do. The athletic department and the school library have been collaborating to build literacy and leadership skills among the athletes on the varsity football team, and both the boys' and girls' varsity basketball teams through collaborative leadership book studies that are also sports-focused. Because of the success of our collaborative program, we have been able to extend it as a school-wide program that the coaches and school librarian lead. As the program has been extended, it has become even more popular and effective.

Inspiration

The Librarian in the Huddle program started simply because of a desire to get our athletes interested in the school library. The athletes on our campus are so incredibly busy with their sports—often more than one—plus schoolwork, home-life, and just trying to be a teenager that the passion for reading or doing book clubs sometimes falls by the wayside. As a former coach, I knew

the importance of the athletes on the campus. They are looked up to by younger students, their peers, and the staff. Athletes are such an impactful part of the school culture that they can also be effective ambassadors for the library and literacy. I knew that if I could get the athletes reading more and feeling invested in the school library, their interest and advocacy would make a huge difference on our campus for both reading and the library. If the student-athletes buy into the school library, it will bring even more students to the library, growing the library's impact on learners. I wanted to come up with a program that would align with the athletes' focus on sports while also building leadership skills that would benefit all students on our campus. The idea of Librarian in the Huddle was born: a student-athlete leadership book study that would meet the students where they are, in sports.

Plan

Students look up to coaches on the high school level—to be completely honest, even on the junior high/middle school level. Because of the time that coaches spend with students on their teams outside of the

The Librarian in the Huddle program started simply because of a desire to get our athletes interested in the school library.

classroom, coaches are often able to create relationships with the students that are different than relationships between classroom teachers and learners. To make the most successful team possible, coaches build relationships with their athletes to create a team atmosphere. Because of how impactful the coaches can be, I knew I needed their buy-in for the new library program to be successful. Before even approaching the coaches, I wanted to have a plan in place so I would be able to show them a product and be able to describe an outcome. I gathered a variety of sports leadership books, added them to the collection, and then approached our campus athletic director and told him about my idea of starting a book club for student-athletes that would



focus on leadership. I also showed him the sports leadership books geared toward young adults now in the school library collection. We narrowed the list of book club titles to:

- Jeremy Bhandari's *Trust The Grind*
- John Willkom's *Walk-On Warrior*
- Jeff Janssen's *The Team Captain's Leadership Manual*
- Vernon Brundage Jr.'s *Shoot Your Shot*

I broke down each step of the process that I planned: meeting with the athletes on each team every other week, each time discussing a different part of the book that team was reading. I proposed that by using a sports leadership book we would not only be encouraging reading with a book of interest to students but also building better leaders on and off the field. The athletic director loved the plan, and together we collaborated to come up with a program that he and I thought would best benefit our students, staff, and community. We had fifty football

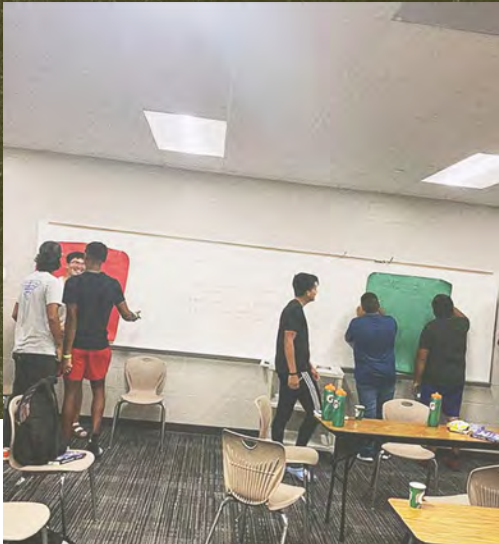
I proposed that by using a sports leadership book we would not only be encouraging reading with a book of interest to students but also building better leaders on and off the field.

players and fifteen to twenty players on each basketball team. The athletic director and I wanted to be able to reach every student based on the sport that they played, and select books accordingly: for example, basketball books for the basketball players. We also wanted to involve the coaches: seven for football, two for girls' basketball, and three for boys' basketball.

Funding

Because funding is always so difficult for school libraries, I went to our principal at the time (who was also a former coach) and told him about the idea that the athletic director and I had come up with: a sports leadership book club. To give the participants an idea of what is offered in the

school library, I wanted to start with sports leadership titles already in the collection, but I needed the books in greater quantities for the book club program. Prior to meeting with the principal, I obtained quotes from various vendors for the necessary number of sports leadership books that I wanted to purchase for book club participants. I showed the principal the quotes in an effort to have him raise my budget or use funds from his budget for the books. Thankfully, not much persuasion was needed because he loved the idea. He gladly used discretionary funds to pay for the books because he recognized that the program would not only benefit the library and athletic department but also improve campus culture and literacy while



building better leaders within the school.

Implementation

Once the books had arrived, the coaches and I met to create a schedule that would work best for all of us. We would meet every other week, either during a team's athletic class time, after practice, or after the strength and conditioning portion of practice. I had a different meeting time for each team so we could have a sports-specific discussion.

Each time we met, we focused on some part of the book and discussed it. A few of our guiding questions included:

What leaders do you (the students) admire and what qualities make those people great leaders?

Where do you find leaders, sometimes where you would least expect them?

What does it take to be a leader?

How can you be a leader on your team, on campus, and in our community?

What do you have to do to reach your goals?

How do you want to be remembered?

How can reading help you reach your goals for being a leader?

As a group, we discussed these questions each week and reflected on the participants' answers, identifying areas we wanted to focus on most during that meeting. Sometimes we would meet in circles and talk about the book. Other days participants would walk around the gym or classroom, and complete graffiti walls with questions written on them or use FlipGrid as a response tool.

The students' responses were very enlightening, revealing that the participants were very aware of what they can do to grow as individuals and to help our community. Sample responses follow.

"We are nothing without our community and being a good leader made by giving back like by cleaning up our streets, being an example by not doing drugs, and helping others stay out of drugs and gang activity" — Football Student Leader

"Leaders aren't always the loudest or the most seen. Some leaders are the ones you can't see or hear but are doing the most work, like the custodians and lunch ladies



on our campus” — Football Student Leader

“The biggest thing that we can do to be a leader at Mayde Creek is by being kind and supporting others. Too many people are against each other or fight just because. We need more kindness to everyone, especially those who are different from us” — Girls’ Basketball Student Leader

Since we were reading leadership athletic books, I wanted each meeting to include an activity that would build leadership skills. One time I had them write letters to various staff members on our campus who have made a difference. Another time I had them make rubber band bracelets for a local nonprofit organization, and once I had them use old t-shirts to make dog toys for

an animal rescue near our campus. We would talk about what we could do to make a bigger impact on our campus and our community, which were major themes in the books read in the clubs. It was an amazing experience to see the athletes collaborating to see how they could build each other up and build up our campus.

Impact

Our program was incredibly successful. All the athletes from the varsity football team, and the varsity boys and girls basketball teams participated in the book study and were engaged in the discussion, raising questions at every meeting. Among the questions students posed for themselves were:

What can I do to be a better leader at work?

It was an amazing experience to see the athletes collaborating to see how they could build each other up and build up our campus.

What can we do as a team to help the younger teams?

Who at our school doesn’t get the recognition that they deserve, and what can we do to give it to them?

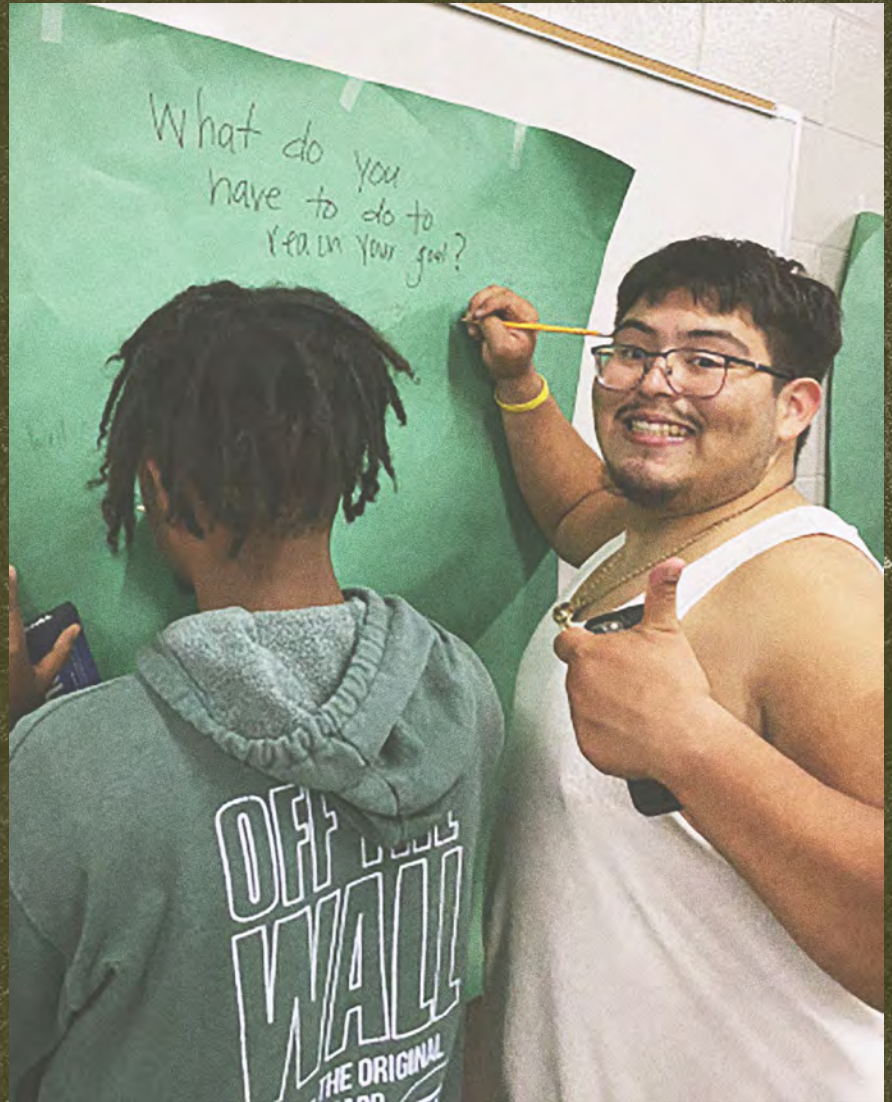
What can I do to help my parents to become better leaders?

Are there more books like this that I can read to keep improving my leadership?

Can you do this with the first-year students to help them be better leaders when they are older?

The students loved that the books showed people like them—people who had come from situations and communities like ours. (Like some of our students, some of the athletes in the books came from lower-income communities.) The students appreciated seeing that even though it can be hard right now juggling school, sports, and life, their efforts are all for something in the end. Many students said they were thinking about the advice in the books, such as being positive and helping others, while they were in their classes and at home. One student said that they put the advice into action and helped their elderly neighbor who was struggling to mow. A senior student is using advice from the book and mentoring a freshman student who was getting into trouble.







The school library's circulation went up 30 percent after the book club was started. Student-athletes also started voluntarily visiting the library and our library events, causing our number of library visitors to grow by 28 percent.

Book clubs and programming that involve books “enable students to learn from the freedoms given, which lead to a deeper understanding of their reading, developing a deeper understanding of other people through their conversations, and providing opportunities to safely fail and celebrate success” (Petrich 2015). This benefit was very apparent throughout our Librarian in the Huddle program. The students created a deeper community with each other through conversations about their book.

The coaches also encouraged book-based studying, and promoted

the idea that reading is important to improve oneself. It never failed to make my day brighter when athletes came into the library during their passing period or during advisory to tell me how much they loved the book club read or to tell me something they were getting out of the book. Seeing how a simple book club program could make such an impact on an influential group of students in the school was truly inspiring. Our coaches also were reaping the rewards. They told me that on the field and on the court students were referring to the books and saying that they are all a team, and we need everyone to be successful. Coaches also noticed student-athletes helping coach each other without prompting. A few coaches even said that the book study had helped them improve their own leadership skills and inspired them to be better.

The school library's circulation went up 30 percent after the book club was started. Student-athletes also started voluntarily visiting the library and our library events, causing our number of library visitors to grow by 28 percent. Our English teachers are seeing more students in our program reading and having higher scores and grade averages than previously. Before we started the book clubs the average grade for student-athletes was 72. After the book clubs became active, that average improved to 81. Student-athletes who are not seniors have been asking us to be sure to continue the book club for next season with new books so they will be able to grow their skills even more. Learners' desire to have more sports-related leadership books also caused me to expand that segment of the collection to better serve my patrons.

So many of the students loved the books that we thought students would re-read them when those learners

needed motivation. Therefore, even though ours is a Title I school, we decided to allow participants to keep the books at the conclusion of our book club season. Many of our students said this was the first book that they ever owned, a statement that had a big impact on the coaches and me, and further increased our desire to grow this program.

Expansion

Because the Librarian in the Huddle was so successful and coaches have such an important role in school culture, as I write this we are moving forward with starting a coaches-led book club that is open to all students. Keeping with the same theme, we plan to call this program A Coach in the Stacks. For this program, once again the library and the athletic department will collaborate. A coach will guide a leadership book study (not sports focused) open to all students and held in the stacks of the library. Because this is a new and different program, we do not yet know what the impact will be. However, we are very optimistic after the positive response to the Librarian in the Huddle program and the positive outcomes.

Five coaches have expressed interest in leading the new groups. To prepare these educators for guiding Coach in the Stacks book clubs, we have been framing questions ahead of time based on the book and mapping out plans and activities prior to the first meetings. All five of the coaches helped me facilitate the Librarian in the Huddle program, so they feel confident about starting to lead their own book clubs. For Coach in the Stacks, I will also be present as an assistant to help the coach as needed, just as they were there for me during Librarian in the Huddle sessions. We are excited to have someone who is not typically associated with literacy lead a book club for all interested students!

To fund this expanded program, we will be pulling funding from a variety of sources: drawing on the library budget and principal's discretionary fund, applying for grants from our district's education foundation, and applying for Texas Library Association grants for programming. If you are interested in starting this program on your campus, I highly recommend looking into grants at your state association level, at the national level, at your district level, or even from local companies.

Looking Ahead

The Librarian in the Huddle has had such a positive impact on the student-athlete participants that we definitely expect to implement this program with the rest of the sports teams at my campus and continue for years to come. I am hopeful and excited to see what the future holds for the athletes and other students on our campus, and how they view the library. Through this program, I was able to advocate for our school library to members of our community, administration, and athletic department. The athletic department became more supportive of the library than ever before because we were working together on an important project. Coaches promoted the school library amongst their athletes and on their social media.

Parents of student-athletes also became more supportive. Many parents who are in the athletic booster club come to campus to volunteer with the athletic department. While on campus they made a point of coming to the library to tell me how much the book study impacted their children. A few parents went further and started helping me in the library with shelving books or helping with

library events. Parents even reached out to me on Twitter to tell me of the impact the book study was having on their child.

Members of the administration saw the impact of the program and began to express their recognition of the library as the asset it is. They also began to view me differently, as evidenced by asking me to help with campus activities in more of a leadership role than in the past. I was also encouraged to work not just with the athletic department but also with school clubs to help all students find a role in our campus community. The positive comments from administrators were very uplifting. It always affirms the work that you are doing in the library when administrators spontaneously

comment on the positive impact that you are making.

I highly recommend all secondary-school librarians reach out to their coaching staff to talk about the possibility of collaborating to start a book club. Our experience was that many positive relationships were formed among the library staff, coaches, and students—relationships that might not have been formed without this program. "The community that a book club provides affirms our reading choices and encourages us to keep asking important questions about the book" (Rumohr-Voskuil and Van Duinen 2015). With Librarian in the Huddle, you are able to create a book club with a population that is often not found in the library. Be the librarian in the huddle!



Jessica Fitzpatrick is a high school librarian in Houston and is in her tenth year of as an educator. She holds a Bachelor of

Science degree in education from the University of Houston and a Master of Library and Information Science from the University of North Texas. She is an AASL member, 2022 Library Journal Mover and Shaker, 2022 Texas Library Association (TLA) Media Virtual Presence award winner, 2022 AASL Inspire Special Event Grant recipient, 2022 YALSA's MAE Award for Best Literature Program for Teens recipient, the 2022 TLA Branding Iron Award Winner for Reading Program, the 2020 TLA Branding Iron Award Winner for Community Engagement, a YALS article contributor, and on the TAYSHAS Reading Committee. She enjoys running, reading, and spending time with her two daughters and husband. You can follow her on Instagram @librarian_fitz and on Twitter @librarianfitz.

Works Cited:

- Petrich, Nathaniel R. 2015. "Book Clubs: Conversations Inspiring Community." *i.e.: inquiry in education* 7 (1): article 4. <<http://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/vol7/iss1/4>> (accessed June 9, 2022).
- Rumohr-Voskuil, Gretchen, and Deborah Vriend Van Duinen. 2015. "Why Book Clubs Matter." *Teachers, Profs, Parents: Writers Who Care* (March 30). <<https://writerswhocare.wordpress.com/2015/03/30/why-book-clubs-matter>> (accessed June 9, 2022).

Recommended Reading

- Smith, Jeff. 2014. "Book Review: The Heart of Leadership: Becoming a Leader People Want to Follow by Mark Miller." *School Administrator* 71 (7): 38–39.
- Webster, Rebecca. 2017. "Fostering a Reading Community: How Librarians Can Support an Independent Reading Program." *Teacher Librarian* 45 (2): 28–31.