

## BALANCING BOOKS AND THE GAME

by:

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Being a teacher-coach in a public school in the Philippines has taught me one truth: a student-athlete's journey is never just about the sport. It is a story of discipline, sacrifice, and a kind of determination that many people rarely witness behind the scenes.

Every school year, I meet students who enter the classroom carrying more than just notebooks and modules – they carry their dreams. Some want to lift their families out of poverty, others dream of representing the region, and a few simply want to prove to themselves that they can excel both in the classroom and on the court. As their coach, I see all these stories unfold up close.

What most people don't see are the early mornings when these students train before class, often on an empty stomach because they left home before sunrise. I witness how they struggle to finish their seatwork while massaging tired legs, or how they try to concentrate during lessons even after a grueling scrimmage. Yet despite all this, when game day comes, they put on their school colors with pride – parang walang pagod, parang walang pinagdadaanan.

There are times when I have to remind them that academics still come first. As much as I want them to shine in the court or in the field, I know that their future depends on more than medals. I often tell them, "Anak, hindi ka lang atleta. Estudyante ka muna." And surprisingly, they understand. They study in between breaks, borrow my old reviewers, and ask for help during lunch because they don't want to fall behind.

I also see how sports becomes a safe space for many of them. In a country where many young people face financial struggles, broken families, or personal challenges, the court becomes a second home. Training becomes a place where they can release stress and find a sense of belonging. As their coach, I try to be more than someone who teaches techniques—I try to be someone who listens, encourages, and guides them when life outside school becomes too heavy.

One of the proudest moments for any teacher-coach is seeing a student-athlete grow not just in skill but in character. I've watched shy students gain confidence, easily distracted students develop focus, and struggling students learn resilience. Sports teaches life lessons that no book can fully explain: teamwork, humility, leadership, and the courage to rise after every defeat.

But perhaps the best reward is seeing them succeed—not just by winning games, but by graduating, finding scholarships, and discovering who they are beyond sport. When a student-athlete tells me, "Coach, thank you—kung hindi dahil sa inyo, hindi ko kakayanan," I am reminded why I chose this path.

Being a teacher-coach in the Philippines is not easy. Resources are limited, time is always short, and balancing roles can be exhausting. But every time I see my student-athletes push forward, I know the effort is worth it. Their dreams, their discipline, and their determination remind me that I am not just coaching players—I am helping shape futures.

And for me, that is the real victory.

*References:*