

Huffines Institute Podcast – 3/1/13

Dr. John Thornton

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Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Well, hello and welcome to the weekly edition of the podcast from The Huffines Institute for Sports Medicine and Human Performance here at Texas A&M. And Happy New Year, this is our first podcast of the year at 101 podcast episode as we steam down to #200 now, we only have 99 left to go.

Dr. John Thornton. Wow...

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. We are so please to have back with us a returned guest, Dr. John Thornton. Welcome back to the podcast John.

Dr. John Thornton. Thank you, Tim. I am happy to be here and look forward to another year.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Yeah. We actually have John back in a different capacity than he was with us last time. If you may remember, Dr. Thornton, has a long history working with the athletic department here at Texas A&M. He was on the men's basketball team here. He worked in the athletic department for thirty-one years in a variety of capacities, including the interim head basketball coach at one time. He was a Senior Associate Athletic Director for Student Athletic Development at Texas A&M for twelve years and was most recently the interim Athletic Director that guided Texas A&M into the Southeast Conference. Congratulations, you obviously did a great job this year so far.

Dr. John Thornton. It's amazing what impact I had in three months. I will take full credit for all the good things that have happened. It is a great program and it is fun to see them have the success they are doing and know that I had some small part in that.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Yeah. Most recently John has stepped back from full-time duties. Some would call that retirement others would say re-direction in his efforts. But, as a result of that there was an opportunity to hire John on limited bases as an Executive Professor. He is our Inaugural Director of the Texas A&M Coaching Academy, which we are launching. And so I've asked John to come back to the podcast and talk to us a little bit about this thing called a coaching academy and why everyone should be worried about coaching. So we are just going to start off with that and say John tell us what we think is going to be a model for the rest of the world. What is the mission of the coaching academy?

Dr. John Thornton. Well, it is something first of all I am very excited about being a part of and I think that I bring a unique set of skills, having been a coach and having supervised coaches and being in an athletic administration role. But, in a nut shell what I hope to be associated with and to see grow is just the promotion and awareness created through the academy for students, student athletes and people that are interested in the various options that are out there. I think that there is a standard understanding what a coach is, whether it is a high school coach, college or professional coach. But there are many related areas of youth development that coaching is a part of and there are new fields and new areas that will be opportunities. I want to promote those areas and then also prepare students to be the best coaches that they can be as they initially enter their career. Having been a coach I know there are some things that I just loved about it and did a great job with. Just some things that I knew and I know now that I could have been better prepared for. I think that not only through my perspective, but reaching out to other coaches and other people in those types of areas there is a way to impart that knowledge to help people to be better coaches as they start out. And then eventually as things unfold to have a structure for job placement and networking that the academy could afford people that are starting out in their career. And then I guess the last thing that I would say, just briefly speaking about it, is a continuation of education for practitioners that are already out there. And give them educational opportunities and developmental opportunities through things like podcast and things that we will work through and within the Huffines Institute.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Why is it important to do something like this? It would seem like coaches have got it covered in a lot of places, so why would we even be interested in such a thing?

Dr. John Thornton. Well, one of the things that I have looked back at and realized and I think that most people that I have talked about as we initially get to trying to understand what we can accomplish through here is that what an impact coaches make on communities and the impact they make on institutions and what, more importantly, they make on individuals on all levels. Whether you are a junior high coach, high school, NFL, you have an ability to positively impact and reverse negatively impacted individuals as they grow up and mature. I think that you can be passionate about that. It is teaching and it's teaching on a level that is related to sport and it is a great opportunity to impact society, I believe, and communities and individuals through promotion of coaches and better coaching.

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Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Talk to us about that last phrase you used, better coaches? Talk to us a little bit about that, especially in relating to youth sports. I mean we have all had kids or relations that have been involved in recreational sports. That seems to be a big deal now. They always depend usually on volunteer coaches.

Dr. John Thornton. Yeah. Well, one thing about managing people in situations, whether it is in recreational programs or youth development leagues. You will find yourself in a role where you

are managing coaches like that. What kind of preparation they have to interact with students or children, or youth. Hopefully you will be able to better equip people to be able to be in servant in those types of roles. So, by that I think that a lot of times if you mention coach, everybody thinks X and O, wins and losses, there is so much more to that and that is one of the things that I would hope that we would have the ability to impact. Sure we want to have coaches that have great decision making abilities, whether it be between the lines or outside the lines, but also establish their ethical beliefs in what they will and won't do and what their roles are as a coach as they help develop individuals.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. I mean even skills such as working with parents and dealing with parents. I say dealing with and that sounds kind of negative, but there is that interaction between parents and coaches, often, especially when you are talking about youth or even high school or college coaches that is so important.

Dr. John Thornton. You know there are so many things that are related to the profession of coaching that if people sit down and think about it that eventually you are going to be facing that, a disgruntled parent, dealing with a child that has no parents and dealing with the different issues educationally. You are dealing with trying to motivate people to be the best they can be outside of athletics and just personal development of an individual. So those are the types of things and there are already systems out there and great programs are already underway. I guess what the academy can do is promote those and enhance those when the ability presents itself.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. You mentioned a few minutes ago about these athletes that don't have parents and you told me a story once about someone you know...well, I will stop there. You certainly have had experience with other coaches that have had athletes that did not have parents.

Dr. John Thornton. Yeah. Well it is one of those things that we all know what a positive impact coaching, and how a relationship with athletics can be. If somebody is motivated to practice and be the best player they can be and want to be part of a team environment and you have an ability to coach because of that interest, to be able to reach out and reach them in other areas and supply them with support mechanism in areas where they might need help in the absence of a parent and the circumstances that they find themselves in their home situation. You can create awareness where you can have a positive impact in a situation through sport or through the coaching role that wouldn't ordinarily be there. If you have been involved in coaching, all coaches can relate a story where they have had an opportunity where they have had a positive impact and I have a cousin that is involved in a coaching profession and actually two of his starters on his team do not have a parent at home and actually live in an apartment by themselves. And actually that relationship with that coach and that affiliation with that sport is what is keeping them in school and they are both very capable of having a very fruitful career in athletics, as well as past that educationally. So that coach in that role has an ability to provide a structure or a support mechanism for individuals to achieve the potentials that they have out there.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. And I think that happens more often than people know those kinds of things...Yeah...

Dr. John Thornton. I believe that people get so wrapped up in what you see and not what goes on behind the scenes. I think that related to all levels, whether it be professionally or junior high or youth leagues. There are so many things in life that people are dealing with that people properly prepared for can have a huge impact on individuals.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Right. I know that there are a lot of examples of this kind of thing. I know that you and I both recently met with some folks that have a new book out called “Letters for Coach”. It is about a group of players that over the years wrote the coaches wife about the impact that he had had on their life after he had passed away and so forth. Many of us have soft spots in our hearts for our former coaches.

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Dr. John Thornton. You know I would challenge everybody to think back on the people that have had an impact on your career. I know that you and I have talked about this before, but we can all go back to individuals that are teachers in regular classroom settings, parents or people that we looked up to, but I’m thinking that there is probably a coach out there that had a big impact on developing you as an individual.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. One of the reasons we talked about the coaching academy was because we were concerned about the lack of preparation in some case, an incredibly important role. And as physical education departments have changed and the major has changed, the emphasis on coaching has kind of gone away in many cases.

Dr. John Thornton. It has and the coaching profession itself has changed. So there is a double-edged sword there, as far as the things that you can deal with. I think that one of the things that we have now, that really is exciting, is the partnership that people that think that way and that being health and kinesiology, education and human development and the undergraduate programs, university studies and recreations, parks, tourism and sciences, along with athletics. We have some partners out there that are doing great jobs in specific areas which I think the Huffines Institute in what we have proposed can help enhance what is out there, and actually add some value to some of the things that are already in existence.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. If we talk about five years down the road, what do you think that The Coaching Academy is going to look like at that time? What kind of programs are they going to have?

Dr. John Thornton. What I would hope where we would be and obviously we would have to have support to do these things?

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. And that is financial support for all of you who are listening and you want to donate, we would be glad to take those donations.

Dr. John Thornton. Was that a subtle enough... (Laughter) You did well!!(Laughter)

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. I hit them with the hammer (laughter)

Dr. John Thornton. Oh, ok...No, but I think that innovated, educational programming from seminars to direct studies, to support to existing programs that are out there, just financially speaking that it would impact coaches. We are talking about students that have the ability to make a decision from some of the things that we provide just as in awareness or where they might go for a job or where they might like to be involved as a career. So the promotion of those things would be one of the things that we would be able to do. The support of those things financially if we can and then be an innovative, as far as seminars, directed studies and clinics. Of course one of the beauties is working through the Huffines Institute because there is already an existing structure, podcast. Some of the things that you already do educationally wise that we might be able to roll into programs for coaches. So at the end of the day you would love to see almost a brand for what the coaching academy could be. You are going to get somebody who doesn't know all of the answers, but is going to be better prepared than the others, because they are going to have an extensive background in things outside the lines, between winning and losing that we are going to be able to provide or at least get them to think about. So the product that will come out and they will have pride in it and they will be able to do as good a job as they possibly can as they start their career. Then I would think that the practitioners outside would look back and see this as a vehicle to even enhance their futures and their careers and have a great sense of pride to have been affiliated with us. I think that is really something to look forward to and get excited about.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Now we may have some listeners that are out there thinking, "Oh right so we are going to do a coaching academy that is going to be like underwater basket-weaving". What would you say back to those people about the intellectual rigor of such? Can anybody do coaching or is this just suited for some people? Or?

Dr. John Thornton. Well, obviously to be involved in this you better have a passion, because being a coach is not an easy thing or job.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. No...(laughter)

Dr. John Thornton. And you know there are guys making a lot of money, but there are a lot of guys, men and women, that are doing it because they are passionate about what they are doing.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. And they are NOT making a lot of money...

Dr. John Thornton. And they are not making a lot of money and they need to make more, but they have a huge potential to have great impacts on their communities. What I would say to

individuals is that this is not a profession that you can fake it in. You are either going to be successful or you are not. What I would say is to be able to be prepared to get jobs and maintain and keep jobs. The product that you put out there needs to be at a high quality. To get there, like I have already said, there are programs that are already doing a fantastic job and our challenge I think is to partner with them and improve where we can in some areas and then add values to it.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. So we talked about your future goals and kind of the division of where it is going to go. And we talked about maybe why we should do this, but what we really haven't talked about is some of the immediate things that people can look forward to seeing happen in the coaching academy.

Dr. John Thornton. Well, one of the things is that they are going to have an ability to take a class from a very qualified individual that is going to be very passionate, and that is me. (Laughter...) No, but one of the things that I will do is I will be teaching a course coming up where I would try to connect the dots as far as the coaching profession is concerned. Everything from dealing with the media, to dealing with academic issues you might have, to managing budgets to getting along with other coaches, finding jobs and those types of things. I think there is already parts of these that are already out there, but I think that I will have an ability with my background and to be able to reach out to the individual on this campus and outside this campus that I can use to bring back to provide great insights.

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Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Well, that topic that you talked about, finding jobs, which is even more important these days, it seems like coaches in particular are certainly held to a win-loss record more now than they have ever been. So there is a lot of job turnover...

Dr. John Thornton. And there is a lot of movement. And if you are doing a great job, you are going to get a new job and if you are not doing a great job you are going to be trying to get a new job, so there is always that turnover and it is good, but it is a lifestyle that you have to be prepared for and that is another thing that will be covered, is just trying to develop an awareness of what coaching is in actuality.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Yeah. And we have talked about potential workshop over the summer.

Dr. John Thornton. Eventually and I think that it would be very exciting to mirror something like a coaching clinic that is done by different organizations, but have it related to Texas A&M, not just Aggies, you know and that would be a bad thing. But, to bring speakers in and have seminar situations and have access for our students on this campus and students from other campuses to come and listen to people that could provide insights and backgrounds into the profession that they are getting themselves ready to get into. Then along with that having ability to network as far as jobs are concerned, very much like coaching school is, where we tap into the career center here and other things that we know are out there to help people to get started in the

business. For example, the accelerate program, they have a job placement network that is involved and teaches certifications. We can work with them and work with others to be able to help people find options.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. You know folks should know that Coaching Academy, even though we have just officially launched it, is really been working over the last nine months, so we work together to help put together and help facilitate a curriculum change and university studies for sports conditioning which is a coaching degree. So those are the kind of activities that are going on right now.

Dr. John Thornton. We talked earlier about why the need for this, what coaching has changed? Ten years ago there was not that big of an emphasis on strength conditioning. Now there are facilities out there that are just out of this world and people need to be trained and they are trained, but we feel like that is one of the areas that we can promote, as well as the roles of youth development through RPTS, in recreation programs, community after school programs or coaches. So these are new options and opportunities that I think that we have a chance to help promote and make people aware of.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Yeah, you bring up the strength and condition coach again that is a new position basically that has come about over the last fifteen years. We have how many here at Texas A&M in the Athletic Department?

Dr. John Thornton. You have put me on the spot, but I'm going to say at least eight? I think at least eight?

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Yeah...I know I work with some of the NASCAR teams, every NASCAR team has at least one, if not multiple, strength and conditioning coaches. People think of coaches as specific sports, but there are these things called strength and conditioning coaches that actually work across several different sports.

Dr. John Thornton. You know back in the day, strength and conditioning was something that if we got time we might or we might not do that, but now it is integrated into everybody's program, whether it be football, soccer, volleyball. Everybody is involved in it, so that is something that is out there that hadn't been out there before.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Ok, so one last topic. You had mentioned earlier on that one of the missions is to help those that are already engaged in coaching. What do you mean by that?

Dr. John Thornton. I know that just for a fact, that there are areas and topics that coaches would appreciate. I know they do and research on their own, but there are areas that we can provide with the resources that we have at Texas A&M, from nutrition to academic issues, to just personal development things for student athletes, as well as coaches. Whether it is the vehicle of podcast or bringing people to campus to share their perspective with other coaches, much like a

coaching clinic. So the developmental opportunity for practitioners, the sky is the limit. In serving coaches in what they miss and what they would like to know more about and we have a lot of them out there. One of the things that is interesting, because of the uniqueness of the confluence of all of these entities that want to come together, the Letterman's Association, it is a lot of access to a lot of former players that are coaches and reaching out to them and getting them back and having an ability to share with Aggies here and with others what it is like to be in their roles and learn from us as they go about it.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Cool...I think that we are running out of time. John, as we always do, we allow people to give us a take home message. You are one of the staff now, but we are still going to ask you for your take home message. What do you think that people can take away from this thought about this new thing that we call The Texas A&M Coaching Academy?

Dr. John Thornton. What I would like for people to appreciate is there are some great things that go on in the coaching profession. I think that they are the go to people a lot of times on campus or in organizations, because they are leaders and doers. I think that the promotion and the understanding, the positive impact that coaches have or can have is something that we hope to promote and people appreciate. And I think that they do, but at the same time there are a lot of things that go on that I think that awareness can be enhances and that would be a great opportunity for us.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Great take home message. Thank you for being with us today.

Dr. John Thornton. Well, thank you Tim for the opportunity and I will be looking forward to working with you.

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. I enjoyed having you back and as always we thank everyone that is listening for taking the time to download us and if you are waiting for the podcast t-shirt question it is rapidly approaching. Here is our executive producer Cheryl with that question.

Cheryl. Which field of coaching is being newly integrated into every sport?

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. Great question, be the first one to e-mail us the answer to that question and send the e-mail to huffinespodcast@hlkn.tamu.edu and you will win one of those nifty podcast t-shirts. Again thank you for taking the time to download us and listening. Dr. Thornton, thank you for being with us again today.

Dr. John Thornton. Thank you, Tim...

Dr. Tim Lightfoot. And as always we thank our production staff of Cheryl and Kelly with us and until next week when you join us again. I know because we will have another interesting individual in the world of Sports Medicine and Human Performance. We hope that you have an active and healthy week.

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