

Human Performance Project comes to CV schools

By Thomas Franz 

🕒 September 30, 2015



John Underwood gives a speech to student-athletes from Macomb Dakota High School on Sept. 22. (Photo by Sean Work)

MACOMB TOWNSHIP— “Accept what you signed up for.” That was the key message delivered by John Underwood, the founder of the Human Performance Project, to student-athletes from Chippewa Valley schools the week of Sept. 22.

Underwood previously visited the district in 2010, and his return trip focused on the effects of drug and alcohol use on athletes, along with diet and sleeping patterns.

Underwood has been speaking and working with groups for 16 years, and his organization, the Human Performance Project, works with professional, college and Olympic sports teams, the Air Force and Navy SEALs, among others.

Previously, Underwood was a track and field athlete at the University of Oregon, and studied human performance in Finland before returning to work in Lake Placid as a coach to U.S. Olympic athletes.

Underwood stated several times the influence his coaches had on him as an athlete, and his desire to not disappoint them.

“I would’ve given everything I had and more because they were trying to help me do something special with my life,” Underwood said. “I cared most about being an athlete when I was young. I didn’t drink a beer until I was 27 years old.”

Underwood said that he typically uses his work experience with the SEALs as an example to younger athletes of the difference between being truly dedicated to a sport.

“Working on the Navy SEALs project was the best example of that. If athletes applied that level of focus, they’d freak themselves out with their level of performance,” Underwood said. “Mental, physical and emotional, SEALs can call upon all of it at a moment’s notice. They’re hyper-vigilant humans in every sense of their being. I wish there were more people who could maximize their potential by simply caring more about what they signed up for.”

The Chippewa Valley Coalition for Youth and Families sponsored the visit to help launch a districtwide website to help parents and athletes take the lessons from Underwood’s speeches and put them into practice.

The website will provide facts on sleep and nutrition with scientific information on the effects of alcohol and marijuana. A coach’s manual, information for parents and an athletic code of conduct are also set to be part of the first batch of content for the new website, which is slated to be launched within a month.

“Our athletes are a highly visible group, and a certain level of discipline is expected, and so to focus on the athletes of Chippewa and Dakota, and the middle schools, was very important to us,” said Charlene McGunn, the director of the coalition.

Macomb Dakota Athletic Director Mike Fusco attended the Underwood speeches and said that Dakota and high schools throughout Michigan have already begun implementing policies that reflect the suggestions of Underwood and other researchers.

“The movement in high school athletics to protect the athletes from concussions by limiting contact, the heat and humidity index controls, the concussion protocol we have as part of our program, all of those things are moving in the direction of protecting the athletes, and I think this message, the message John Underwood sent, amplifies that message,” Fusco said.

Fusco added that Dakota coaches have been diligent in sending messages to their student athletes about nutrition and bad decision-making on a daily basis, and the Underwood speech gave an answer as to why they preach those lessons.

“Many of our kids and parents don’t know why we tell them to get eight or 10 hours of sleep. This gives them that information. Many people don’t know why the legal drinking age in Michigan is 21 years old, and it’s because of some of the things John presented today, that your brain is still developing until you’re about 21 years old, and we don’t want people damaging that progress and putting a stop to that progress,” Fusco said.

One of Underwood’s goals for his program, especially for younger athletes, is to create greater involvement in positive decision-making.

“If this program gets running and it’s youth-driven, and you get the right kids involved, all those things go off the cliff and fall out of the picture because you’ll have kids who care enough about what they’re doing that they’ll forego partying for a chance to win state, and that’s not a hard sell,” Underwood said.

For more information on Underwood’s Human Performance Project, visit www.lifeofanathlete.us.