

# WinSmarter

## Poker Chip and Challenge Coin Program

### Poker Chips



So we made up some custom poker chips for our program, utilizing our logo, our core values and our mantra. The first couple of years we did this, we just used plain old generic poker chips, though, so don't think you need to be too fancy!

#### **Here's exactly how it works:**

Over the course of the first week or two of practice, utilizing our pre-practice talks, we teach our team the core values of our program.

When I say "teach" them, what I really mean is that we explain to them what the values are, why they're important and then give them specific things they can do to model those core values. This part is really important because it helps our kids make the connection between these abstract terms and what these values actually look like in practice.

## **Chip Ceremony**

After we're confident they understand our values, what they mean and how we expect them to demonstrate those values on an ongoing basis, they're ready for what we call our Chip Ceremony.

We do this at the end of practice one day and we make a big deal about it. Since they've already been through the first few weeks of practice it's almost like that was their trial period and now they've finally earned their spot on the team since they've demonstrated their work ethic and understanding of our culture and core values.

We call them up one at a time and ask them if they're willing to be "all in" for the team and our values. When they accept the challenge, we give them a single chip. We literally make them look at the team and say "I'm all in for you guys." The team claps, cheers and screams for each kid as they receive their chip.

We tell them that chip is super exclusive and only a small group of deserving student-athletes ever get to possess one. Now that they've earned it, we expect them to carry it on them at all times as a reminder that they're part of something bigger than themselves and as a reminder of the core values of our program.

If they lose it, there will be consequences!

I know it sounds kind of cheesy, but over the past few years, this has become a really big deal to the kids on our team and a real point of pride for them - earning their chip and being part of the program.

## **Daily Practice**

Each day when our kids come to practice, they have to bring their chip with them. As they walk into the wrestling room they have to drop their chip in a bucket we keep by the door. We make sure they realize that dropping that chip into the bucket each day, means they're "all in" for practice that day - they're ready to give their best effort, work hard, support their teammates and model our core values.

Each day when they drop their chips into the bucket, they have to earn them back in practice that day. If they do, we return the chips to them at the end of practice.

Each day in practice or competition, kids who we feel do a particularly good job modeling our core values can earn another chip. This is so much better than an individual award because the kids know it's not limited to just one of them - they all have an opportunity each day to earn another chip.

Similarly, if you don't live up to our standards on any given day, you can have your chip taken away and you have to try to earn it back the next day.

Our kids get REALLY into this. They have the opportunity to accrue many chips over the course of the season (and we want them to! More on that below).

A really important point here is that earning or losing your chip has nothing to do with competitive outcomes. It's entirely based on each kid's demonstration of our core values, so an inexperienced freshman has the opportunity to earn just as many chips as our star senior.

## **Last Practice**

We have another Chip Ceremony our final practice before entering the postseason. Again, we'll do this at the end of practice. On that day we tell our kids they must bring all the chips they've earned to practice. We try to make sure that every kid has earned somewhere between 10-20 chips over the course of the season so they have a good supply of them.

We'll have the kids circle up and one-by-one we'll call them into the center to dump ALL of their chips into our bucket. We make a really big deal about this and about all the chips they've earned, how proud they should be for their collective efforts and how proud we are of all of them. The team claps, cheers and screams for each kid as they come up to dump their chips. There are a few reasons why this is really powerful and really important:

1. They're once again re-affirming that they're ready to go "all-in" for the team in the postseason. Once again, we make them look at the team and say "I'm all in for you guys."
2. We point out to them that all the chips they have are a visual representation of all the hard work and effort they've put in over the course of the season. We use this as a way to point out to them how well-prepared they are for the postseason.

3. When they've all added their chips, the bucket is usually overflowing with chips. We use this to point out how strong our team can be when we put all of our collective efforts together toward a common cause.
4. We get all the chips back to use again next year!

## **End of the Season**

We've also tied our chips to our season awards. Because we focus so strongly on the process rather than the outcome, we love to give awards to kids that exemplify that kind of focus. The easiest way to do that is to tie the awards to the number of chips a kid earns over the season.

A key point here is that we're creating an opportunity for everyone to earn an award, not just one kid. Don't get me wrong, this isn't an "everyone gets a participation trophy" kind of thing. What I mean is we set a threshold - and it's a high one - and we tell our kids anyone who earns more than a certain number of chips qualifies for this award.

What we've done in the past is create a special hoody, not available for sale, that we give to any kid who qualifies. What we're also thinking of doing next year is creating a large plaque for our wrestling room, to which we can add names each year of the kids who win this PantherTough award.

## **Challenge Coins**

These poker chips have become a prominent part of our program and our culture, but at the end of the season they must be returned, to be earned again next year.

For seniors though, there never is a "next year" so we do something really special for them.

We strongly believe that our program's values help kids become successful on the mat and in life, so giving our seniors a parting gift that thanks them for their service to the program and reinforces our core values for them as they move on from our program was a no-brainer.

We created challenge coins that look almost identical to our poker chips. These are high quality gold-colored coins that make a great keepsake and our seniors can keep with them forever to remember their time in the program and the core values they learned. We couldn't think of a better gift to send them off with!



At our end-of-the-season dinner as we call each senior up front, talk about their contributions to our program and present them the coin in one of those fancy fuzzy boxes in front of their teammates, friends and families.



This has been a super impactful event every year for our seniors, their parents and even our coaches and younger athletes. For our seniors, they each get a special moment to feel honored and thanked and they get something meaningful to them that

not only symbolizes their time in the program, but gives them **a permanent connection to our program** to take with them into the future.

For the parents of our seniors and our underclassmen, this always leaves them feeling great about our program. Often this translates to the parents of our seniors staying involved in our program after their kids graduate - **many become donors or continue to help with booster club events.**

For the parents of our underclassmen, watching this tradition almost always results in a greater buy-in on their behalf, makes them bigger fans of our program and the opportunity it provides for their kids, and, maybe most importantly, **sets us up for great relationships with the parents in our program** going forward.

Finally, for our younger athletes they get to watch the kids on the team they most look up to honored for their contributions to the culture of our program, not just for their competitive successes.

Not only does this help us subtly reinforce the behaviors that ultimately drive success in and out of sports (our core values), but it shows each kid that they can be an important part of the program even if they're not the star of the team.

**This has done a ton to keep kids engaged and committed to working hard, and tends to build a bridge towards true intrinsic motivation.**