

COACHING YOUNG COUCH POTATOES

A GAME PLAN
FOR RAISING
RESPONSIBLE
YOUNG ADULTS



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CLAPIER

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YOUNG ATHLETES TODAY ARE DIFFERENT THAN YOU WERE

Get Over It

My son was no athlete. The positive team experience and fitness goals that he accepted as part of the team inspired healthy eating. He made those decisions on his own, set goals, and began exercising every day.

He took control of his own life in junior high school. Later he discovered a passion for cycling and recently graduated with a master's degree in Information Technology.

—*Kathryn J., Mother*

I'M AN IDAHO FARM BOY. I grew up in a country setting where physical activity was a way of life. There were always chores to do, animals to feed, crops to irrigate, and interesting places to play. We were seldom drawn indoors by television and never by video games or computers. When I was ten years old, I could throw a bale of hay and my brother off the haystack.

A huge stack of straw bales provided one of my most delightful memories of physical activity. My Grandpa George put a fresh crop of straw next to his corrals to use as bedding through the winter for his cows. He sent my cousin Stan and me to the top to throw bales down. We soon discovered that throwing each other off the pile was fun because landing in the straw was painless. The battle at the top was thrilling. (As I remember, Stan did most of the falling.) We spent an entire day climbing,

fighting, and throwing each other down. It was fun. It was physical. We were exultant.

We knocked a lot of straw off Grandpa's stack. We changed the symmetry from square to round and tore the twine string from more bales of straw than we could repair. But lucky for us, Grandpa valued developing good boys more than maintaining a good-looking stack of straw. He loved us and understood the value of physical play.

I remember him often when I think of a coaching model. Even when our behavior varied from his expectations, he recognized the value of our play. He saw it reflecting in our eyes and let our fun guide his reaction to that activity. In other words, he did not get mad. He knew that our play served the greater good of growing young people, and he channeled our enthusiasm instead of resisting our exuberance or letting it bother him. He did, however, strongly suggest that we rebuild his straw stack. And we did, more than once.

Fast forward thirty years. We live in a very different world. The lack of physical activity in our children's sedentary lifestyles is reaching dangerous and epidemic levels powered by a vast wasteland of electronic time-fillers. Thinking young people know how to play a game, work, or use physical ability can be a dangerous expectation. Media and sedentary behaviors fill much and control most of children's leisure time, yet we immediately expect them to "play ball."

The State of Our Youth's Health

From 1980 to 2004, the number of overweight children ages six to eleven more than doubled from 7 percent to 18 percent of our population. During that same time, the number of overweight children ages twelve to nineteen more than tripled from 5 percent to 17.1 percent of our population.

Obesity is the excessive accumulation of body fat present when total body fat is more than 25 percent in boys and more than 32 percent in girls. Between 5 and 25 percent of children and teenagers in the United

States are obese. As many as one child in four is in physical danger from too little exercise and too much poor food.

These numbers are frightening. The problem belongs to us all, not just children. It is a problem that we, their parents, are handing them. Nearly 65 percent of America's adult population is overweight, and 33 percent are clinically obese, a number that has risen more than 30 percent during the past three decades. Childhood and teenage obesity has almost tripled in the last decade alone. Obesity is now one of the leading causes of death in America, second only to tobacco use.[1]

Lack of exercise is stealing the essence of health from our children. Consider the following statistics:

- Every hour children play video games or watch television may double their risk of obesity.
- In the United States, childhood obesity rates have tripled over the last twenty years.
- England is planning to create cities of 20,000 inhabitants specifically designed to combat obesity in children.

Video games successfully compete for young people's time at every age.

- Video game play is replacing children's physical activity.
- On average, eighth grade boys play video games twenty-three hours a week, and eighth grade girls play them twelve hours a week.
- Studies now indicate that electronic games should be limited to prevent childhood obesity.

Assume Nothing about Their Ability

Physicality is the body's ability to perform athletically and to move physically. It becomes a measurement of an individual's level of biomechanical capacity. The lack of this capacity is the single greatest threat to childhood development and health. Because declining levels of physical fitness, increasing choices for sedentary entertainment, and bad eating habits are producing children so vastly different from those even a

decade ago, your job as a coach becomes more important than ever before. You must deal with more than you might imagine.

As you delve into your role as youth coach, parent, or mentor, you may be the best hope that an athlete has for not only enjoying the game but also building a foundation of quality experience that will affect them the rest of their life. You may think that sounds like too much power and responsibility. But it is not. You stand at a powerful crossroad for every child in your care. Most parents want youth sports to provide an outlet for physical activity, counteract their children's lack of exercise, and allow them time to safely have fun. Not only must youth coaches teach the rules of the game, but we must also work with a growing number of children who lack even basic physical ability. It is through the potential of each child that we draw the power to continue in our role. The games may be played now, but the legacy of our coaching can last forever.

Let Each Beginning Be Simple

On the first day of a wrestling class, I let the kids run, jump, roll, vault, walk, skip, and do everything I can think of so I can watch them experience basic balance and movement. This is especially important if some kids are new to the sport. Regardless of the sport you are coaching, you must determine level one competence before moving to level two. I never assume that a child whom I have never coached brings any skill to their first day of practice. It is important to put them through these motion exercises. You must see how they move so that you know what you have to work with, where to start, and how to design your workouts.

No Physical Conditioning

Because so many youth are growing into maturity with little or no physicality, athletic trainers have developed a new phrase to describe this dangerous lifestyle. *De-conditioned* describes a person who has never been in shape and does nothing to contribute to a healthy physical condition. They live so far removed from physical activity that they lack even basic

muscle tone. Without necessary encouragement and needed skills to change their lifestyle, their options become limited—get healthy or die.

Is it any wonder that coaching is more than showing up for practice in Little League? We must not only teach the growing generation to play the games but also learn to love exercise. We have a difficult job on our hands.

The Purpose Isn't What You Think

Youth sport programs give children a laboratory to investigate life's experience. Through youth sports, children develop more than physicality. They acquire social skills that allow them to work with others, experience the value of working toward a simple goal, learn the disappearing art of winning with class or losing with grace, and discover the importance of being active now and through the rest of their lives. No one disagrees that these are important issues. You, their coach, are the guardian of the gate, the keeper of the keys, the dispenser of wisdom and insight. A coach is not just the guy or gal who yells when things go wrong.

Coaching's Great Questions

Little League sports give children supervised activity in a safe environment. When winning becomes the paramount activity, then a number of grand paradoxes emerge:

- How do I win if my athletes can't play?
- How can I teach them to play when they have the attention span of mosquitoes?
- How do I help them physically work when their idea of work reflects neither effort nor physicality?

What Brings You to Coaching?

Someone decides to coach for one of two reasons: to spend time with their children or to prove something for themselves. The first group is

larger, the second group more dangerous. I believe the two types of coaches can best be described as *wannabes* and *should-a-beens*.

Wannabes want to be good coaches, be involved in a quality experience for their own or other children, and be part of an organization that benefits their community. Winning a few games is a nice plus.

Should-a-beens should have been greater than they remember, should have had better high school or college careers, should have been professional athletes, and in a few cases, should have been more committed to the children than to controlling the outcome of the games.

Fortunately, most coaches fall into the first category. Good volunteer coaches act upon an opportunity to connect youth sports and healthy exercise to time spent with children. Even though their motives are good, they have little or no practical experience. Most of their coaching experience comes from playing sports in their youth.

Even with good personal memories, the value of previous experience is minimal, if valid at all. Both today's environment and children are so different from past generations that coaching is like nothing seen before. Most coaches want to do a good job and are willing to learn. Reading this book is evidence of your desire to gain skills to help young athletes.

Destructive coaches, the *should-a-beens*, are too proud and stuck in their ways to accept advice or counsel. They coach blindly, use outdated intuition, and overlook most of what is needed to effectively connect with and help children. Too many try to recapture something from their own youth, something that they failed to realize as a competitor, and end up as tyrants. They inject the worst of the coaching experience into the innocence of children's games.

Tyrannical coaches are created through a variety of situations. Perhaps they thought they were better athletes than they actually were, or they may believe that their own child is a better athlete than performance validates. They crave power, want to be in charge, or simply do not know better. They are often proud, which means they do not listen; stubborn, which means they will not change; defiant, which means they ignorantly use outdated methods. Whatever the reason, these *should-a-been* coaches

are blind to the varying behaviors of children, the difference of time, and the culture in which they coach. They remain neither able to see what is nor envision what might be.

Trying to prove something through coaching often means that winning games is your only measurement of success. Should-a-beens fail to intelligently measure the cost of winning and are left out of balance. A good coach knows that winning is not the most important reason for involvement. The goal of coaching is not to prove anything. It is to help children.

If you win all of your games, does that prove you are the best? If you lose all your games, does that indicate that you are the worst? Not necessarily—and usually not at all!

Worst or Best of What?

Every win-at-all-cost program I have observed, including high school and college programs, reaches the championship levels by stepping over the bodies of injured children or by manipulating rules of conduct and eligibility in some manner. Creating injury as a result of your coaching can never justify a program. (College and professional athletics are not part of this discussion. They are entirely different animals representing entirely separate scenarios.) Little League sports, when conducted in their most positive format, are simply a game. Anything can happen during competition. The playing ground of youth sports is vastly different from higher levels of sport. The imbalance of talent and purpose is so diverse and the disparity of skills so vast that youth coaches must be careful not to put such import into conclusions such as “I win, therefore you are a loser.” Winning and losing prove nothing. They are simply a measurement of the child’s play. A child becoming a healthier person is too complex and the future’s sake too important to impose such unweighted dichotomies of purpose as winning and losing on children’s lives. A child on a losing team is not a loser, yet they can be labeled as such by their competitors, coaches, and themselves.

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