

## So you want to be a coach!

### Coaching smart

We all like to think of ourselves as pretty capable at our day jobs, but when it comes to coaching kids in baseball, lack of experience can be a source of frustration and bad feelings around. For starters it does help to have played a lot of baseball yourself at some point in your life. It's not a prerequisite to being a good coach. Just like in the sport itself, coaching has certain fundamentals. Your two biggest concerns at the lower levels (10 and under) should be:

- A. **Make the experience fun-** That means fun for the kids and fun for you too. If everyone is having a good time, you're doing something right.
- B. **Teach the game-** There is a multitude of books on the finer points of coaching, teaching skills, drills, etc. Take the time to read these, but first, you must know how to teach. One rule of thumb when talking to a young player one-on-one (as simple as it sounds) is to not stand over him and talk down to him. Bend over so you're face level with him, or even kneel down, so he is even with you or a little above. It's amazing how this will prevent intimidation, and keep his attention. Keep in mind that your highest goal at this level is to instill a love for the game in your players, so they'll want to continue playing for years to come. Helping them to succeed at the basics of the game is more important than any number of wins. Next there are three very important areas we need to cover to be effective as a coach, which makes for a more successful (not to be confused with winning) team:
  - C. **Require respect-** Kids sense a pushover, and will take advantage and walk all over you. You'll get no drills done, no practices will be productive, and games will be sloppy. The key is to set the ground rules right at the start, preferably in writing. Point out what you expect from your team, and what they can expect from you. And stick to it. Just like you must follow through with your threats of punishment with your own kids when they push it too far, you must be gentle but firm with a team.
  - D. **Be prepared-** Like a big league manager, a good coach is prepared. That means you come to practices with a specific plan as to what you will be working on that day, right down to the drills and stations. Always have your equipment, plenty of practice balls, as well as first aid, an ice chest (for bumps and bruises) and even a cooler of ice water for hot days. For games days, have your line-up and fielding rotations figured out the night before and charted on paper. Have a few alternatives in case some kids didn't show, or get hurt. There's nothing more annoying than a team taking the field with seven players as the coach scrambles madly to figure out who needs to play three innings as a requirement so their parents don't complain which leads to my next subject.
  - E. **Communicate with parents-** The parents can make a joy or a chore. Distribute a roster with phone numbers. Assign duties, such as snacks, field maintenance, etc. Let them know your game and practice schedules, enforce pick-up times (you're not a babysitter), and have them voice concerns to you, not behind your back. Keep these simple concepts in mind this coming season, and you'll do fine.

**Good luck!**

## How to bring out the best in young athletes

### Coaching smart

I. I find it interesting how sports psychology is getting an amazing amount of exposure in sports-how to best motivate athletes. Challenge their innate senses of pride; draw out their inner champions.

I think that is great stuff when you have a receptive athlete who not only wants to hear what you have to say on that level, but also understands how to respond. With kids though, this magic formula doesn't exist. To me, the crux and primary issue of working with young athletes lies in the pedagogical science as much as it does in the training application, maybe more.

Developing relationships with your young athletes is the most powerful thing you can do in the task of helping them create their sporting potential or adhering to a lifetime of physical activity. In my opinion, it's not about 'beating the drum' through vocal inspirations with all kids. One of the biggest shortcomings I have seen with many coaches and trainers is that they play the 'vocal motivation coach' with every athlete they encounter. It's simply not the most effective thing to do. The same way that not all exercise selection, arrangement or amount of weight is a one size fits all equation, so to be the same about the interpersonal relationship building sequences called coaching. I have organized my thoughts into categories of athletes in order to best describe what I mean.

#### **A. The athlete is not motivated and doesn't possess skills:**

You know this athlete. Shy, quiet and lacking both confidence and ability (one likely is the reason for the other). This is not the kid that is going to respond to a "verbal – go get 'em' style of coaching." In my experiences, I qualify the coaching style needed in this situation as '**direct**'. You need to take the time to make this young person feel comfortable in your group training setting. More often than not, I do this by speaking very quietly and directly to him once I have sent the other athletes on a task. Kids like this typically don't enjoy being 'spoken to' or 'singled out' in front of everyone. That's why I call this coaching style, direct. Direct your questions, suggestions and task to this youngster personally so that they do not feel 'on display' in front of the group.

#### **B. The athlete is not motivated but has a high skill level:**

Here's where the highly excitable 'rah, rah' coach can be effective. The kid is good; he shows great skills and demonstrates wonderful technical ability. I'm very familiar with this type of athlete because that was me growing up so now as a coach I understand very often their motivation is lost due to the fact that they lack challenge. Things may have come very easily to this athlete he just never felt challenged. The coaching system warranted here I call '**inspire**'. In a positive and uplifting manner, challenge this young athlete to achieve more. Alter his regimen design by adding an exercise or increasing the difficulty of the sequence.

However, be careful of the young athlete who is talented, but lacks motivation because they simply have no interest in this sport anymore. That's where the interpersonal skill of coaching is key. You have to know whether or not you are 'inspiring' a young athlete who is just looking for a challenge or one is looking for a way out of sports!

**C. The athlete is very motivated and highly skilled:**

The phrase is 'delegate'. I have seen so many coaches try to corral athletes made up of these traits, almost like they want to take credit for the child's abilities. Sheltering kids like this and imposing your will and ideas on them is just not smart. Kids like this need to be part of the decision cycle. Demonstrate explain exercise selection to them; work at perfecting technical excellence, have them understand the goals associated with programming, and then include them in building the teams program. Kids are smart people. While some need to be 'directed' others can and should be part of the coaching process. Talk to kids like this and get their feedback. Give them authority to comprehend matters of technique and exercise progression and then encourage them to work with you on practice design. Finally, the last athlete category is;

**D. The athlete has a high level of motivation but very little skill:**

The coach's job here is to 'guide'. The player wants to do it. He works hard at getting better. He really wants to improve. Guide them. Work hard with them on fundamental techniques. Match his eager dispositions with an equally energetic coaching style dedicated to helping them learning and improve their skill level.

So, there you go. Four different, yet common athletes, with four very different, yet corresponding coaching styles. Coaching is a wonderful art that you must work hard to become better at. Far too often in baseball we look at technical application of practicing only. With kids, that's simply not good enough.

**II. How to coach a team with kids of different personality types:**

This is very common, but almost impossible to avoid. Whenever you bring 2 or more young athletes together, you are bound to see more than one personality type and therefore need to incorporate more than one coaching style.

**A. Here are the four categories of players**

- Athlete 1 (low motivation & little skill) - requires a 'direct' approach of coaching
- Athlete 2 (low motivation & high skill) - requires 'inspire' approach of coaching
- Athlete 3 (high motivation & high skill) - requires 'delegate' approach of coaching
- Athlete 4 (high motivation & low skill) - requires 'guide' approach of coaching

## **B. Examples of what to do to get the most out of the athlete**

**Athlete 1** - Get down to his level (which would be on your knees given the height difference and quietly let him know what a good job he is doing. Ask him if he has any questions about what he is doing. Chances are, if he did have questions, he would not have asked them when the entire group was together. The key here is the tone of your voice – be patient, relaxed and easy-going.

**Athlete 2** – ‘Seriously Joe that is even better than last week!’ ‘Your making this look easy, let me show you a more challenging method, because I know you can do it!’ Remember, they have low motivation, but high skill – Encouraging and challenging are good methods to use.

**Athlete 3** – Ask him what he thinks. ‘How does it feel?’ ‘You feeling good with that today or you want to switch it up a little?’ ‘What do you think we could add to it?’ Delegate some of the responsibilities of their training to them and help them make it work. Empower them to seek out and create new ideas.

**Athlete 4** – Verbally reward their effort and work to make them understand the movement better. ‘That looks great, Johnny!’ ‘Now, you see how left elbow is dropping when you throw the ball? What do you need to do to correct it?’

This flow and sequence of coaching can be taken through the entire practice, even through your drill and technical skill portions. Just create and segment the drills, include a teaching component preceding each segment and apply the appropriate style of coaching to each individual athlete.