

## MAKE SURE YOU HAVE THE RIGHT PRIORITIES

HEY, COACH, this column is directed at you!

Look, just between you and me, we need to get a few priorities straight about coaching youngsters in youth league sports. Just in case you missed some of the basic fundamental philosophies about coaching kids, let me take a little time here to refresh your memory about why you've volunteered to coach-and even more important, about why kids sign up to play youth sports in the first place.

### 1. First and foremost, let all the kids on your team play and play a lot.

This rule might appear to be fairly obvious, but let's be honest: How many times have you orchestrated your lineup so that only the more talented kids get the most playing time? Do you think the other kids aren't aware that they're being cheated out of quality playing time? Do you think their parents don't also know what's going on? C'mon, Coach, let's get back to the real world. The truth is, while it's wonderful if your team wins a lot of games, and perhaps even the league championship, what the kids on your roster want to do is play in the games. They don't want to be relegated to the role of a cheerleader who only sees action when the score is lopsided.

### 2. Be sensitive to every youngster's wishes and dreams.

Suppose a kid on your team isn't a terribly good athlete but is dying to play shortstop? Let him try it and give him the satisfaction of at least putting forth his best effort. I can hear your protests: "But putting a weak player at shortstop isn't fair to the other kids on the team. After all, they want to win!" Nonsense. The entire purpose of youth league sports is to allow kids the freedom to choose and chase after their dreams, and to see how well (or poorly) they fare in their endeavors. Trust me on this, Coach, nobody was ever offered a pro contract or a college scholarship because his or her fifth-grade Little League team won the town championship.

### 3. If you want to have a real impact as a coach, make yourself into an active and solid role model.

This means doing and saying the right things. All the time. No cursing. No yelling at the refs. No yelling at your players. No sarcasm with the kids. No moodiness or pointing fingers if the team loses or has a bad game. Everybody knows how difficult it is to find good role models in sports today. So rather than be part of the problem, why not be part of the solution? Remember, in sports, not all coaches are created equally. So make a pact with yourself to be one of those rare coaches who really does stand for all the right themes in sports. Become one of those unusual individuals who truly has a major positive impact on the lives of young athletes.

#### *SOME FRIENDLY ADVICE*

*When your emotions run high on the sidelines, take a deep breath and remind yourself that they're only kids out there playing a kids' game. To make a difference in a young athlete's life, give him the courage and confidence to chase his dreams. That's what he really needs from you, Coach. Be there for the kids. Encourage them, help them and praise them. You'll be rewarded with much more than just wins.*

*Sports psychology expert Rick Wolff is the father of three children and the author of Good Sports, The Concerned Parent's Guide to Competitive Youth Sports (Sagamore, 1-800-327-5557).*

*You can send questions to him at Parents' Guide, P.O. Box 5574, New York, N.Y. 10185-5574*