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Since I started my baseball/softball business in 2007, I have found two things to be very rewarding. One is obviously helping young athletes get better at the game, and seeing the progress of the kids that come through the program. The other is the conversations we have as a coaching staff. One of the conversations that took place after a camp one night is the genesis of this article.

The question was posed as "What are we coaching for?" When pressed on the issue, she asked if we were coaching the kids to be good little league players, good high school players, or good college players? What was the end game? What was the goal? Her opinion was that we should be grooming all the players that come through the program as though the goal was to play college baseball or softball.

This conversation stuck with me for a long time. I thought about our mission, how it relates to our instruction, and also how it relates to coaches that coach the kids in leagues during the summer months. I finally settled on this philosophy that guides us today:

Coaching is closely intertwined with teaching. In fact, just like the old time carriage that was pulled by horses, a coach, by true definition, *carries a person from one place to another*. As a baseball or softball coach, where are we carrying them to? What's the end game? What's the goal?

In my view, we as coaches should be taking the young athlete from where they are at and carrying them to where they need to go. We need to take those athletes and prepare them for the competition they will see at present time, while also setting them up for success at the next level. An example of this would be taking your team of 9/10 year olds and coaching them on the fundamental things they need to know to be successful during the year, but at the same time, exposing them to what will lie ahead at the 11/12 year old level.



This can be tough for many reasons. Limited practice time, indoor practices and limited space, and the biggest obstacle- kids at different ability levels. Perhaps a daunting task for a volunteer coach, but then again, it's a thankless job and nobody said it was going to be easy.

Therefore, I pose this question to the coaches reading this: What are you coaching for? If your answer is to win the league at all costs, or to dominate each team you play while making sure your best players are in key positions the whole time, you may be missing the mark a bit. Do not get me wrong- I will be the first person to raise my hand and say that winning is important. Winning creates confidence, it creates swagger. It evokes excitement. And most of all, winning is fun.

However, let's step back and put this into perspective. In the grand scheme of things, is it more important to win the 7/8 year old league or foster a love for the game in each and every one of those fifteen kids you have on the team? Is it more important to get a first place ribbon at the end of the year, or to develop each child throughout the season, exposing them to multiple positions? Would you rather win because of six key players and perhaps have three players never return to the game the following year, or engage each player throughout the season so they all feel like they contributed?

What are you coaching for?

By now it is no secret that fewer kids are playing baseball and softball. Many kids are turning to soccer, lacrosse, and other sports that are more "exciting". Major League Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred has been adamant about reviving baseball within today's youth--to attract those kids at an early age and hold their interest as they grow in talent and knowledge. Our role as coaches is to teach the game, foster a love for the game, and keep as many kids in the game as possible. Will they all play college ball? No. Will they all play high school ball? No. Will all of them come back the following year? Probably not. However, the goal should be to have them all return the next year EXCITED about the season at hand.

The question then becomes, "What can you do as a coach to foster a love for the game, improve as the year goes on, develop players at multiple levels, and win ballgames?" It's a daunting task, right?



The biggest thing you can do as a coach is to be up front with your players and communicate with them as often as possible. This includes telling a player that they may not play a lot of innings during a game or play the position they want to. However, the best reinforcement you can give those players is that they haven't mastered the skills they need YET. These kids need to know that you believe that they can and WILL improve, and in return, you will get their best effort to get better. As a side note to that, I've never been able to watch a 9-year-old play and tell you how good they will be at 18. Nobody can.

Therefore, do not give up on those kids that may not be superstars at a young age. We all progress and grow at different rates.

Another important role of the coach is to keep practice moving and have all players engaged for as much of the time as possible. The diehard player can wait four minutes between chances to field a ground ball in practice. However, most kids cannot and will become bored. Invoke the help of as many of your players parents as possible, have a plan, and have them execute that plan with you. Have multiple offensive, defensive, and base running stations to keep the kids moving and active throughout practice.

It is my opinion that kids should be playing and learning as many positions in practice as possible. This doesn't mean they will be playing them in the game, but they will get exposure to those positions. This will make them better players and keep them engaged.

Also, all players should be exposed to pitching. And as a coach, you need to make sure they are being taught the correct way to pitch from the beginning, so they don't develop bad habits from the start. It is still true that you can never have too much pitching. Kids take vacations, get hurt, get sick, etc. If all kids have had practice time on the mound, then you as a coach will have more options as the season moves forward.



What are you coaching for? It's a great question to ask, as the answer will impact the players you coach this season.



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