

Remembering the big picture



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BUT LEARNING FUNDAMENTALS AND
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- NANCY JUSTIS

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From our guest contributor, Nancy Justis.

Across the country, there are thousands of opportunities for kids of all ages to participate in competitive sports, ranging from city recreation programs, all the way up to elite and AAU teams. Most of these programs are coached by volunteers. Many of these volunteers are moms and dads of kids on the teams.

As one of those former kid athletes and now a spectator watching my grandsons from the stands, I understand the pluses and minuses of the volunteer coach. Understandably, there are the coaches who seem to love what they are doing and do it the right way. There are others who struggle with the concept of coaching youth sports.

Volunteer or not, I think it is imperative that the volunteer coach asks him or herself, “Why do I want to coach? How should I coach? What is my motivation to coach?”

My biggest pet peeve with youth coaches is that they stress winning over development. Winning is important for motivation

and stick-to-it-ness, but learning fundamentals and life lessons is so much more important.

Positive Coaching Alliance, a national non-profit that makes "Better Athletes, Better People" through on-line and live courses, offers these tips for the parent-coach.

- Be clear on your own goals for coaching. Coaches of kids just starting to play a sport may have the simple goal of a season enjoyable enough that everyone returns for next season.
- Share your goals with your players and parents from the start. Have a pre-season parent meeting or at the end of a practice to let them know why you are coaching. "Let them have so much fun they'll return next season" and "to also teach some skills and life lessons".
- Invite the parents to help. At practices and games.
- Welcome each player by name at every practice and game. They'll feel welcome and positive.
- Plan practices that keep kids active. They'll stay more focused. Avoid lines. Bring plenty of equipment so they aren't standing around. Repeat drills for practice.
- Face the sun, take a knee and be brief. Get onto their level physically so you can see eye-to-eye. Make sure you are facing into the sun. Shorter discussions aids in attention spans than fewer longer discussions.
- Pick one-to-two areas of focus per practice/game. Simpler is better for focus.
- Create a team cheer and cheer often. Kids love having adults be silly with them.
- End practice/competition on a positive note. "Who saw one of your teammates do something well?" "Parents, what did you see that you liked?"
- Don't forget that it can be hard. You go in with high expectations but don't have control over the

outcome. Share your challenges with coaches who have been doing it longer.

Volunteering can change your life. I read a blog recently by Kate Leavell and I thought she was right on.

“Coaching youth sports is less about the sport and more about the development of people. ..You’re leading kids with no life experience down a road that will teach them how to navigate their future in an environment filled with fun and competition. You can learn the skills and the breakdowns of your sport in the myriad of educational sources out there – what you really need to coach – is heart!

“It may be stressful, take up a lot of your time, and you may feel overwhelmed, but at the end of the season – you’ll never be the same, you will be (a) better, more enlightened and more passionate human being. Because once you are called coach it won’t last for just a season. Once you are called coach – you are one for life.”

Finally, “Changing the Game Project” says coaches are accountable to athletes in the following ways:

- Treat them with respect and encourage them as they learn.
- Be a positive role model.
- Be a clear, consistent communicator and listener.
- Make it safe to fail and learn.

I could go on and on about what makes a good or bad youth sports coach but this is a start. Remember, it’s all for the kids.

For more information about civility in youth sports, click [here](#)!



Nancy Justis has over 40 years of journalistic experience ranging from newspaper and magazine writing and editing, to collegiate public relations.

At a time when women were a virtual non-entity in the athletics media relations field, she blazed the trail. She has over 30 years of experience in the promotion of sports teams and working with student-athletes. She was Sports Information Director/Assistant Athletics Director for Media Relations at the University of Northern Iowa for most of those years, publicizing the Panthers' nationally-recognized men's basketball and football teams. She is a member of the Cedar Valley Character Counts Committee and serves on the board of the Cedar Valley Sports Commission. She freelance writes for various publications.

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