Stepping Into Coaching
If you are like most youth league coaches, you have probably been recruited from the ranks of concerned parents, sport enthusiasts, or community volunteers. Like many rookie and veteran coaches, you probably have had little formal instruction on how to coach. But when the call went out for coaches to assist with the local youth sport program, you answered because you like children and enjoy sports and perhaps because you wanted to be involved in a worthwhile community activity.

Your initial coaching assignment may be difficult. Like many volunteers, you may not know everything there is to know about the sport or about how to work with children. Coaching Essentials presents the basics of coaching youth sports effectively. To start, we look at your responsibilities and what’s involved in being a coach. We also talk about what to do when your child is on the team you coach, and we examine five tools for being an effective coach.

Your Responsibilities As a Coach

Coaching at any level involves much more than scoring points or preventing your opponent from scoring points. Coaching involves accepting the tremendous responsibility you face when parents put their children into your care. As a coach, you’ll be called upon to do the following:

1. Provide a safe physical environment.
   Participating in any sport holds inherent risks, but as a coach you’re responsible for regularly inspecting the practice and competition facilities and equipment (see “Facilities Inspection Checklist” on page 68 of the appendix).

   Make it a priority to explain to the athletes and parents before the start of the season that all sports involve risks. Therefore, during the course of the year, athletes
   • will get bumps and bruises,
   • will be tired and need extra rest, and
   • will need to increase their fluid intake to stay hydrated.

   Teach athletes and parents the importance of keeping their equipment in good working order. Reassure them that, to avoid injury, they will learn the safest techniques and that you have a safety plan and you will follow it (see chapter 3 for more information).

2. Communicate in a positive way.
   As you can already see, you have a lot to communicate. You’ll communicate not only with your athletes and parents but also with the coaching staff, officials, administrators, and others. Communicate in a way that is positive and that demonstrates that you have the best interests of the athletes at heart (see chapter 2 for more information).
3. **Teach the fundamental skills of your sport.**

When teaching the fundamental skills of your sport, you want to be sure that your athletes have fun. Therefore, we ask that you help all athletes be the best they can be by creating a fun, yet productive, practice environment (see chapter 4 for more information). To help your athletes improve their skills, you need to have a sound understanding of sport-specific skills.

4. **Teach the rules of the sport.**

Introduce the rules of the sport and incorporate them into individual instruction. Many rules can be taught in the first practice, and at any time an opportunity naturally arises in later practices.

5. **Direct athletes in competition.**

This includes determining starting lineup or event assignments and a substitution plan, relating appropriately to officials and to opposing coaches and athletes, and making sound tactical decisions during competitions (see chapter 5 for more information on coaching during competitions). Remember that the focus is not on winning at all costs but on coaching your kids to compete well, do their best, improve their skills, and strive to win within the rules.

6. **Help your athletes become fit and value fitness for a lifetime.**

We want you to help your athletes be fit so that they can participate safely and successfully. We also want your athletes to learn to become fit on their own, understand the value of fitness, and enjoy training. Thus, we ask you not to make them do push-ups or run laps as punishment. Make it fun to get fit for their sport, and make it fun to participate in their sport so that they'll stay fit for a lifetime.

7. **Help young people develop character.**

Character development includes learning, caring, being honest and respectful, and taking responsibility. These intangible qualities are no less important to teach than the fundamental skills of the sport. We ask you to teach these values to athletes by demonstrating and encouraging behaviors that express these values at all times. For example, athletes should learn to help their teammates, participate within the rules, and show respect for their opponents. Many coaches ask their athletes to sign a team code of conduct pledge at the beginning of the season. This code of conduct should be based on your team policies (see Athlete Code of Conduct in the appendix on page 71).
These are your responsibilities as a coach. Remember that every athlete is an individual and you must provide a wholesome environment in which every athlete has the opportunity to learn without fear while having fun and enjoying the overall experience.

Coaching Your Own Child

Coaching can become even more complicated when your child participates on the team you coach. Many coaches are parents, but the two roles should not be confused. As a parent you are responsible only for yourself and your child, but as a coach you are also responsible for the organization, all the athletes on the team, and their parents. Because of this additional responsibility, your behavior with the team will be different from your behavior at home, and your son or daughter may not understand why.

For example, imagine the confusion of a young boy who is the center of his parents’ attention at home but is barely noticed by his father (who is also the team coach) in the sport setting. Or consider the mixed signals received by a young girl whose skill is constantly evaluated at practice by a coach (who is also her mother) who otherwise rarely comments on her daughter’s activities. You need to explain to your child your new responsibilities and how they will affect your relationship when coaching. Take the following steps to avoid problems when coaching your own child:

- Ask your child if he wants you to coach the team.
- Explain why you want to be involved with the team.
- Discuss with your child how your interactions will change when you take on the role of coach at practices or competitions.
- Limit your coaching behavior to when you are in the coaching role.
- Avoid parenting during practice or competition situations in order to keep your role clear in your child’s mind.
- Reaffirm your love for your child, irrespective of her performance at practice or during a competition.

Five Tools of an Effective Coach

Have you purchased the traditional coaching tools—things like whistles, coaching clothes, sport shoes, and a clipboard? They’ll help you in the act of coaching, but to be successful you’ll need five other tools that cannot be bought. These tools are available only through self-examination and hard work; they’re easy to remember with the acronym COACH:
Comprehension

Comprehension of the rules, tactics, and skills of your sport is required. You must understand the elements of the sport. To improve your comprehension of the sport, take the following steps:

- Read about the rules of the sport in various resources.
- Read additional coaching books, including those available from the American Sport Education Program (ASEP).
- Contact youth sport organizations.
- Attend coaching clinics.
- Talk with more experienced coaches.
- Observe local college, high school, and youth competitions.
- Watch competitions on television.

In addition to having knowledge about your sport, you must implement proper training and safety methods so that your athletes can participate with little risk of injury. Even then, injuries may occur. And more often than not, you’ll be the first person responding to your athletes’ injuries, so be sure you understand the basic emergency care procedures described in chapter 3. Also, read in that chapter about how to handle more serious sport injuries.

Outlook

This coaching tool refers to your perspective and goals—what you seek as a coach. The most common coaching objectives are to (a) have fun, (b) help athletes develop their physical, mental, and social skills, and (c) win. Thus, your outlook involves your priorities, your planning, and your vision for the future. See “Assessing Your Priorities” to learn more about the priorities you set for yourself as a coach.

ASEP has a motto that will help you keep your outlook in line with the best interests of the kids on your team. It summarizes in four words all you need to remember when establishing your coaching priorities:

**Athletes First, Winning Second**
Assessing Your Priorities

Even though all coaches focus on competition, we want you to focus on positive competition—keeping the pursuit of victory in perspective by making decisions that, first, are in the best interest of the athletes, and second, will help to win the competition.

So, how do you know if your outlook and priorities are in order? Here’s a little test:

1. Which situation would you be most proud of?
   a. knowing that each participant enjoyed participating in the sport
   b. seeing that all athletes improved their skills
   c. winning the league championship

2. Which statement best reflects your thoughts about sport?
   a. If it isn’t fun, don’t do it.
   b. Everyone should learn something every day.
   c. Sport isn’t fun if you don’t win.

3. How would you like your athletes to remember you?
   a. as a coach who was fun
   b. as a coach who provided a good base of fundamental skills
   c. as a coach who had a winning record

4. Which would you most like to hear a parent of an athlete on your team say?
   a. Mike really had a good time participating this year.
   b. Mike learned some important lessons participating this year.
   c. Mike played on the first-place team this year.

5. Which of the following would be the most rewarding moment of your season?
   a. having your team want to continue participating and competing, even after practice is over
   b. seeing one of your athletes finally master a skill
   c. winning the league championship

Look over your answers. If you most often selected “a” responses, then having fun is most important to you. A majority of “b” answers suggests that skill development is what attracts you to coaching. And if “c” was your most frequent response, winning is tops on your list of coaching priorities. If your priorities are in order, your athletes’ well-being will take precedence over your team’s win-loss record every time.
This motto recognizes that striving to win is an important, even vital, part of sports. But it emphatically states that no efforts in striving to win should be made at the expense of the athletes’ well-being, development, and enjoyment.

Take the following actions to better define your outlook:

- With your coaches, determine your priorities for the season.
- Prepare for situations that challenge your priorities.
- Set goals for yourself and your athletes that are consistent with your priorities.
- Plan how you and your athletes can best attain your goals.
- Review your goals frequently to be sure that you are staying on track.

**Affection**

Another vital tool you will want to have in your coaching kit is a genuine concern for the young people you coach. This requires having a passion for kids, a desire to share with them your enjoyment and knowledge of the sport, and the patience and understanding that allow each athlete to grow from his involvement in sport.

You can demonstrate your affection and patience in many ways, including the following:

- Make an effort to get to know each athlete on your team.
- Treat each athlete as an individual.
- Empathize with athletes trying to learn new and difficult skills.
- Treat athletes as you would like to be treated under similar circumstances.
- Control your emotions.
- Show your enthusiasm for being involved with your team.
- Keep an upbeat tempo and positive tone in all of your communications.

**Coaching Tip**

When athletes know and feel that you care for each of them as individuals, they will care about the team and learn to participate in the sport correctly.

**Character**

The fact that you have decided to coach young athletes probably means that you think participation in sport is important. But whether or not participation develops character in your athletes depends as much on you as it does on the sport itself. How can you help your athletes build character?

Having good character means modeling appropriate behaviors for sport and life. That means more than just saying the right things. What you say and what
you do must match. There is no place in coaching for the “Do as I say, not as I do” philosophy. Challenge, support, encourage, and reward every youngster, and your athletes will be more likely to accept, even celebrate, their differences. Be in control before, during, and after all practices and competitions. And don’t be afraid to admit that you were wrong. No one is perfect!

Each member of your coaching staff should consider the following steps to becoming a good role model:

- Take stock of your strengths and weaknesses.
- Build on your strengths.
- Set goals for yourself to improve on those areas you don’t want to see copied.
- If you slip up, apologize to your team and to yourself. You’ll do better next time.

**Humor**

Humor is an often-overlooked coaching tool. For our use, it means having the ability to laugh at yourself and with your athletes during practices and contests. Nothing helps balance the seriousness of a skill session like a chuckle or two. And a sense of humor puts in perspective the many mistakes your athletes will make. So don’t get upset over each miscue or respond negatively to erring athletes. Allow your athletes and yourself to enjoy the ups, and don’t dwell on the downs.

Here are some tips for injecting humor into your practices:

- Make practices fun by including a variety of activities.
- Keep all athletes involved in games and skill practices.
- Consider laughter by your athletes a sign of enjoyment, not of waning discipline.
- Smile!