

# Coaches, respect your players

With the outdoor sports seasons finally underway, coaches have dusted off their clipboards and polished up their whistles. What they may not have examined are old habits and a tendency to backslide into the tried and trusted.

- **Get out of your comfort zone.**

Falling back on what you know has a lot of merit, but recognize that each season, kids join sports eager to have fun and learn something new.

One of the best things coaches can do is cast off old patterns of behaviour and start coaching this new season as if it was their first time coaching. Come to the sport with new eyes, new ideas and new energy (and if you can't muster that, perhaps it's time for a rest).

Adapting the way you approach teaching the sport you're coaching will provide a challenge that will force you to think differently — in turn, it will force you to think about how your athletes are receiving your instruction. Plan on not coaching the same way you always do: get out of your comfort zone.

- **Always coach individuals.**

Canada's former national men's basketball coach, the late great Jack Donohue (who pretty much built the game in this country), was once asked if he ever wished he were coaching individual athletes.

Donohue answered bluntly that though you



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might coach a team sport, you are actually working with individual athletes. That's a good thing to remember when you're looking into the faces of 15 or 16 kids aged 10 on your team.

- **Have the highest expectations of your players.**

Depending on the kid, you, as his coach, may be among the most important role models he has. Take that responsibility seriously.

Do that by taking the athlete seriously. Recognize that each one will develop at a different rate and might need a slightly different approach. To coach a player with a qualification that "this kid is so slow, she'll never be a decent forward" is to immediately lower your expectations of her.

Instead — and it takes a lot of attention — bolster the player's skills with the soccer ball or her good height and help her play to a new and different level and expectation.

- **R-E-S-P-E-C-T.**

Among the greatest holes that exist in minor sports (and which carries through right to the professional leagues) is the abstract notion of

respect. In fact, on a larger scale, it is a hole that has rent our very social fabric.

Sport — and coaches — can repair the damage.

Because of its abstract nature, many kids (and not just young ones) may not know exactly what the notion of respect is. Spell it out for them. Show them.

Teach the concept of respecting game officials and opponents (without either, there is no game), other team members and the game itself. Teaching this to the parents is probably necessary, too. And if, as a coach, you're not too sure yourself what constitutes respect, figure it out. Fast.

- **Win or lose, guarantee a fun season.**

Fun is left out of the equation too often — and yet it is the crucial component of minor sports. That should be the motivating factor for coaches and parents, who have been entrusted with guaranteeing that the players have fun and learn something along the way.

Whatever age of athlete you're dealing with, think about a five- or six-year-old: they likely have no idea about the game or the nature of competition, but what they really know is fun.

No matter how old your athletes, and no matter what their competitive level, strive for fun this season regardless of wins or losses.

Andrew Coppolino's column appears Wednesdays.

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