

Losing The Leadership Of Our Classic Coaches

BY RICK WOLFF

It may sound like a fairy tale, but once upon a time coaches at all levels of youth sports were tough—and respected for it. They were fair, and their word was close to law. If you wanted to talk to Coach, you did so without Mom or Dad or the family attorney there. He didn't have to answer to overzealous parents for his decisions. Nobody ever thought of appealing sports concerns to the school's athletic director or the school principal, school board or superintendent.

Coach pushed you and your teammates to do your best, and you tried hard to live up to the words he used every day in practice: dedication, commitment, sacrifice, teamwork. You knew the coach would notice if you hustled and had the right attitude, and best of all was when he told you that he liked your work. For him to single you out was high—and rare—praise.

Parents went to games but rarely to practice. And I can't recall ever hearing about a dad calling a coach at his home during the evening or a parent getting in a coach's face about playing time. It just wasn't done.

Unfortunately, that's not the way it is anymore, and we're losing some great coaches as a result. With heavy parental involvement and interference today, many influential coaches who once played such important roles in the community are driven to give it up, citing the stress and pressures of the job. But aren't we parents the same people who used to revere the coach when we were growing up? Why in the name of "protecting our kids" are we depriving them of the same kind of coach/player relationships we often credit with helping us grow up?

It isn't easy for a parent to see a child getting the tough-love treatment from a coach whose style might seem abrasive or standoffish. You might want to step in and ask why the coach is treating your youngster in this manner. But think of it this way: You don't give your child everything she wants all the time. In fact, you often give her a dose of

your own tough love. Even though your youngster might think you're being a little harsh, you know you have her best interests in mind. A good coach—even one with a gruff, off-with-the-kid-gloves demeanor—has the same thoughts and goals. He isn't giving his players a hard time just because he thinks that's what a coach is supposed to do. He's doing it because he wants the children to learn something, and he knows that mixing a little adversity with deserved positive reinforcement will help a youngster mature in important ways.

A good way to get a sense of a coach's effectiveness is to talk with his or her former players. They'll often say that Coach was tough when they played for him, that maybe they didn't even like him much. But now, looking back, they realize how much they learned from the coach—and not just about sports.

The next time your child encounters a coach with old-school style and ideals, take a step back before stepping in. Give the coach the time and space he's earned. If your son or daughter complains about something, don't overreact. Tell your athlete to be patient, to work hard. Remind your athlete that respect has to be earned from the coach; respect was never meant just to be handed out.

As a sports parent myself, I want my kids to have the same kind of coaches that I had when I was a young athlete. I've forgotten about the wins and losses in my sports career, but I remember my coaches. Art Mann. Eric Kantor. Karl Wiehe. Mike Cannold. Their lessons made a difference in my life. Interfering with a coach's leadership, no matter his style, could deny your kids similar experiences.

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