

Are Coaches Being Glorified?

Question. I do not score goals, run for touchdowns or make baskets: I do not make passes, receive passes or make errant passes: I do not stop goals, make tackles or cover the opposition: I do not dribble, or stick handle around opponents: and I do not sacrifice my body physically for the team. But I am involved in sports and get the most close ups and individual airtime on Television than anyone else during a sports cast. **Who Am I?**

Answer. THE COACH

With the NHL and NBA playoffs in progress and the World Cup approaching, sports fans will be watching countless hours of team sports on TV. The camera's will focus on many sports personalities but it's the coaches that will literally hog the TV screens with most of the close ups. Although sport has always identified the coach as an important person in the scheme of things, the expectations put on a coach, especially as an entertainment value, has increased substantially in the past decade. It is quite common for cameras to be solely focused on the coach to see what their reaction is in the game. We see close ups of their reactions to goals and touchdowns and now the coaches are practically part of the replays.

If a player has a scoring opportunity, in many cases the coach may have thought out the play to create the chance but ultimately, it is the skill of the player that will decide the fate of that moment. But we still want to see how coaches react, look, cheer, curse or whatever else they do during a game

We want to see how coaches react, cheer, & curse

The media has certainly helped glorify the coach and his/her importance to the athletic results on the field, floor, ice or diamond. But does the coach actually deserve this attention? TV stations will do what it takes to improve ratings and if fans want to see a coach's reaction then they will get it. Unfortunately, too many youth coaches think they need to behave as though they are coaching the pros and are on TV. Some coaches believe all eyes are on them to produce winning results. Some coaches may want to coach at a higher level but while they are coaching kids, they must understand that their role is not to produce winning teams at the expense of the child's social development and certainly not in an entertainment, ratings grabber sort of way.

What is the role of the coach and how important are they in that job?

I remember asking this question to Keith Eddy, in 1979. He coached the former Toronto Blizzard of the NASL in the days when the Blizzard averaged over 20,000 fans at Exhibition Stadium. I'll never forget his answer to that question. He quickly and very confidently said, "The coach has to be a psychologist. The coach, in the rest of the world is called a manager. He has to manage individuals and they're all different and they're all individuals. A coach needs to get respect from his players and if you're honest with them you'll get the respect."

The coach, regardless of the age group he or she is coaching, has a very important role in the relationship with the athletes of the team outside of simply teaching skills and tactics. In fact, this role is probably more important than most coaches themselves understand. Studies have shown over and over that a coach is a very influential person in a child's life and actually is the second most important person in children's lives next to the parent. In fact, in cases where there are parental problems or a child has lost a parent, the coach can take on those roles as well. At each age group, the coach influences players in different ways. How a coach interacts with the athletes can either create a positive or negative experience for the athlete.

In other studies that looked at the drop out rates in children's sports, the coach has been shown to be very influential. How enjoyable they make the sport, can either increase or decrease the chances of their players playing the sport for a long time or quitting. Their role in the development of the child as a person will be a much more important aspect of their coaching. Players and parents will remember them in how they or

their child was treated and not what they won. Unfortunately, coaches themselves are often under the wrong impression that they are there to only teach kids how to play and then to make their team a winning team.

The biggest misconception coaches have is that they feel the parents of the players they coach want them to produce a winning team.

This is the biggest misconception a coach can have about his or her performance as a coach. Most parents don't care if the team wins or loses. All they care about is how their kids play. Everyone plays to win but the parent is concerned that his/her child plays. Are they enjoying the game, making friends, keeping fit, demonstrating fair play, and learning the values of competition and cooperation? These are life skills that are applicable to the real world. Playing in the NHL or the World Cup is not going to be the real world for most kids. Of course, there are parents who actually think their child will be the next superstar but most are reasonable and just want their kids to do their best and use sport as a life learning tool. That can only happen if kids stay in sports. Of course players need a goal that there may be a future in athletics but coaches must realize that young kids will search for that goal on their own. Parents are actually expecting you to get to the other goals. Ultimately, to learn life's lessons.

Therein coaches make grave mistakes and are the prime reason why kids quit sports. In a study of over 11,000 kids, the number one and two factors for why kids quit sports are:

- 1) **It was no longer interesting** and
- 2) **It was no longer Fun.**

This was the same for boys and girls. Quitting because the coach was a poor teacher was the 6th on the list for reasons why boys quit sports and not even in the top ten list for why girls quit sports.

Who else can be blamed for kids quitting sports based on the top two reasons but the coach? If the coach cannot make playing a sport interesting or fun, than he/she has failed as a coach in being the leader and role model that he or she needs to be. The coach has failed in the player's eyes. Parents also consider the coach a failure. Championships are not what parents care about. Players want to have fun first and foremost. If this is not achieved, the coach has been a poor psychologist.

Spectators at youth games are there for one reason and one reason only.

The issue of kids quitting sports is huge. Soccer's drop out rate hovers above 75% in boys and at 65% in girls by age 12. Learning skills, tactics and strategies does play a role in keeping players interested and coaches need to understand that learning is important but winning is not. Take a good look at the spectators at a youth sporting event. Most are parents and they are not there to watch the team. They are there for one reason and one reason only. They are there to watch their children and in reality, that's all they care about.

A parent would rather see their child play a fair share of the game and risk losing the championship rather than sit out. A victory would be more rewarding if the child played in the game rather than be embarrassed in front of his or her peers for not playing. Parents couldn't really care less if the team won or lost if it was at the expense of their child not playing. This year I watched a nine-year old boy cry so hard that he created a crowd after his house league coach barely played him in a playoff game. I also witnessed a coach of a house-league select team act like a monkey on the sidelines and get thrown out of a game.

I've seen house-league coaches act like monkeys and make kids cry.

Whenever I put on house league coaching sessions I say to coaches: "Coaches, you are not on TV! There are no close ups of you and you are not being judged by whether you win or lose."

Coaches often make that assumption because the one or two parents out of 18 that they coach, are giving them suggestions of what he or she should do to win. Those parents are giving coaches the wrong impression. They do not represent most of the other parents of the kids they coach. Unfortunately, those type parents are also often the most vocal parents on the team and use language that would make the coach feel that all other parents share his or her views. Rarely is that the case.

Children want to have fun, and they are eager to learn but things need to be kept interesting. The coach occupies a special place in the eyes of a young player. They look to the coach as a role model, leader, problem solver and someone who will enlighten their lives. Coaches must not turn them off sports by ignoring these psychological cues that children fail to shout out at them.

Ultimately the coach will be judged and remembered by how they treat their athletes, the officials and the opponents.

An important note to coaches:

“You are very important in more ways than you think. It’s time to re-define your real job as a coach of our youth. You are not there just coaching a sport. You are there to help guide kids through life. Those coaching very young kids will have different issues than coaches coaching teenagers. Also, each child is different emotionally, mentally and coaching is a challenge. Please be proud and honoured of the fact that you have been given a huge task with our youth and learn what you can about dealing with the age bracket you are coaching. Take it professionally and respectfully.”

“Success will come automatically if you can accomplish this task.”

“Your real job is to keep kids in the game, while teaching values and ethics. Make it fun first and interesting to the point that the kids you coach will love what they’re doing so much that they will thrive to repeat what you teach them at home and look forward to coming to games and practices”

“And about losing your players to poachers. Don’t worry. If you accomplish those two goals, no one will want to leave and the parents will not want them to leave. You’re real success as a coach will be judged by how many players you keep in soccer and by the impression you left on that child’s life forever. Will the players you coach seek you out 20 years later and thank you for your time and how you treated them as individuals?”

“Strive for those goals everyday as a coach and success will come automatically in more ways than one.”

Be the reason kids stay in sports, not the reason they quit sports.

Coaches! You are glorified because you do make a big difference in a child’s life. Unlike television you are not glorified because the audience wants to see you act immaturely on the sidelines. That’s not your place when you coach kids. You are not on TV. You are not in the entertainment business of pro sports.

If you coach kids, please be the reason kids stay in sports, not the reason they quit sports.

Enjoy the challenge, have fun and thanks for reading.

John DeBenedictis

Executive Director (National Soccer Coaches Association of Canada)

(John DeBenedictis received his Bachelor of Science Degree in Physical and Health Education with an advanced certificate of Coaching from York University. He has studied the psychological and sociological factors that affect sports including children’s drop out rates in sports for over 25 years. He has written numerous articles, made films and lectured on these issues. He has coached and instructed professional soccer players and continues to work to promote soccer through his lecture, video and slide presentation- For The Love of Soccer. John DeBenedictis can be reached at (416) 291-7184 if you require more information on these issues for your club or organization.