

Keys to Getting the Most Out of Kids: Part Three

Make Individual and Team Improvement Your “End Game”

“Scoreboard”! Sometimes crowds yell this one word at their opponent when the numbers show their team to be the winner at that point. Winning certainly beats losing; we don’t have to learn that. It is part of human hardwiring in the world of athletics. And life! We like to celebrate, and wins give us a chance to do just that.

Coaching youth baseball and softball is a portion of the world of athletics. How do we set ourselves up to win? First, it is helpful to consider the words of the Serenity Prayer, one of the sanest things we could possibly consider as a coach. “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference”. To establish a road to individual and team success, we must begin by considering exactly what we do and do not control as a coach.

The Things We Can’t Control

This is a critical place to start. If we spend most of our season lamenting what we cannot control, we lose sight of the things we can do with our kids to improve and the fun that comes from having a positive team environment. So what must we accept that are beyond our influence? We do not completely control the athletic genetics, maturity and upbringing of our players. We do not control how good the players are on the teams we must play. We do not control how another coach works with his or her team and the manner they play. We do not control who umps or how well they do on any given day. We do not control the weather or the rainout policy of the league. We do not control how zealously some parents want to influence the experience their child is having on the field, nor how much pressure they are applying to their child before and after games. We do not control who makes the all-star team. We do not control how the ball bounces or how many line drives are hit right at our opponent. This list is not all-inclusive, but it is a good start.

To get the most out of our players, we need to help our kids understand the stuff we do not control. Rather than make these things important and a source of endless griping and

aggravation, we must first model while teaching that the focus of our time and energy as individuals and as a team must be the things we can control. I've watched numerous teams fall apart in games and had their entire season collapse by endlessly bemoaning the things that are always there and will never go away and simply must be lived with and accepted as obstacles to overcome. It is never fun to get overwhelmed by these things. Never! It is, however, important to deal effectively with the things we can improve and develop.

The Things We Can Control

Most importantly, we control the attitude that we bring to work with our players each day. If we are excited to work on the game of baseball each practice and play every game scheduled, we have set a tone that can be followed. If we are organized and ready to have a practice that will get kids active and engaged, we can make the game fast paced and interesting. If we model and provide clear expectations for interacting with each other as teammates, we can make sure that mistakes are learning experiences and inevitable, not reasons for laughter and verbal put downs. We can move toward respectful interaction for all and not name calling that comes from clique groups within a team thinking they are better than those outside their group. At the end of my coaching career I had one basic team rule: Respect. Respect for the game we play, respect for you, and respect for your teammates, umpires and opponents. Attitude, effort and interaction are things coaches can model and positively expect from each player. Once established, they create the type of learning environment that will allow players to become the best they can be, individually and collectively. These things do not just happen, naturally!

After a learning environment is nurtured and established, it is time to create the focus for all our efforts as a team—that focus being improvement, moving daily to get better and better at the skills and strategy of the game. PB's, personal bests and TB's, team bests are now going to be front and center. PB's are the ways that coaches can get kids focused upon becoming "their own best self", which is completely controllable. All too often, players compare themselves to others that are better and more mature and more experienced. Often these are negative comparisons ("I'm not as good as.... and will never be!") Not only can we not control natural genetics and maturity, such thinking leads to decreased effort and giving up. How many times have younger siblings been compared to an older brother or sister with

this classic phrase: “why can’t you be more like them”? Wow! When has that ever helped someone improve?

A New and Improved Scoreboard

As a teaching coach, we must see improvement as moving forward one step at a time, always seeing the next “step” after a new one has been learned. This is essential for all players, weakest to strongest! Why? Because now we are more effective creating goals and standards—goals like hitting over 300 in a season are unattainable for our weakest player and easily attained by our strongest before the season begins. Rather, we create games and goals in practice and establish “baseline numbers” for each player. How many times in a row can you throw a ball into a net and have it land inside the square? How many thrown balls can you catch in a row? How many times in a row can you hit a ball past the pitchers mound off a tee; out of the infield in a row off a tee; past an outfielder in a row off a tee? These goals are then the focus for improvement for all players. Once you can do something three times in a row, move to the next level of difficulty. Make the throwing targets smaller. Start working on catching the ball properly, looking the ball into the mitt. Make the hitting targets farther away.

Once goals and standards and PB’s and TB’s are established, start celebrating growth! It does not matter if your best player is now hitting the ball over the fence three times in a row or your weakest player is hitting the ball three times in a row past the pitchers mound, make it a big deal every time the things we can control have improved. Hand out peanuts or small candy bars or bubble gum or anything else you can conceive of to celebrate. Then, immediately, set the new goal. Start working on the next level that has become attainable. The new scoreboard is now keeping track of a precious win: improvement!! Players now are always looking to take that next step!

Now, after playing a few games, create a new scoreboard for your team. More important than beating an opponent that is not as good as your team; more important than losing to a team that is genetically and physically better than your team, is playing the game in an ever improving way. Celebrate making more plays. Celebrate throwing more strikes. Celebrate throwing the ball to the right base. Celebrate running the bases smarter and more instinctively. Celebrate hitting the ball more and more often and striking out less. Focus on the things you can improve. Enjoy them. This way, you can actually use mistakes as the things

you can improve... they help show you what goals you need to set and what needs to be improved in your next practice. A “bad game”, individually and collectively, just sets you up to get better the next time you play by focused practice the next time you are together.

Conclusion and Reflective Questions

To get the most out of players, we must stop moaning about the things we do not control and we must focus on the things that we can. Coaches can create a positive learning environment. We can create meaningful standards and goals for our players, individually and collectively for our team. We can help players see the value of comparing themselves against “their own best self” and celebrate the growth of every player throughout a season. We can create team goals, and we can use failure to inform us what we need to work on while we create evolving goals and standards for the team we have. We can let kids know that excuses and blaming and put down’s cannot help a team get better—Ever! Meaningful work toward improvement is the only way to accomplish better skill and performance. And improvement is fun!

The fifth assignment: What are the negatives of comparing yourself to others? And why is it so important that coaches and players focus upon improvement and not just winning? Why is it hard not to overact to losing and lose sight of improvement? Now, consider how these answers can lead to planned actions that will make you a better coach.