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fitness

Keeping sports fun for smaller sluggers

Coaching for life. A new definition of winning goes beyond the scoreboard: Do the kids want to come back next season?

By Kristen Browning-Blas
The Denver Post

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More than 50 million kids play organized sports between the ages of 6 and 14, but many drop out when they reach high school. Dropping the win-at-all-costs attitude might help retain players and improve parent-coach relations. (Stock Photos)

You know that one guy. The one yelling from behind the backstop. "Hey ump, you're missing a good game here!" Or worse.

It's usually a parent on the other team, right? Maybe it's even a parent on your own kid's team.

It might even be you.

Just this summer in [Colorado Springs](#) , two girls were charged with fighting and an adult arrested for third-degree assault after a conflict at the Four Diamond Sports Complex.

The disagreement started when a softball player was hit by a pitch and charged the mound during a game between [Cheyenne Mountain](#) and Wasson High School club teams. The umpire ejected the girl and stopped the game, but tempers flared in the parking lot. Police reports say up to 30 people were involved, some with bats.

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It's a perennial story.

"I think it is as bad as it's ever been," says Jim Evans, who umpired for 28 years in the major leagues and now trains professional and amateur umpires. "It's not getting any better, let's put it that way. On TV, kids see violence, benches clearing, very unsportsmanlike acts in professional baseball."

Starting with T-ball and Pee Wee football, on up through college and into corporate conduct, coaching consultant Rod Olson wants to change the win-at-all-costs attitude that has

penetrated youth sports, tainted parent-coach relationships and led to arrests.

Olson, who goes by "Coach O," says he expects to see more intensity on the sidelines this summer as parents' stress levels increase and families use youth sporting events as their "staycations."

Plus, parents are more involved in their kids' sporting careers. "That's a good thing and a bad thing," says Olson.

Ex-ump Evans agrees. "Too often, parents try to live vicariously through their kids. They're looking for every advantage, every break and the umpire seems to be a logical target. The purpose of all youth programs is not to train youth for professional baseball; it's how to be good citizens — how to take getting benched, striking out — how to be humble."

Between the ages of 6 and 14, 57 million children play sports, but that figure drops to 7 million by the time the kids turn 15. Why? "Ninety percent of that dropoff is caused by the win-at-all-costs mentality by coaches and parents," says Olson.

After 20 years of coaching all levels of college sports and his own children, 11, 13 and 16, Olson has turned to coaching the coaches.

"We need to redefine what it means to win. Is your kid learning and growing and wanting to come back next year? That's winning," Olson told volunteer football coaches Thursday night in

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Littleton. The Panther football club invited him to speak to the men who coach their 6- to 14-year-olds after hearing Olson speak to the South Suburban Arapahoe Youth League, where they play.

"Coaches have so much impact on kids," says Janet Holmes, a parent volunteer who organized the mandatory meeting. "We want to show we are on top of what we want the coaches and the kids to be, to take it to the next level."

"The next level" is a well-used term in sports, but the teams who hire Olson are looking for support beyond the scoreboard. Whether they simply want to improve morale among coaches, parents and players, or in response to previous conflicts, many youth sports organizers want to shift their focus to character development.

"It's gotta end. Kids are getting chased away from sports," says Michael Prudhomme, who coaches 13-year-old football and played at Central Catholic High School in Denver. "The coaches have to learn to step away, to get some perspective. The kids need to learn you can't quit life."

But the current generation of kids in youth sports does not respond to "do it because I said so." They have a sense of entitlement that can work for them — or against them.

"We've done a great job of teaching our kids to think for themselves and ask questions," says Olson. "These kids have been taught that someone should care about you, not yell at you."

That means coaches need to adapt, he says. "Does motivation by fear work? Sure it does, but the shelf life is not long," Olson tells the group.

"With these 21st-century kids, if you can't get their hearts, they will bail. They'll go do something else, maybe try another sport, play an instrument ... or something else," Olson says darkly, hinting at the trouble kids can get into when they drop out of group activities.

He calls his approach "Three-Dimensional Coaching:" First, teach the fundamentals of the game. Second, understand the psychology of the players. Third, speak to their hearts.

This approach will result in shorter rehab times, more adaptable players, increased creativity and deeper relationships.

At the Panther meeting, Nick Prudhomme listened from the perspective of a coach and a player. The Arapahoe High School senior plays center on the Warriors football team, and coaches in the youth league. "It helps knowing your coach wants to help *you* to help the team, and is not just focusing on individuals."

Kent Calkins, who coaches football and lacrosse, says the message extends beyond the sports world. "It's not just specific to coaches, it carries to families as well."

Olson says coaches must cultivate trust with parents and kids.

"How do you handle a bad coach? First, obey

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the 24-hour rule. Don't go talk to them right away. Think about it, pray about it, get some counsel, then talk. If that doesn't work, go to the league. Maybe you'll have to walk away. You might have to say 'We don't want them to quit, but if you're harming my child's heart, I'm out of here.' "

Advice for — and about — umpires

Jim Evans wrote the book on baseball. The actual book: "Official Baseball Rules Annotated." He reminds parents that officials are there to call the game, not police the spectators.

In amateur games, "there's not enough training in calling balls and strikes, fair or foul, much less in conflict resolution," says the retired major league umpire who lives in Colorado and runs clinics around the country for professional and amateur umpires.

"We train people to first ignore the fans; then acknowledge that you hear it, give a warning; and finally, ejection."

There's the normal stuff an ump is willing to hear, but when it goes past the "Aw Blue!" zone into real conflict, the coach needs to control his players' parents.

"The coach has more influence with the parents on his own team than the umpire does," says Evans. "The umpire's job is dealing with what's happening on the field. But there are cases where umpires call time and go to the screen and say 'Hey, this is about the kids.' "

Evans says a league official should be present at every game, and complaints should go to them.

"It's really unfair to expect the umpires to handle situations in the stands. I guess they'll want the umpire to be working the concession stands now, too." *Kristen Browning-Blas*

Advice for parents

1. Understand your role. There are only four types of people at a sporting event: the coaches, the players, the officials and the spectators. You cannot be all four, only one: the spectator.

2. Pick the right seat. Do not sit by people who will try to draw you into the negative parent/fan culture of sports. If you end up in a bad seat or section, simply move — there are no padlocks on your seat cushion.

3. Let the coaches coach . Do not yell out instructions to your child during games or practices. This is the coach 's job. Games are chaotic times for children trying to deal with fast-paced action and respond to opponents, teammates and coaches. Simply limit your comments during the game to encouraging your child and the other players on both teams.

4. Be a positive role model toward officials. Mention good calls by the officials to others in the stands or on the sidelines. Start to create a climate where it's recognized this is about the kids, not just about winning.

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Car-ride rules: What to say before and after the game

Before the game: Tell the kids that it's OK to be nervous. If you don't have some butterflies in your stomach, that's a little weird. Saying you can't be nervous is wrong.

At the game: Just cheer for the kids.

After the game: Give three put-ups and a wish. A "put-up" is a sincere, specific compliment. Tell the child three things he or she did well, then give your advice. Build them up, and then you've earned the right to give some advice. Say "I wish" instead of "You need to."

Rod Olson, coachesofexcellence.com

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