

Building Character through Sports

by Jim Thompson Positive Coaching Alliance

Youth sports is under assault by a “win-at-all-costs” mentality that has filtered down via saturation marketing and media exposure from the professional sports entertainment business. Youth sports, which should be seen as an integral part of the educational experience of young people, more and more resembles the worst aspects of professional sports.

High-profile cases such as the “Hockey Dad” case in Massachusetts are only the tip of the iceberg. Virtually everyone involved with youth sports has seen examples of adult misbehavior at youth sports events.

When children quit sports because of experiences with negative coaching or parental pressure, the negative impact can be life long. Children who participate in sports are more likely to be physically active throughout life with accompanying long-term health benefits. Lessons learned from sports about such things as teamwork and resilience in the face of failure prepare people for success in their careers long after their youth sport experience has ended.

It is important to be clear about the cause of the problems with youth sports. Competition is not the problem. Wanting to win is not the problem. The problem is a win-at-all-cost mentality, which causes people to become negative, resort to cheating and “bending” the rules, and misbehave on the sidelines to try to give their team an advantage.

Two key ideas essential to creating a solution to the problems of youth sports is facing our “organizational culture” and the “mental model” of what it means to be a good coach.

Organizational culture is simply “the way we do things here.” Different organizations have different ways of doing things, even if they are in the same industry selling the same kinds of products. Many business leaders have become adept at creating a strong organizational culture that helps the organization achieve its goals. The tools that business leaders use to create a strong culture aimed at making a profit can be adapted for use by leaders in youth sports organizations. These tools can be used to create a strong positive culture focused on providing children a wonderful educational experience, a culture in which “Honoring the Game” is the norm.

Even though most youth sports organizations have no full-time administrators, youth sports organizations working with the Positive Coaching Alliance have demonstrated that volunteer leaders and board members can apply the lessons of organizational culture to create and maintain a positive culture.

The first step in creating a culture of Honoring the Game is to “set the table” by making it absolutely clear what behavior is expected of parents, coaches and players. The technique of “message bombardment” is used to make sure that members of the organization receive the message in many different ways, again and again, so that there is no doubt about what the organization’s values are. This will drastically reduce the number of times that individuals will act in ways that violate the norms of the culture, because most of us are “pack animals” who try to do what is expected of us when we know what that is.

However, even when an organization does a good job of setting and communicating expectations, there will be individuals who will step over the line and act in a way that dishonors the game. There is so much emotion and so much seemingly “at stake” when our own flesh-and-blood children are

competing in sports that it is inevitable that adult misbehavior will occur from time to time. When this happens, there must be an intervention to let the person who is misbehaving know that this is not acceptable behavior, or the culture will begin to degrade at that moment. “Moral courage” is required by leaders, coaches and parents to speak up for a positive culture to those who would dishonor it.

Finally, the organization needs to establish “structural pillars” that will maintain the culture over time, so that when the leaders who established the culture have left the organization, the culture remains strong. The wonderful thing about organizational culture is that it can have an impact on the behavior of the organization’s members even if they don’t all agree with it.

The second big idea in establishing a positive culture in a youth sports organization is that to effectively change an organization, you need to get inside the heads of the people in the organization and change their “mental models.” A mental model can be thought of as an internalized job description that sometimes is not well understood by the person who holds that model in his or her head, even as it largely controls his or her actions.

The current mental model of coaching in this society is win-at-all-cost, often even at the youngest levels of sports. It is harder to eliminate a bad model without something better to replace it. Positive Coaching Alliance has developed a model called the “Double-Goal Coach” to displace the existing mental model. Our Double-Goal Coach model is based on a large body of research from sport psychology, moral education and other disciplines.

Mental models are incredibly powerful. They control how people think, how they behave and even what they see (or fail to see). A coach with a win-at-all-cost model in his or her head will often miss the chance to teach a life lesson when the opportunity is staring one right in the face. For example, it is hard to learn to bounce back from defeat when one never loses. So a tough loss can be a “teachable moment” for a coach who never loses sight of the second goal. But a win-at-all-cost coach might totally miss this opportunity because of a fixation on the result on the scoreboard.

A Double-Goal Coach wants to win (goal #1) but has another, even more important goal – to use sports to teach life lessons and develop positive character traits in the players he or she coaches. Positive Coaching Alliance has a large base of experience in training thousands of coaches in this new model over the last four years with great success. When coaches see that building character and teaching life lessons is compatible with winning, they readily embrace this way of coaching.

Positive Coaching Alliance has the goal of fomenting a “social epidemic” of Positive Coaching to roll across the country (and beyond!) so that every young athlete can have a positive educational experience with sports. This goal can be reached if youth sports organization leaders begin to establish, enforce and maintain a strong positive organizational culture within their own spheres of influence. It can be done if WE make the commitment to do it and begin today.

** Jim Thompson is the founder of Positive Coaching Alliance, a movement of parents, coaches and youth sports organizations dedicated to “transforming youth sports so sports can transform youth.” The PCA website is www.positivecoach.org.*