

COACHES CAN ENCOURAGE MORALITY AND FAIRPLAY

Basil Kavanagh
Marijane Fall



Mr. Best is yelling at his son, Joe, for striking out. A teammate ridicules Joe by saying, "You couldn't hit the ball if your life depended on it." The coach glares angrily at Joe, while the assistant coach chastises the umpire about the last strike call.

Hmmm. Isn't an athletic event supposed to be a beneficial and wholesome activity for young children? Many sports educators agree that this scene and a win-at-all-costs attitude should not be a normal occurrence in youth sport, simply an unfortunate exception.



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Students don't have to experience this unfortunate exception, and it's up to coaches to make sure this doesn't happen. Let's look at this scenario another way: Mr. Best is in the stands watching Joe's turn at bat. Joe strikes out. As he leaves the batter's box, his dad calls out, "That's okay Joe. You'll get a hit next time." As Joe continues to the dugout, the next batter gives him a high five. "Watch out for the dropball," Joe warns in return, "It's his strikeout pitch." Upon entering the dugout, many of Joe's teammates call out, "Nice try, Joe." The assistant coach smiles and winks at Joe as he takes his place on the bench. The head coach says, "Joe, the way you pro-

tected the plate with two strikes was great. You also did well to fight off so many tough pitches. I'm really proud of you." Joe's face beams.

To make sure this is the case, coaches can use a six-step plan to teach morality and good sports conduct through youth sport. The plan includes practical suggestions and guidelines, and a basis from which coaches can construct individual plans that will enable them to be certain that the opening scenario is not "the rule."

Step One—The Quiz

Coaches who teach morality and good sports conduct need to identify and become aware of their own personal attitudes, beliefs, and values.

Simon (1991) believes that three criteria must be present for moral reasoning to occur:

- decisions are impartial,
- stated positions are consistent,
- moral decisions are critical and reflective.

King (1992) has an excellent quiz that coaches can use to be sure they are adhering to Simon's criteria.

Here are some questions coaches can ask themselves to be certain they are acting as they should:

- What do I want from the athletic experience (e.g., winning, gaining recognition, or developing a child's



physical, cognitive, and social skills)?

- What are the athletes' needs? For example, are they participating for fun, to meet new friends, or to develop new skills?
- How can the experience meet the athletes' needs? Can I add "fun drills" to practices if I learn the majority of my players participate for fun?

- Do I value fairplay? Do I care more about right and wrong than winning or losing?

- Is my behaviour consistent with my words? Do I set a good example? Am I a consistent role model for my players?

- What is my stance on respecting the rules and officials? For example, do I accept referees' decisions, treat the officials with respect, and encourage my players to do the same?

- What are my responsibilities to opposing coaches and players (e.g., show them respect, cooperate with them, exhibit good sports conduct)?

- What would I like to accomplish by the end of the season? For instance, do I want my players to become more co-operative and value fairplay?

- How can I accomplish my goals? Should I, for example, work to treat players more fairly, emphasize the "process" (playing) not the "product" (winning), and provide equal opportunities for all players?

Step Two—Why Participate?

Coaches need to determine why participants are involved in youth sports. At one of the first preseason team meetings, coaches can ask why

athletes participate in the sport. Coaches can ask the participants to list—ranked in order of importance—the reasons they participate in sports. Coaches can then compile these lists to determine the most common reasons children participate in sports: having fun, meeting new friends, developing new skills, and getting fit.

To measure athletes' moral reasoning, coaches could give a second questionnaire—an adapted version of

King's coach's quiz (1992)—at the same time. This quiz would determine the athletes' perceptions, values, and attitudes regarding good sports conduct and moral reasoning. For example, one question might ask players if they would aggressively argue an official's call.

Coaches can use this data to establish plans to integrate morality and sportsmanship. If, for example, coaches find out that the majority of

Coaches Self-Quiz

Ask yourself these questions—adapted from King's quiz (1992)—to be certain you are thinking and acting in a moral and ethical manner.

• What are my needs concerning the athletic experience (e.g., winning, gaining recognition, or developing a child's physical, cognitive, and social skills)?

- What are the athletes' needs? For example, are they participating for fun, to meet new friends, or to develop new skills?

- How can the experience meet the athletes' needs? Can I add "fun drills" to practices if I learn the majority of my players participate for fun?

- Do I value sportsmanship? Do I care more about right and wrong than winning or losing?

- Is my behaviour consistent with my stated position? Do I set a good example? Am I a consistent role model for my players?

- What is my stance on respecting the rules and officials? For example, do I accept referees' decisions, treat the officials with respect, and encourage my players to do the same?

- What are my responsibilities to opposing coaches and players (e.g., show them respect, cooperate with them, exhibit good sports conduct)?

- What would I like to accomplish by the end of the season? For instance, do I want my players to become more co-operative and value fairplay?

- How can I go about accomplishing my goals? Should I, for example, work to treat players more fairly, emphasize the "process" (playing) not the "product" (winning), and provide equal opportunities for all players?

athletes would aggressively argue an official's call, then a coach can immediately address the behaviour in the next team meeting. Coaches could rank the less pressing problem areas and plan to deal with them in practice and other team meetings.

Step Three—Expectations

Now coaches need to be certain the team members understand what's expected of them. To do this, coaches can hold a discussion during a team meeting—the second or third, for example—to share what the coaches and the athletes expect for the season. Ideally, during this discussion, team members will identify and agree on team-related issues, including the coach's philosophy, any short-, intermediate-, and long-term goals, and team policies.

These discussions are a good time for coaches to specifically state that morality and sportsmanship are primary team goals. This direct statement tells participants that these characteristics are desirable; it also makes the players more aware of the coach's expectations.

Step Four—Inform the Parents

Team members are not the only ones who need to be aware of desirable characteristics. Parents also need to

know these things. Coaches can outline their philosophies in a letter to parents. The letter should include:

- team goals (e.g., compliment teammates regularly and accept officials' call),
- team policies (e.g., regular attendance, equal playing time),
- typical procedures (warm-up routines, postgame meeting, etc.),
- the risks of negative outcomes (such as low self-esteem),
- the possible benefits of participation,
- the option to leave the team at anytime for any reason, and
- what can be expected from the coach.

Coaches can also include example scenarios to illustrate athletes' expected modes of behaviour. For instance, coaches can clearly discourage players from making disparaging remarks against opponents regardless of the circumstances. And coaches can encourage players not to retaliate against opponents' aggressive behaviour. In addition, coaches should encourage parents to positively reinforce their children's efforts, regardless of the outcome. Athletes and parents who are informed of the coach's intentions and expectations can make informed decisions about participating in the sport. However, informing participants of the goal of sportsmanship is not enough to make it happen—coaches must continually remind players of this goal and model this behaviour.

Accommodating parental attitudes and beliefs is a challenge for all coaches. Coaches' opinions invariably differ from some parents'. Those coaches who are successful in getting adults to support the educational model of athletics—by giving them straightforward information at the outset—will have powerful allies. If parents support the coach's attempt

to teach morality and good sports conduct, youth sports will have crossed a major hurdle.

Step Five—Practice

Team members cannot simply decide to act with morality and good sports conduct. Like everything in sports, players must practice these traits. Therefore, coaches should allocate time during practices and team meetings to discuss and actually replicate various game—or practice—scenarios involving sports conduct and morality issues. Coaches can have the team identify potentially troublesome situations, compile a list of these, and work to implement Simon's criteria. (1991)

If the coach and team discuss negative incidents such as aggressive behaviour, game strategies that break the spirit of the rules, and poor refereeing, the coach can use this opportunity to elaborate on Simon's moral reasoning criteria. Coaches of young children may want to do some role-playing of predicted incidents. For instance, one child can portray an aggressive opponent while another child pretends to be the recipient of the aggression. Other team members can observe and comment on the scenario. Role-playing provides auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic stimuli and will enable all children to learn in their own ways. Coaches may want to follow role-playing with a discussion of the moral reasoning employed.

Athletes and coaches can plan and mentally rehearse appropriate cognitive and behavioural responses to unacceptable sports conduct. Coaches can emphasize these three examples to illustrate how to combine cognitive and behavioural responses. At all times, players will:

- make a conscious decision not to retaliate (cognitive) to aggressive opponent behaviour and will con-

The Six-Step Plan

1. Take the Quiz.
2. Find Out Why Athletes Participate in Sports.
3. State Expectations.
4. Inform the Parents.
5. Practice.
6. Use a Positive Role Model.

tinue participating in the competition (behavioural),

- respond to opponents who invoke game strategies that ignore the spirit of the rules with silent disapproval (cognitive) and increased personal competition intensity (behavioural),
- ignore bad calls by referees (cognitive) and use this as a cue to move to strategic positions (behavioural).

Coaches who use these techniques may discover that participants do not dwell on events beyond their control and can easily adapt to situations that challenge their morality and sportsmanship.

Step Six—Role Models

Coaches should exemplify morality and fairplay characteristics by acting as proper role models. Coaches who suggest that athletes refrain from criticizing teammates or opponents or from disputing officials' calls—and then model that behaviour—are consciously demonstrating moral behaviour.

Stephens (1993) says players' perceptions of their coach's attitude significantly predicts players' likelihood to play unfairly in sport settings. Simply stated, young athletes model their coaches' behaviours and actions.

Therefore, coaches who display good sports conduct, morality, and are ethical will encourage young athletes to do the same.

New Attitudes

Even if coaches follow the six-step plan, they will have to overcome some obstacles—and change some attitudes—to successfully integrate morality and sportsmanship in youth sports. The first change coaches need to make is from a product orientation—winning or losing—to the model of an educational process. The process of acquiring morality and sportsmanship must take priority over winning. Coaches should consistently empower athletes to make moral decisions. Coaches can provide opportunities for athletes to

- meet new friends,
- learn new skills,
- have fun, and
- socialize.

Once coaches have done this, they must acknowledge these opportunities as more important than game outcomes.

Time

When they adopt a moral approach to good sports conduct, coaches will need to focus on commitment and planning. If they really value moral behaviour and sportsmanship, coaches will determine how best to

schedule practices to include these important characteristics. Coaches need to take time to prepare their teams psychologically, which usually enhances performance. At the very least, psychological preparations help athletes become more focused. Practices, pre- and post-game meetings, and competitions will provide sufficient opportunities for coaches to reinforce the valuable characteristics of morality and sportsmanship.

Language and Direction

Coaches need to be opportunistic and seize "teaching moments." Those moments should be positive. For example, instead of telling a player, "You have to be more aggressive, don't let opponents take advantage of you," the reinforcing comment may be, "I'm proud of the way you ignored your opponent's aggressive foul." This immediate reinforcement of good team conduct encourages desirable behaviour, instead of promoting unethical conduct, and shows a consistent emphasis.

Coaches who follow this six-step plan may find that their athletes not only enjoy sports more, but exhibit morality and good sports conduct more often.

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References available upon request.