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Youth Sports from the Heart. . . .

There is an adage in the coaching ranks that says if you coach with your heart instead of your head you will learn to regret that decision. While that may hold true in the professional and beyond high school levels it sure doesn't make any sense at the younger levels.

I ask you, how much sweeter feelings can you as an adult have in your heart than the joy of creating an experience for a group of children that totally excites them, creates happiness, and inspires fun filled effort. An experience that creates in the youngsters an indelible, memorable, and cherished moment of unfettered joy and independence within their warm and glowing hearts, as the youngsters embark on the exciting and unpredictable trail through the trials and tribulations of self discovery. Each child exploring the mystery of their unique physical, social, mental, and emotional attributes as they move forward in the complicated maturation process of learning the basics of their life skills.

To observe a player free from "shoulds" and oughts," being allowed to play rather than perform, given free reign to create rather than imitate, to try new things without the fear of criticism, and to know and feel in your heart that you as an adult helped create that joyous experience for that child. Oh my! Wow! It doesn't get much better than that. Truly a most humbling and gratifying adult experience, not to mention the absolutely wonderful impact such freedom to explore has on the child.

Whether you are a parent, a coach, a referee, an administrator, or a fan, I'm sure you will agree, that bottom line, it's what drives most of us to contribute the endless hours of effort, support, and contribution (not to mention the dollars involved) to the youth sports scene.

In fact the experience is often so heartfelt that you feel a little self-conscious about it wondering if you do things for your own satisfaction or for the kids involved. Yes, it feels that good! But you have to try it, to see for yourself. It is a win-win situation for all involved.

Just to say that seems ridiculous doesn't it? Why on earth would we as involved adults try to do anything but create a hearty fun filled experience for the kids? That's why we do what we do, or at least I hope it is. We all have only the best intentions of doing what is in the best interests and benefits of the young participants' right?

Why all the preaching then Brill? We do things differently from the way things were done when you were a kid. There are a lot more choices available for the kids today

Yup! I agree, times have changed considerably and I know we can never go back. We have to adjust to the prevailing culture and try to provide the best programs for the kids based on today's cultural environment. And that's my point.

With so many factions competing for the youngsters' leisure time it is difficult to create a athletic achievement ethic environment in an instant gratification culture. If the kids aren't having fun at their activities it makes it even more difficult. The trick is to provide as much fun in the sport in the earlier years and then let the kids decide their own future. I think here that the word "inspiration" has a better connotation in describing how to influence the younger player than the more controlling connotation the word "motivation" brings to the table.

Youth hockey (or for that matter any youth sport) *does not have* as its primary purpose the development of players for advanced levels of competition. Certainly products of the youth sports system do advance to higher levels of competition and that's a good thing given our cultural penchant for achievement, but the percentages are so small at the collegiate and professional levels of competition (less than one-half of one percent in ice hockey nationally). There are not many Tiger Woods stories out there, so why not play the percentages and just let the kids play. If there is a Tiger in there somewhere he will eventually surface.

I know, I know, it's the American way, the American dream, but is that just a rationalization? I think so. Are our 10-11-12 year olds focused on achieving the American dream? Or is it the adults doing the thinking for the children?

We pay too much attention to the critical few. It seems a little silly to concentrate 95 percent of our adult efforts on less than one-half of one percent of our constituency and only 5 percent of our effort on the other 99.95 percent of the kids, particularly when they aren't even teenagers yet. This is where all of the players start. Every single one of them.

By building and paying more attention to the participation base (the 95 percent) more cream will be allowed to rise to the top (maybe even more than 5 percent). However to get the numbers in the first place we need to sell our sports at the younger levels and to do that it has to be fun as well as an inspiring experience.

If in fact we would concentrate 95 percent of our adult efforts to provide the 13 and under age groups with a program adopting a mission statement based on the following, I think the numbers of participants would actually increase, which in turn would increase the chances of developing more highly skilled athletes, just because of the numbers.

The Ideal 13-Under Youth Sports Mission Statement:

To provide every participant with the opportunity to participate in a youth sports experience based on *that individuals unique and personal level of interest, skill, needs, and aspirations*, in an enjoyable, challenging, inspiring, fun filled environment.

Maybe the mission is idealistic? Nah... it really isn't. What I am talking about is really giving the children the opportunity to enjoy the *play aspects* of sports based on each individuals level of interest and maturity rather than being chained to the *perform aspects* that many of our programs dictate and often use as a tool to measure success.

All too often we measure the success of our efforts based on *performance factor* rather than *play factor*.

Play a game, how did we do? A short term, short sighted approach, but at least it does provide measurement. However that measurement is applied mostly to the coach who knows if he doesn't win he won't be coaching long.

Obviously the play factor is difficult to measure and often the results won't become apparent for years. Certainly a longer term and more calculated approach. I think most coaches agree with the importance of the play factor but really can't apply it for fear of losing their job.

Some of the deterrents to carrying out the ideal mission statement:

Often adults do not understand the wide range of maturity levels existing at the younger ages. Human growth and development factors in the 13-under age levels, the physical, social, emotional and mental aspects of each child's level of maturity in each of these areas varies considerably from child to child. We need to honor and respect these unique differences in each child.

There is a tremendous need to provide all adults involved in youth sports with a well documented, professional educational process helping them to understand the dynamics of the 13-under participant's human growth and development timetable.

In a group of 15 pre-teen children there could be as much as a four year difference between the various aspects of each child's personal maturity schedule.

By culling the more mature players at an early age and assigning them to the "future stars" program not only is a disservice to the selected player, but also to the player not selected, who may out of disappointment decide to quit the program, when in fact in two years that player's maturity schedule has caught up with the earlier selected player and often exceeds that player's level of athletic ability and skill.

As a consequence the "early selectee" has a distorted view of his/her capabilities because in effect the chosen child gets more practice time and a higher level of coaching investment. We do all that we can in order to validate our selection process.

Perhaps consciously, perhaps unconsciously, but that's what we do when we cull from the group early.

But you know, no matter what you do, each performer will eventually reach his/her limitations. You do all you can to prepare and then all you can do is watch, hope, encourage, and accept. And isn't that an exciting process!

The player not selected is being "short changed" and penalized because of something not under his/her control, the personal human growth and development maturity schedule. That child, perhaps 9-10-or 11 years old may be anywhere from 2-3 years behind in his/her development schedule but by around age 14 or 15 could actually be a much better equipped performer than the "early selectee". The development process has its own schedule for every individual and eventually levels the playing field..

If the child quits early because of the culling process we just will never know how much more development could have been achieved. That is so unfair to the "late bloomers." I don't think any of us wants that to happen. Yes," in the words of Emerson, "patience is a virtue, (for which we all strive and seldom reach)."

As ABC's John Stossel would say "Gimme a break!" By allowing our 13-under youngsters to express themselves at play we allow all the kids the opportunity to grow and develop. I learned a long time ago that we as adults don't motivate kids to perform. What we do is tell (or sell) them on things and if we do a good job, and if the youngster sees some benefit in doing what we tell them, then he/she will motivate them self. If they feel good, they play good, is something I have always thought.

As I said before, I believe all adults involved in youth sports have only what is in the best interests of the young performer at heart. We do the best we can with what we have within us to do the right thing, that's for sure. The point is, perhaps if we sat back and asked ourselves "*are we doing the right thing rather than doing things right? Are we doing things efficiently at the expense of effectiveness?*"

If each of us as adults considered the uniqueness in each youngsters shining and smiling eyes, honoring respectively each child's individual growth and development factors, and listened to our hearts instead of our sometimes impatient ego's, just maybe all of our younger 13-under performers could indeed have a enjoyable, challenging, and rewarding youth sports experience.

To just let them play. To just let them be anxiously and gracefully inspired. Not just the chosen few, but all of them. The performance is actually predictable. It is based on the quality level of preparation. At 13 and under the best preparation is playing and not performing.

It's allowing the child's self to be just that, and allowing all of the complicated growth and development tools within each child to express their unique and very personal qualities as maturity finds its place in the child's own developmental journey.

We are not talking preparations for advanced higher levels of competition. You hear it all the time, "You have to work harder!" To a 10 year old child? Doesn't that sound a little foolish, or maybe a little to controlling? Work hard for who, the adult or the child? You know the answer to that question. We all do.

How can you tell when you are "doing the right things?" It's a simple indicator. Just look into the eyes of the child beaming with happiness and joy. If your heart melts with the same joy then you will know "you're doing the right things".

It really is as simple as that. Try it, it really works that way. Honest. And jeez, does it feel good!

Let them play rather than perform and measure the consequences of that action by the warm feelings in your heart and the sounds of their joyous laughter.

You will be very pleased with the result if you're "doing the right things".

Inspire, inspire, and watch them grow higher!

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