



POSITIVE COACHING – BE COMPETITIVE AND POSITIVE  
All notes from Jim Thompson’s book “Positive Coaching”

Coaching youth athletes is a privilege and should be treated as such. The goal of every coach should be to build character and self-esteem in every player. This is not easy or quick, but will provide a foundation of confidence and self-worth that can make a lasting impression on every player you coach for many years after they leave your team.

**CHARACTER**

Whether you are new to coaching or a seasoned veteran, tackling this challenge can be daunting. Where do you start? Start with the goal in mind by breaking down how to build a child’s character. To do this, you must decide what you believe are the character traits you think are important.

- Mental Toughness – Doing what other people aren’t willing to do
- Setting and commitment to goals – Do this for your team and encourage players to write their own goals down
- Winning and losing with class – Go beyond being “a good sport”
- Embrace the challenge – Be excited about a challenge or obstacle in your way of success
- Courage – Not an absence of fear, but rather the ability to complete a task in the presence of fear

These are examples, pick the traits that drive you. The DSISD football programs use a chant of “TPD” at every break down as a reminder of their motto; Trust, Passion, Discipline. Whatever you choose, how will you instill this in each player?

- 1) Introduce the trait – Use the beginning of the season to lay this foundation, don’t try to wait until you are comfortable. Introduce the trait in a positive and clear manner starting day one.
- 2) Look for opportunities to illustrate this throughout the season – Highlighting player actions in the moment and tying these back to the trait is key.
- 3) Re-enforce, model and intervene when appropriate – These are moments when a player is not exhibiting the trait. Pull the player aside to re-enforce the trait and provide guidance on how to exhibit the right behavior.
- 4) Look for stories to share with players – Examples and stories will help solidify the trait and behavior with kids.

**SELF-ESTEEM**

Just as important as defining character traits, creating self-esteem for the young athletes you coach should be priority. Think about it as “filling their emotional tanks”. Each kid will be different as to how often you have to help fill their tank, and it will be the biggest challenge you face as a coach. The underlying foundation here is to be relentlessly positive. It is important for kids to understand how to compete and win, but don’t let the competition of winning replace positivity. Be positive, then layer on “the little things”. Here is a list of things to try, realizing every player will respond differently.

- |                   |                |  |                                 |
|-------------------|----------------|--|---------------------------------|
| • Use their names | • Listen       | • Express appreciation and recognition | • Help them see their potential |
| • Smile           | • Be receptive | • Brag on them to parents              |                                 |
| • Humor           | • Apologies    | • Individual coaching                  |                                 |
| • Eye contact     | • Forgiving    | • Positive criticism                   |                                 |
| • High five       | • Ask for help |  |                                 |

This list is by no means complete. Some of these you may not be comfortable with or may not fit your style. Reflect on that and determine what works best for you. Whatever your approach, remember you are looking for ways of giving the player a positive “endorsement”. This will make them feel important about their worth to the team and will help fill their emotional tank.

## **MISTAKES**

Parents and coaches are wrong if they think most kids want to play a sport to win, or improve their skill, or just go out and have fun. These are all present in their minds as we re-enforce these elements, but most of all they want our endorsement. In order to get this, they have to avoid making mistakes and looking “dumb” in front of everyone. We as adults don’t want to look bad in public, and neither do young athletes. Create an environment where mistakes can be made, with the lesson being about how to bounce back from the mistake. Parents, coaches and players will all make mistakes during a season. Be accountable for the mistake and focus on the effort exhibited after the mistake to bounce back.

## **PRODUCTIVE PRACTICES**

“Practice sessions are where the players discover whether the coach knows what he is doing and whether he has a commitment to helping the team become as good as it can be.” – Jim Thompson

Creating a habit and environment of overlearning is key. This repetition can lead to outstanding athletic performances from your players. The challenge is making this habit productive and fun. In order to tackle the productivity challenge, coaches must be prepared. Being prepared starts with accepting that practice, not games, is where the rubber meets the road. If you think about practice in the 10-minute drive there, you are probably doing your team a disservice of not being ready. You should have your practice plans written out. You may not always have a chance to type and print them out, but at least jot some notes on a piece of paper. Think about building around a core of activities for the season, typically centered around key fundamentals.

Once you have your core concepts identified, find various ways to teach these core skills in a fun way.

- Competition – Small group games, scrimmages
- Reducing the level of play – Youth cannot be expected to perform at a high-level, 100% of the time
- Have coaches play – Ensure coaches are helping, not hindering player effort
- Rewards – Daily or weekly goals to bestow to the TEAM (e.g. popsicles for effort)

The final element of a productive practice is coach and parent delegation. The stronger your teaching community for your team, the more success you will realize. It will maximize repetitions for the limited time the team spends together, so get to know your parents and coaches and make preparations for their involvement in every practice.

## **HANDLING PARENTS**

Coaches must be able to recognize various behaviors from parents that we all exhibit at one time or another in the heat of competition.

- Distorted perceptions – All parents will at one point be affected by thinking the referee is out to get their team. This happens most notably in close competitions. Coaches should be prepared to defuse this perception by calling attention to it. Set the tone early on of your expectation and that you will call their attention to it should the need arise.
- Reliving past glories – Youth sports is about learning from mistakes. Remind parents to put themselves in their child’s “shoes”, with their current foundation of understanding of the game. As a coach, speak to the parent if you see this happening. Do it positively to help defuse the potential issue.
- Judgement of you as coach – If you coached your child before, you know this feeling that you are being judged every moment by parents based on your child’s athletic performance and social behavior. This is true sometimes, but more often than not, parents are self-consumed with the same emotion for their own child. As a coach, be the first to admit you do not judge them on that basis. Remind them the player’s performance and behavior is a joint responsibility of the coach, parent AND player. Telling the parent you don’t place blame will help defuse situations.

Recognizing the above behavior will help defuse tense moments, but also remember to focus on what parents DO want; to be in the information loop, to hear good things about their kids, to see their kids play, and to be included or feel “among friends”.