

How to Coach Youth Who Do Not Play As Often As Others

Coach John Wooden often said that he felt like he became closer to his bench players than he did to the players who received most of the playing time. This situation does not occur very often in youth sports. More often than not the reverse is true - players, who do not play very much, despise their coach.

If youth sports coaches could learn coach Wooden's methods, there would be many less confrontational situations in youth sports. Most negative incidents happen because players and/or their parents do not feel like the kids are being treated with respect. Parents feel like their kids are not getting any positive esteem building from being a member of the team and so often, they are right. Unfortunately, by the very nature of sport, this situation can never be solved completely. However, if youth coaches learned how to deal with the less talented players in a healthy manor, those kids would still benefit with increased self-esteem, which should be the goal of youth coaches after all.

Coach Wooden's bench players gained self-esteem and felt as if they were important parts of the team, despite the fact that they did not play often. How did he accomplish this? Coach Wooden accomplished this by explaining to his team that a team is like a smooth running car. He informed his team that even the minor components of the car must operate correctly for the car (team) to work. Therefore, he went on, all parts of the car (team) were important and not just the engine (star players). He points out that without all parts of the team working together, the star players and team will never function properly. In this manner, Coach Wooden convinced all his players of their importance and thereby build up their self-esteem.

Based on my experiences with some outstanding coaches in my professional career, here are some suggestions for youth sport coaches to help treat players who do not play as often as others: Coaches should:

1. Acknowledge all players by name with a greeting at the beginning of each practice session, when possible.
2. Delegate equal time to all team members in practice.
3. Look for signs of improvement in all players, no matter how small, and point it out to individual, team and player's parents.
4. Express the importance of each player's contribution to the team's success.
5. Allow players to play their favorite positions in practice even though they may not play those in games.
6. Communicate each player's importance to the team and how important it is to stay prepared to play at all times during games and the season.

7. Always look for opportunities to put players into games like games that are out of hand score wise and exhibition games.

8. Look for situations where players have a good chance of succeeding in games as opposed to situations where less-skilled players may be over matched.

9. Constantly teach sport strategy knowledge in games, especially to players who are sitting on the bench.

10. Recognize the different God given physical talent of players and show patience with less talented players.

11. Reward and encourage players who display effort, dedication and attention.

12. Give all players a pat on the back and a smile at the end of games, win or lose.

Of course, many recreational sports leagues have mandatory playing rules, which is good. Coaches should always strive to give bench-sitting player's confidence and a sense of importance with their coaching attention. As mentioned, building and maintaining youth players' self-esteem is the number one goal of youth coaches. Coaches, who make a point of paying extra attention to kids who do not play as much, become positive role models to all players.

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