

July 26, 2011

Coaching Etiquette

By **Brian Gotta, President of CoachDeck** (www.coachdeck.com)

As a coach of a youth sports team, there will be situations when you clearly have the game in hand and it is time to “call off the dogs,” to avoid embarrassing the opponent. And there may be occasions when you find yourself on the wrong end of a blowout. When a coach doesn’t seem to know or care that he’s allowing his team to pile on, the result can be frustration, hurt feelings and anger.

When do you know enough is enough? Clearly there is some amount of judgment required. I have coached baseball teams that had sizable leads, but we still didn’t feel comfortable because I’d seen us give up big innings in the past and knew that it could happen again. We left in our best defense or scored again when we could have held back. It is very likely the other coach didn’t see it from my standpoint and assumed I was just trying to run up the score. In these instances I would usually try to have a chat and clear things up after the game. Sometimes my counterpart would assure me he was not offended in any way. Other times I could tell he was sore.

Most youth sports organizations try to legislate etiquette into their programs. Some soccer leagues do not allow their teams to win by more than a certain number of goals. Most baseball programs have a “run-rule” limit that ends the game after a minimum number of innings any time a team leads by too much. When one team’s advantage in Pop Warner Football exceeds twenty-eight points they can no longer pass the ball, and coaches may be subject to a review to determine if they were trying to light up the scoreboard unnecessarily. Yet, beyond these written guidelines, coaches should also try to use common sense.

The key, I believe, is to be able to put more than just your own team’s interest at heart. A couple of years ago I was coaching girls 12U softball. In one of our first games of the season, due to a combination of illness, injury and outside commitments, my team only had seven players for the game. We had the option of simply forfeiting, but I wanted the girls to play, so we sent out a standard infield and just one outfielder. The girl we asked to pitch had done so only rarely, and we had no one who had ever played the toughest position: catcher. I talked a reluctant girl named Shelby into putting on the gear and she promised to do her best.

The opposing manager was one of our league’s board members, Joe, originally from England. It was clear he was only learning the game in the past several years. Their team was scoring at will because our pitcher didn’t throw many strikes and Shelby had a very tough time stopping the wild pitches. As the game got more and more out of hand, Joe seemed to get more and more excited coaching third. Because our league rules capped the number of runs a team could get in an inning, there came a point when it was mathematically impossible for us to come back and even tie. Yet with every passed

ball he exhorted his runners to steal, including going home to score more runs. Shelby was in tears by the end of the game.

When it was over, after the teams shook hands I stopped Joe, who I know is a good guy, and explained that I didn't think he had been intentionally unsportsmanlike, but that in baseball and softball once a team clearly has a victory in hand, it is customary to stop stealing bases. His response was, "Oh, we were just having fun." I replied that it hadn't been fun for our girls and in fact, our catcher was in tears. I got the feeling he didn't appreciate being lectured. However later that evening, apparently after reflecting, he sent me an apologetic email.

What all this means is that if you coach at the recreational level yes, you have a responsibility to prepare your players to perform at the highest level possible and to ensure that they have lots of fun. But it doesn't just end with your team. It is up to you to do your best, through good sportsmanship, to be careful you don't ruin the experience for the kids who are also trying to have fun on the other side of the field.