



Longing for the Joys of a Simple Game

Secondary level coaches must teach young athletes honor and sportsmanship

By Dr. Charles Breithaupt

Sammie showered down on the '64 Buick and lit out south on Highway 96. We were making good time as the asphalt flew by. Ahead, the highway looked like a shimmering sea with the heat hovering over the pavement. The windows were down, and I had my hand out pretending to be an airplane.

The kids were all in the back seat. The moms were in the front. There was no air conditioning, but we didn't care. Never really thought much about it, unless our ice cream melted too quickly and trickled down our arms. But that was very unlikely even though it was a scorching summer day. We could scarf down a dipped cone faster than a vacuum cleaner could suck up dust.

I just had to make it back to baseball practice. We had driven the 16 miles north to Kirbyville to pick up a few items at the Five & Dime store. If we didn't make it back, I was in for a long summer evening of duck walking. Our coaches did not tolerate tardiness or skipping practice.

Sammie wheeled into the vacant lot that served as our practice field. We made it with a few minutes to spare. As the car left in a cloud of dust, I found a spot in the shade of several crepe myrtle trees full of watermelon red blooms. Some of my teammates took part in a game of rock, paper and scissors. Then our coaches arrived.

They weren't much older than we were. I was only 11, but we had a couple of other guys who had better starts on their beards and mustaches. Of course, those wouldn't have been allowed even if we could grow them. But, every day Bubba and Cecil would be there right on time and they expected us to be there as well.

Bubba worked in a grocery store owned by his family. He had been a terrific high school athlete and had even played baseball in the minor leagues. Cecil worked for the telephone company and always came to practice in his khaki pants and boots and a great flat top haircut. We all had burrs or crew cuts. His flat top was classic.

We could only wear our baseball caps to games. Gimme caps were a thing of the future. We didn't have practice uniforms and we saved our cleats and practiced in sneakers. All in all we didn't look like much, but we learned a ton. Our coaches taught us more than how to lay down a sacrifice bunt. They taught us about fairness, respect and responsibility. Besides the lessons on punctuality and attendance, we learned to respect every team we played. We prepared for every game regardless of the talent level of our opponents. We learned never to fear any opponent and to respect even the last-place team.

We practiced hard and played hard. We ran out every at-bat. We hustled on and off the diamond. We didn't ridicule the mistakes of others and we certainly weren't allowed to be

bench jockeys. We absolutely were not allowed to argue with umpires (most of whom were our dads). Then we cleaned our dugout and the stands, never leaving that task for someone else.

We were elated in victory and sad in defeat, but the great equalizer was the free snow cone or hot dog left over from the concession stand. Just getting to play was enough for us. The sting of defeat was generally gone by the time we reached the family station wagon.

Times have changed. Long gone are the hot and itchy wool uniforms, sponsored by Western Auto. Also gone is the innocence of days gone by. While I don't long for cars without air conditioning, I do miss the joy of playing a simple game where I learned many life-long lessons.

Today, our coaches teach honor through high school sports. Even though they are saddled with kids who come from youth league experiences that care nothing about character and integrity, our school coaches understand that extracurricular activities should be educational. Part of that education involves teaching responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness, citizenship, caring and respect.

This is how coaches must view educational competition.

They must train their athletes to win and compete at the highest level. And they must do so by teaching and modeling honor on the field of play.

The youth leagues of today, regardless of the sport, are much more sophisticated. Kids start at much earlier ages, some not as big as a soccer ball; others unable to even carry a bat. Teams have fancy uniforms and travel in style, by bus or plane. Select teams and all-star teams make the

regular season ferocious with tension and anxiety. The championship team coach gets the prize of coaching the all-stars, so winning is paramount to learning how to play.

Players and fans are encouraged to taunt their opponents. Umpires are ridiculed and spit upon. Players cry after wins and losses. Parents attack coaches and players with scorn and less than adult behavior – a sight too often seen at practically any youth league venue.

These lessons, or lack of, are ingrained by the time the young athlete reaches the seventh grade. The self-worth of many of these athletes is wrapped up in how many times they have made an all-star team by the time they are 14. On the other hand, many, tired of constant verbal abuse from parents, simply drop out.

Secondary school coaches are responsible for teaching young people how to play the games they love and how to respect those games and the other people who play, coach

and officiate them. Coaches must take this responsibility seriously.

Much has been said and written about non-school play. Many of the complaints we field come from parents who complain about a coach who has violated the eight-hour rule. Yet, the same parent will take that same child to a private lesson or club practice.

How healthy can it be for a student to participate in 100 non-school baseball games following the school season? How much balance does a student have who spends practically all of her free time playing club volleyball or taking private lessons?

Parents feel these activities are necessary because they want college scholarship opportunities for their children. But how many promising athletes have simply dropped out of activities due to injuries caused by overstressed joints, burnout or boredom?

Coaches need to work with parents to develop a balanced life for the student-athlete. While we have lost many opportunities to teach kids about being well-rounded, we do not have to succumb to the over-specialization that is taking place in high school athletics.



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Too many good athletes feel as if they have to specialize if they are going to get a scholarship. Too many good athletes turn their back on sports they enjoy in order to grab for the glory and opportunities promised them by adults. Far too often this is met with great disappointment and dismay at what has been left behind.

The simple days of playing for fun and enjoying the relationships that come from partici-

pating in high school sports has come and gone in many areas of the country.

The lessons about honor and responsibility, caring, citizenship, fairness, trustworthiness and respect have been absent from many non-school experiences. Therefore, it again becomes the responsibility of our coaches to teach these valuable educational components.

Or, I could get Bubba and Cecil out of retirement. **CQ**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. Charles Breithaupt became executive director of the Texas University Interscholastic League earlier this year after serving as an assistant director for 17 years. Before joining the UIL in 1992, Breithaupt was an athletic director, principal and school board member in Texas. He also coached five sports during a 17-year career and won numerous coach-of-the-year awards. He currently is a member of the NFHS Board of Directors.

