

The 7 Biggest Mistakes Youth Sports Coaches Make

Being a youth sports coach means being a jack of all trades. All at once you are expected to be a counselor, friend, discipliner, teacher, and confidant. You are expected to maintain control but respect your players and foster an environment of fun. Fun generally comes from success, but you cannot focus too much on winning. There is a delicate balance you must strike as a coach, and here we show you what some of the most common coaching mistakes are and how to avoid them. Each tip gives you examples of what to do in certain situations, how to fix things when they have gone wrong, and how to avoid falling into the same error again. There are ways to prevent these mistakes from happening as well as tips for handling things in the moment. We know that coaching is difficult; we also know that your patience, dedication, and love for the sport will help you do it successfully!

1. Win, Win, Win

The point of sports is learning and having fun, but it is also about winning. Winning is a natural goal of all teams, but coaches who focus only on winning run the risk of demotivating their athletes. Youth sports are an outlet for children to learn, grow, and develop important interpersonal skills. None of these benefits are possible if you, the coach, put the focus only on winning.

Winning-focused coaching happens when a coach teaches his/her athletes to “win no matter the cost,” which includes injuries, penalties, or cheating. It also comes about when parents pay excessive amounts to involve their kids in sports and expect to see results. A winning-focused coach is also one who is very personally emotionally involved in the team and the sport. This type of coach is one who probably played the game as a youth as well and wants to make up for his/her own mistakes through the conduct of the current athletes. This is a recipe for disaster, because the coach is no longer focused on the athletes.

To avoid falling into the winning-focused trap, start by talking to the parents. Nothing is more important in youth sports than the attitudes of the parents, and they often prescribe to a “win at any cost” mentality. While this may be based on their own past experiences, it could also be a method of showing their pride in their children and wanting them to succeed at any cost. Unfortunately, when parents become winning focused, children do not see that their parents are proud of them or that they want only the best for their children; kids only see that if they do not win, they have disappointed their parents. This changes the entire meaning of sports and makes it harder for youth to perform well. They need a loving, supportive environment to truly thrive.

When speaking with parents, make it clear that the point of the season is to learn the basics of technique, develop the discipline of practice and repetition, and focus on working together as a team. Remind parents that their attitudes are a huge influence on their children, and ask them to behave appropriately at sporting events and at practices. Ask them to keep competitiveness to a minimum and to encourage their children, regardless of the outcome of the games. When you set a good example for your athletes, parents will feel compelled to follow your lead, creating the best kind of environment for your athletes.

To create a season focused on learning and fun, you must also speak with your athletes. At the beginning of the season, speak with all athletes and tell them your goals for the season. These goals should be achievable but not focused entirely on winning. Instead of saying, “I want us to win 7 games this season,” say something like, “I want everyone to personally improve 3 things about their technique in the game. I’d also like to focus on keeping a positive team attitude and working together. It is important to me that you support each other instead of competing against each other. The point of a team is to work as one to achieve a common goal. Our goal is having fun, playing well, and hopefully winning the game!”

By keeping your team and your parents focused on the positive benefits of youth sports, everyone will pay less attention to the results of the game and more to the personal improvements the athletes receive.

2. Not All Athletes Are the Same

Just as a teacher has to learn to explain things several different ways for their different students, a coach must learn to coach in many different ways as well. You cannot treat all athletes the same and expect the same result. Some athletes are visual learners and will learn plays and see strategies better when drawn out on a board. Others will learn better by hearing you explain the strategies instead of see you draw them.

You cannot coach every athlete the same way. To help determine the best way to coach each of your players, watch them throughout the first few weeks of practice. Begin by coaching in one style, such as being very supportive, encouraging, and explanatory. See which athletes respond well to that type of coaching and which athletes suffer from it. Switch your style, focusing more on discipline and individual development. It is your job to determine which coaching style works best for the majority of your team, and use it. Some athletes will need more individual attention than others. Other athletes will respond best to the occasional “I noticed how well you have been doing lately and I wanted to let you know I am impressed!”

As a coach, you are going to have to practice using different styles of coaching. Many coaches feel that they are who they are and that their players and parents should accept that. A truly dedicated, good coach will work to improve their abilities to reach all athletes the way they learn best. Study up on coaching methods and pay attention to with what style you feel most comfortable. This should be the style you use most often, as long as it is effective.

As with any coaching style, there needs to be a mix of discipline and encouragement. Athletes should be trained to respect you as a coach and listen to your expertise. By respecting you, they should learn to respect themselves and each other, creating an environment of trust and respect. This aids discipline, because athletes will be much more open to your decisions and fear your discipline more.

When it comes to encouragement, recognize the hard work of your athletes! It is so easy as a coach to only focus on the negative aspects of the team that need work. However, no one works well in an environment that never offers anything positive. Your team is no different. When you see them following directions or doing their best to fix an error they discovered themselves, point it out to them. As a team, praise them for working well together or supporting each other during

a particularly difficult competition. Let them know that even though your job is to fix their problems, your job is also to encourage them and pay attention to their strong points.

A good way of praising them is to have an awards banquet at the end of each season. You can develop different awards that you feel reflect important aspects of your team's development throughout the year. Honor your athletes for their personal strengths. This is a way to show them that even if you have not pointed out their strengths as much as you should have during the season, it does not mean that you did not recognize and appreciate them.

3. You Fixed the Immediate Problem, But What About Its Cause?

Coaches often feel that their job is to put out fires. This is one style of management that is effective, but it is not the only one, nor the best one. When two of your players get in a fight, you must put out the fire and break up the fight. However, a good coach will not just leave the situation and assume that the problem is resolved. Every issue that you deal with comes from some larger, underlying problem that you may not have recognized yet. It is your job to discover those tensions and resolve them before they surface in other ways, such as a fight.

Many coaches say that they have so many little issues to deal with that they do not have time to address larger ones, which often cause smaller ones. It is not so important to them to teach their athletes to respect each other, because they need to make sure their players do not sabotage each other in the short term. However, this style of leadership leads to more conflicts, because your players never learn the more important lessons of sports.

When you find yourself in a situation where you have to fix an immediate problem, give yourself time to discover the larger problem as soon as possible. If you do not address the tensions that build within your team, you will have small, frequent explosions that consume your life as a coach.

If athletes are fighting, sit them down separately and speak with them, gently asking for the reason of their anger and asking what you can do to help. When you have gotten both athletes' takes on the situation, bring them together and talk through things with them. Suggest a way that you three can work together to resolve the problem. Sit down with the entire team and explain the issue you have targeted with your two fighting athletes. Explain its importance to the whole team and ask if they have suggestions to fix it. Make it a focus over the next few practices, teaching your players the importance of addressing problems when they develop, respecting each other, and working out solutions acceptable to everyone.

The best way to prevent tensions in your team is to talk things out from the beginning. Tell your team that it is very important to you that everyone feel comfortable enough to talk to each other and to you, and that you want them to come to you if they have any problems or are unhappy. Make it clear that actions such as fighting and sabotage are unacceptable, and that you will not tolerate them. Ask players to speak to you if they are getting upset enough to fight with each other.

4. Inefficient Time Use

Time is one of the biggest assets a coach has, but it has to be used appropriately. When a coach arrives to practice unprepared or overwhelmed, athletes will immediately pick up on that and follow suit. Pretty soon, you have endured a frustrating, useless practice. Everyone leaves in a bad mood, realizing that nothing was accomplished and blaming someone else.

When coaching, your job is to lead your players through drills, improve technique, prepare them for competitions, and build self-confidence and team unity. If you do not have your practice planned, none of these things will occur. Just like a teacher, a coach must have a “lesson plan” of sorts.

Certain things should be kept constant in practice. There should always be time for a warm-up and stretching at the beginning of a practice. During this time, you should help your team transition into “practice mode” and focus on the work at hand. You should help them prepare their bodies sufficiently for the physical exertion ahead and help them concentrate on what they individually need to improve.

Next should be time for technique and drills. This may be the least entertaining part of practice, but it may also prove to be the most worthwhile. No one enjoys repeating drills just to fix some minute error, but this develops strength, patience, a drive for perfection, and personal pride when the drill is performed correctly. All these drills and technique practices should follow a series, working from the most basic to the most intense. You cannot teach your players to run before they learn to walk, so start at the beginning and work your way forward.

After working on technique and drills, take your team to competition preparation. Show them tapes of previous games and what they can work on, or walk them through their last game mentally if you do not have tapes. Be sure to point out the positive aspects of their game as well as the negative aspects, and gently show them what needs to be improved for the next competition. When you enter this section of practice, you must pick a finite number of improvements on which you want your players to focus. More than three is unrealistic. Look at the past competitions and look for a pattern. Are you seeing anything that your team is consistently missing, even though you have raised it as a concern? If so, pick that as your only focus between now and the next competition. Sometimes, even three improvements are too many, especially when you are trying to change a major pattern you see in your team. Ask them to be aware of that issue and to do their best to fix it in themselves. They need to know that even though they are part of a team, their main responsibility is to ensure that their own actions are the best they can be.

To help your team remember which aspects you want them to focus on before the next competition, talk them through it during the warm-up each day. Have a new way of explaining the problem and remind them to focus on improving those specific areas. Also, remind them of past issues you have already resolved, so that they do not fall into the same problems again.

At the end of every practice, spend a few minutes with your team doing some cool-down exercises and more stretching. This will help protect their muscles and give you a chance to have a last minute chat with them before leaving for the day. Encourage them by recognizing the

good work they have done during that practice and give them something to think about for the next practice. Keep the focus on their personal performances instead of winning or losing the next competition, because youth athletes perform much better when the emphasis is on performance instead of results.

Before each practice, spend some time thinking of what your team needs to accomplish that day. Follow the plan outlined, but be sure to tailor it to your own needs. This plan is a great way to build rapport with your team, especially during the warm-up and cool-down periods.

5. Never Leaving the Coaching Capacity

Your main job is to coach your players to success in a given sport, but your other duties include teacher, psychologist, counselor, mentor, and friend. It is extremely hard to balance all of these roles while still maintaining your coaching status, but it is a give-and-take that you must develop. If you always stay in the coaching mentality, you will forget to look at your athletes as people as well, people with problems and questions and bad days just like you.

Coaches who only play that role develop strong teams, but not teams based on rapport and trust. Your players will only relate to you when it comes to the aspects of the sport. This is fine, but it will not give you insight into their lives, their feelings, or their needs as people. To develop that kind of relationship, you need to know when to leave the coaching role and enter into the counseling or friend role.

When you see a player having a particularly bad day, or when one of your star players seems unfocused and unhappy, step into the friend/counselor role. Take that player aside either during a break in practice or just after, and mention that they seemed distracted and unhappy during practice. Say that you saw it affecting their abilities at practice and that you would like to know if anything is wrong. If they are hesitant to talk about it, do not force them to explain. Tell them that you are always available if they would like to talk about their issue, and mention that you are only here to help. If they still resist you, drop it and let the player go for the time being. Perhaps check in on them in the following days or within a week. Ask them if they have resolved their issue or if they would like to talk about it now. If after a week, you see no improvement in your player's focus, or if their performance is still being affected by whatever is bothering them, call them into your office or to a private place during a scheduled time, so that they feel more comfortable talking to you. If you cannot get anything out of the player, ask their parents. Parents will usually be very helpful and willing to talk to you, especially if you notice that something is bothering their children and they know what it is. Sometimes it will be family problems that the player is uncomfortable talking about, or perhaps a death in the family. The sooner you know what the issue is, the quicker you can accommodate your practices and your coaching styles to the particular player.

If your player does open up to you immediately and wants to talk, LISTEN. They are not necessarily asking for advice, and if you give it too quickly, they will not return to you when they need to talk, because it will seem as if you are only interested in fixing things instead of understanding. They probably have lots of people in their lives who want to fix things but very few who want to listen, so you may be able to provide them something they get nowhere else. If your player raises a serious concern that affects their well-being, safety, or personal health, bring

it to the attention of the parents. If the parents are causing the harm, speak to the school or sponsoring agency for the youth sports league and follow their advice for handling the situation. It is not your job to alert Family Services or any other government organization until everyone involved has a chance to explain their actions and correct the problem.

Sometimes, all your players will need is a friend. Take an interest in their other activities. Ask your players about their school sessions, their other sports teams, or their other hobbies. You can play easy “ice-breaker games” at the start of every practice to get to know your players better and loosen them up. An easy game is “Good Day/Bad Day.” Each player says the best and worst thing that happened to them during the day. It gives you a chance to see what is happening in their lives and what might be affecting their practices or their performances.

6. Not Enough Communication

Communication is the most important part of any coach’s strategy for success. From the very first practice you have with your team, you need to communicate your goals, plans, and expectations for the season. Let your team know what you want them to accomplish, where you want them to go as a team, and how to give you what you expect from them. They will disappoint you consistently if they never know how to make you happy. Do not make them fail by not giving them the tools and information they need to succeed.

Develop several clear goals for the season and discuss them at the beginning of the year. Ask players what their personal goals are and how you can incorporate them into your goals for the team as a whole. Ask the players why they decided to play your sport, so that you have a better idea of why everyone is here. Some players will only be there because their parents signed them up; others will want to play professional sports. Still others are there to have fun. Lastly, some might be there to get in shape because a doctor has warned about childhood obesity. It is your job to find out why your players are there and help them accomplish the goals they have individually. Chances are, your players’ goals are going to be very diverse.

Communication with parents is also key. You should ask parents to come early to a game one day and talk with them, introducing yourself and asking them for any questions or comments they may have. Give them your contact information so that they know how to reach you if they ever encounter a problem or need to speak with you. Ask them if there are any issues about their children you should know about, including allergies, medical conditions, and personal difficulties. These things will help you be a better coach.

Explain your plan for the season to the parents as well. The best way to keep everyone excited about the season and the players is by sharing common goals and celebrating milestones. Ask parents to be supportive of their players regardless of the outcome of competitions, and ask them to follow up with their children to see how their progression is going to reach their personal goals for the season.

Give parents concrete information to take home with them that explains your policies. Print out sheets for them with the requirements for the team, basic rules and regulations, a schedule of practices and competitions, and any other important events of which they need to be aware. Outline your expectations for the season, such as “I would like all players to arrive 30 minutes

early for events to allow time to talk about strategy and to go through a sufficient warm-up. As soon as the game is over, we will meet as a team to discuss any issues we discovered and to recognize those players who did a superior job. As soon as the meeting is over, all players are free to go. I do ask that parents wait to speak to their children until the meeting is over. It will only take about 5 minutes, but it is one of the most important times for our team, because it shows us what we have done well and what we need to improve. I appreciate your understanding and your support this season!" This will help you create a good relationship with parents. Their busy schedules will benefit from your preparedness and organization.

If anything changes in the schedule during the season, communicate it immediately with parents. If a game is cancelled due to inclement weather, show up at the game site anyway, in case parents did not receive the cancellation notice. They will appreciate that you took the time to inform them, especially since it means going out of your way to do so. Send home reminder notices of important events or tournaments to help everyone stay on top of things. With these tips for better communication, your season will run smoothly, and more importantly, with the full support of your parents!

7. Losing Control

Youth athletes are full of energy, life, and vitality, but they are a huge handful! When you see your team running around, chasing each other, giggling, or talking to friends, it is hard to see how you can regain control. The truth is, you never should have lost it. Mistakes happen, though, and you did lose control. These tips will help you regain control once you have lost it, and learn to keep it once you have it.

When you have lost control, try gathering all your athletes around you. This may be hard to do, especially if they are not all in one place. Blow a whistle if you have one, wave a flag, do whatever you have to do to get everyone's attention. Do so without getting angry. Even though the players are running wild, it is probably your doing that let them get to that point, so it is not helpful to get angry at them. You will need patience as you gather their attention. Some players will give you their attention and then take it away again when something new comes along, so you need to make it clear that what you are going to say is the most important thing they need to know for the day.

When you have everyone's attention again, explain to them that it is very hard for you to be a good coach if they are running around, not paying attention, or not listening. Tell them it is disrespectful if they do not respond to you when you ask for them to calm down, sit down, and be quiet. Respect them by treating them fairly, giving them a chance to correct their actions, and not getting upset with them too quickly. Set up a system of consequences if something like this were to happen again, so that they know what their actions will result in if they choose to misbehave again in the future.

To maintain control from the beginning, develop a sense of respect and trust within your team. Tell them that you will respect them as long as they respect you. That means that you need to listen to them when they need to talk, that you allow them to express themselves in practice, and that you take their suggestions and problems seriously. Them respecting you means following your directions, working to achieve your goals, and honoring your requests. When a player

disrespects himself, you, or another player, talk to that player about their conduct personally. If it involves another player, talk to them together, explaining what was wrong with the player's actions and showing how it affected the other player. You can use the same technique with yourself, explaining how the player's actions affected you as a coach and your ability to lead the team effectively. Gently showing your athletes that they have made a mistake and working with them to correct it will develop even more respect in them for you. Even though you have been disrespected, you still showed them respect. This is extremely important to developing a lasting relationship with your athletes. It will also help set an example of how your team should run. These things together will foster a relationship of trust and respect, leading to a level of control you may not have thought possible in youth sports.