

THE 6 HABITS OF A HIGHLY EFFECTIVE COACH

From the big leagues to Little Leagues, highly effective coaches share the same outstanding teaching and communication skills. Here's six areas to focus on as you get ready for the upcoming season.



1. Teach, don't preach

Be aware when you are in overtime with your speech to the team. Smaller pieces of verbal communication are easier to handle than a long-winded monologue in the middle of practice. The effective coach knows the difference between be a dialogue and a monologue. In a dialogue, the player is involved. The monologue is a one-man show.

2. Listen and watch more during the games

This is a big challenge in the "daddy ball" generation of Little League and travel ball where over-coaching has become the norm. Choose your words carefully and write down game observations to share with staff at the next practice. The effective coach will let the players play without fear of repercussion and allow them to play without looking over their shoulder.

3. Be aware of your body language

Try to avoid crossing your arms and slumping your shoulders in front of your team. A confident looking coach is contagious. Smile more than you frown and know that how you are projecting yourself in the dugout and on the coaching lines effects the morale of your players. Be aware of your post-game body language and overall tone of voice, especially if you get the pants beat off you. Don't pout in the dugout if your team is down 10 runs in the first inning. Model the way you want your players to respond to adversity.

4. Set the right tone with the umpires

Always introduce yourself to the umpire prior to the start of the game and suggest that your catcher does the same. Prohibit your players from challenging or arguing with umpires, or engaging in verbal exchanges with the opposing team and fans. Remind your players of this rule and if the behavior continues, remove the violating player from the game and suspend him/her for the next game. Ensure your coaches know there is no yelling, arguing or challenging umpires. Deal with the fact that the umpires at this

level are subject to making mistakes. Keep your rule book in the first aid kit if you have a rules interpretation issue with the umpire. Present your protest calmly and with a civil tone of voice. If you are respectful to the umpires, the players will follow your lead. Make sure that you keep your parents under control; do not tolerate yelling from the stands at an umpire. It is the coach's responsibility to make sure all players and parents are under control.

5. How to visit the pitcher's mound

Jog, don't walk to the mound. Know your players. Pitchers are creatures of habits. Know from past games how quickly your pitcher can "lose it" and how you can nip the problem sooner by a proactive mound visit instead of a crisis visit (e.g. bases loaded, no outs). Some pitchers need a challenge; others need a hug and a pat on the back. Be part of the solution when you visit the mound. Appear calm and confident that your pitcher can get through the inning. Even when taking pitchers out, stay positive and let him/her know that a change in pitchers is not personal. Spend more time talking about tempo, rhythm and breathing patterns than hard-core mechanics. Always leave the mound having the pitcher believe he can work out of the jam. In the event the pitcher is staying in, finish your quick chat with a positive, up-lifting tone. Put your hand on the player's shoulder to let him/her know that you still believe in their abilities. If you are planning on taking your pitcher out and the bullpen pitcher is ready, don't get talked out of it by the pitcher.

6. Nurture your father-son relationship

The best and worst of times! Try to understand the challenges your child has in you coaching the team. Your child should be treated fairly and given the same support and attention as the rest of the players. Do not engage in extended lectures or "personal chats" with your child. Embarrassing your child in front of the team is not an option. Try asking another coach to "manage" your child's game conduct. Be aware that the ride home or dinner time may not be when your child wants to replay the previous game. Respect his/her boundaries and let them initiate the discussion about their previous performance. Adhere to the Oreos cookie rule in giving feedback to your child (as well as other players): start with a positive comment, add on constructive criticism with a real solution, and end the conversation with a positive, uplifting message. Recognize playing time of your child will be scrutinized by all players and parents. Avoid telling your players when and where to throw the ball. Reliance on the coach's verbal command will never allow the players to think on their own. Practice time

should be spent reviewing when the ball should be held and when a throw is necessary.

No one said being an effective coach is easy. Before each season write down the three most important areas of improvement you wish to achieve as a coach this year. Remember, goal-setting isn't just for your players.

And finally, a word to the wise: when you think there is nothing left to improve upon, retire; or realize you are wrong.