

# Ten Rules for Healthy Youth Sports

By Doug Abrams

Two weeks ago, I spoke about sportsmanship and values to the parents and coaches in the Twisters Roller Hockey League in Hallsville, Missouri. Hallsville is a small town (population 1,500) about 18 miles north of my home in Columbia, and the league plays outdoors from April through June. The teams come from Hallsville and surrounding communities.

The Twisters' Mission Statement says what needs to be said. The League "provide[s] value-based roller hockey instruction and game structure in a family atmosphere. We promote healthy life habits, including exercise, sportsmanship, teamwork, respect, patience and compassion. We strive to provide equal playing time to all players to promote positive self-esteem and enthusiasm beyond competition."

Many youth sports programs make similar promises because writing a lofty mission statement nowadays is easy for any league administrator with a computer and a keyboard. The challenge is living up to the promises during the season, and that is where many programs fall short.

I have watched a number of Twisters games for a few years now, and the program actually delivers. I told the audience that I have never seen a Twisters parent or coach yell at a referee or anyone else. Nor have I ever seen a coach yell at a player, a coach bench a player, or a player take a cheap shot. When I attend a game, I see parents, coaches and players enjoying themselves as they compete. In today's often overheated youth sports atmosphere, you can't say all this about every program.

## What If the Players Were Here Alone?

I knew I had a friendly audience in Hallsville last month, so I began with a question: "What do you think would happen if all the parents and coaches dropped off their players here at the outdoor rink today and then went shopping, leaving the players with no adults nearby?"

I answered my own question. "The kids would choose up a game and play, officiate the game, keep score, and stop playing at the end." Before youth sports became adultified by the early 1970s, that's exactly what local sports on sandlots and playgrounds meant most of the time. Kids conducted their own games then, and they could conduct their own games now.

The point is that youth leaguers do not need their parents or coaches around unless the adults have something positive to offer. If coaches bench or yell at players, or if parents confront one another or verbally abuse referees and opponents, the kids would be better off running their own games with the adults miles away. But if parents and coaches promote vigorous, healthy competition within the rules of the game and the bounds of civility, the adults enhance the experience and the kids do need them. The value of the adults' presence depends on the adults themselves.

**Ten Rules**

With this introduction, I spent about a half hour presenting the Hallsville parents and coaches with “Ten Rules for Healthy Youth Sports.” David Letterman-style, I counted down from 10:

**10. *Forget everything you think you have ever learned about sports from following the pros.***

When parents or coaches enroll their families in a youth league for the first time, much of their knowledge of sports comes from the professional games they’ve watched on television, attended in person, or read about in the newspapers for years. They have seen or heard stories about coaches who put only a fraction of their team into the lineup; coaches who try to motivate players with insults and foul language; fans who verbally challenge players and referees from the stands; and players who trash talk one another throughout the game.

Much of what Americans have come to expect from professional sports has no place in youth leagues. Professional playing rules may resemble youth league rules, but pro athletes and youth leaguers bear no resemblance to one another.

The pros are elite multimillionaire adults employed by multimillion-dollar (and sometimes billion-dollar) corporations to provide public entertainment that earns profits for owners and shareholders. Lucrative media deals, corporate sponsorships, personal endorsements, and entire cities’ economic fortunes ride on winning and losing. When coaches bench or yell at a pro, or when fans boo a pro, the multimillionaire still gets paid handsomely.

Youth leaguers, however, are not miniature adults or pint-sized professionals. In local communities from coast to coast, youth leaguers are children who are growing, learning and playing, not working. Without fat contracts, national media coverage and audiences of millions, children play for fun and fulfillment to an audience consisting usually of only family and friends. The children’s physical and emotional welfare, and not financial reward, is the bottom line.

A few years ago, I happened to watch an ice hockey practice run by a coach who spent the entire session barking at his 11-year-old players, who seemed ready to obey even if he spoke in a respectful tone of voice. Afterwards I asked the coach why he conducted himself that way. “That’s what pro coaches do,” he responded, and he sincerely meant it. “Vince Lombardi was gruff with his players, and he’s in the Hall of Fame,” the coach explained, “I’m just trying to be a good coach.”

I am not sure whether the youth hockey coach was right about Lombardi, but he was certainly wrong about techniques for coaching children. It never occurred to him that Lombardi played to a different audience. Lombardi’s Green Bay Packers and Washington Redskins were well-compensated adult professionals, and 11-year-old hockey players are . . . well, 11 years old.

**9. *Help your player set “effort goals” rather than only “outcome goals.”***

For youth leaguers and their families, the desired “outcome goal” is both obvious and natural -- they would like to win the game. But teams rarely go undefeated, so players fail to meet their outcome goal much of the

time. Particularly in a team sport like hockey, each individual player has relatively little control over the final score if the teams are matched fairly evenly.

What if the opposing goaltender has a hot game? What if your goalie has a bad day? What if a teammate gets a breakaway with the score tied late in the game, but hits the post rather than place the shot an inch inside the post? No individual player can control for all this, or for so much else that determines the final score.

But Jim Thompson is right that youth leaguers have considerable control over their own performance – their “effort goals.” Guided by their parents and coaches before the game, players might resolve to throw five good passes, to backcheck and forecheck effectively, to hit the net on every shot and follow up on rebounds, or to perform other selected skills that might help the team win. Some youth hockey coaches even communicate effort goals to an entire forward line or defense line, and not just to individual players.

When parents and coaches help their players strive to meet effort goals, the players can win even when the team comes out on the short end on the scoreboard.

#### **8. *Listen to what your son or daughter does not say.***

When parents ask their players about everything that happened in the game, the players typically chatter away. But sometimes players also convey important messages to their elders through behavior or actions, without words. The player may feel unable or unwilling to say something, but the unspoken message can make a big difference if the parents are perceptive enough to “listen.”

What if for three consecutive weeks, for example, a player suddenly complains of a headache or upset stomach a half hour before it is time to leave for practice? Chronically avoiding practice is simply not normal, so players raise red flags when they try to beg off practice repeatedly.

Perhaps the player is signaling that he does not want to play the sport any more (which is OK because youngsters’ interests do change from time to time). Perhaps the coach verbally abuses the player and other teammates at practice. Perhaps the player needs the coach’s special attention because one or more teammates bully the player in the locker room, or because the player feels embarrassed at being one of the team’s smaller or less talented players. Before the parents can seek special attention, they must sense the need by “listening” for what the player “says.”

#### **7. *Maximize the “power to praise” by using the “sandwich technique.”***

Most young athletes crave praise from their parents and coaches, and they also crave their coaches’ constructive criticism because they want to improve their game. Praise is powerful, and so is constructive criticism properly given.

Good coaches look for reasons to energize the players with praise throughout the game, and parents join in afterwards. Delivering deserved praise can be easy because every player does something right every game, win or lose. Most players do plenty of things right. Mistakes are sometimes more obvious than plays done

right, but parents and coaches need to remain alert for what is praiseworthy, and not only for what needs correction.

Imagine what it's like to go to the grocery store and buy a dozen doughnuts. The parent or coach might open the box and see a dozen donuts, or the player or coach might open the box and see a dozen holes. What people see depends a lot whether they are looking for the positive or the negative.

When constructive criticism is in order, the "sandwich technique" lets coaches treat children like children: "Sam, you're playing great for us. But you want to keep your stick on the ice next time you're out there. Keep setting up those plays." Praise, correction, praise.

#### **6. *Don't compete through the kids.***

Competition in youth sports is healthy, provided that the people competing are the youths and not the adults. Games, however, do not always work out that way.

Parents or coaches may seek, for example, to live vicariously through their son or daughter to relive their own playing days. Or parents may get the idea that they are better providers when their children win than when they lose. Or coaches may try to run up the score because they personally dislike the other team's coaches.

When adults make themselves the focus of competition in children's games, the players usually end up the losers. Parents may impose unhealthy pressure, and coaches may bench less talented players to achieve their own goals on the scoreboard. The game may become overheated as the adults skirt the rules of the game and, equally important, the rules of civility.

We call our enterprise "youth sports" for a reason. Today's adults had their day when they played youth league, high school, and perhaps college sports years ago. Just let the kids play. Now is their time

#### **5. *Don't say or do anything to the referees that you would be embarrassed to say or do in front of your child on Main Street.***

When a call goes against the team, referees can hear insults from parents and coaches only when the adults yell so loud that their own children on the field or the bench can also hear. When parents or coaches physically confront (and sometimes assault) referees on the sidelines or in the parking lot after a game, everyone sees the bullying. The adult's verbal or physical abuse would not win the children's respect on Main Street; the conduct wins no respect at the game either, even if no child ever says anything about it.

Over the years, a few players have called me aside privately to apologize for their parents' unruly behavior in the stands. Parent-child relationships suffer when embarrassed 12-year-olds must make excuses for their parents. Youth sports serves families best when the role models are the adults, and not the 12-year-olds.

#### **4. *Welcome the players' mistakes.***

Legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden accepted his players' mistakes as part of the game. "If you're not making mistakes, then you're not doing anything," he would say. "A doer makes mistakes."

I used to strike a bargain with my hockey teams before the first practice. The bargain was the same for U-8 mite teams and the high school teams, and it defined the coach-player relationship all season.

*The players' part of the bargain* was to try their best in practice sessions and games, and to work on skills they found difficult as well as ones they had already begun to master. Players cannot learn or have much fun when they anticipate backlash from their coaches or teammates whenever something goes wrong. Words hurt, and backlash had no place on our team.

*The coaches' part of the bargain* was to teach, support and encourage each player as they made mistakes and tried again. Coaches promised not to chastise, single out, or ridicule a player for giving 100% effort and coming up short. This reassurance operated in practice sessions and games alike, not only because "a doer makes mistakes," but also because mistakes create opportunities to learn.

Young athletes can take correction delivered by supportive coaches. Indeed, constructive criticism is one reason why teams have coaches in the first place. But harsh criticism brimming with intimidation does not toughen youth leaguers, sharpen their skills, or enhance their competitive spirit. Calling out a player for a mistake might work sometimes in professional sports, but it can shatter the self-confidence of youth leaguers who know that they have given their best effort and expect support from their elders in return.

By tolerating mistakes, the coach helps players avoid "fear of failure," a mental barrier that can easily bring a team down. Players who fear the coach's wrath for doing something wrong are more likely to play tentative and unsure, producing a cascade of yet more mistakes that can turn close victories into close defeats. For coaches who want to win every game within the team's reach, the key is not the mistake itself, but how the team reacts.

### **3. *Smile most of the time at your children's games.***

Bob Bigelow, a leading national advocate for healthy youth sports, advises parents and coaches that they should be smiling most of the time at the field, rink or gymnasium. Bob is a former first-round draft pick and NBA player, and he knows what he is talking about. Once adults stop smiling, harmful conduct such as benching players and abusing referees often follows close behind.

Sports should provide fun and fulfillment for the whole family – for the players who try to win, but also for their parents and coaches who sacrifice and root for them. Parents and coaches defeat a major purpose of youth sports when they deny themselves the enjoyment that they seek for their children.

### **2. *Protect the players' emotional safety, and not only their physical safety.***

Parents and coaches tend to understand "physical safety" – the need for proper protective equipment and careful enforcement of safety rules, for example. But safety in youth sports also means "emotional safety." Adults have succeeded when players finish their youth sports careers both physically intact and emotionally intact.

Among other things, emotional safety means providing each player fair and equal opportunity to participate in every practice session and game. Chronic benchwarming is a badge of shame, and it is a major reason why so many kids quit playing sports by their early teen years. Players sign up because they expect a fair opportunity to participate. They do not sign up to warm the bench for a 30-something or 40-something coach who thinks that playing only some players might help win a game whose score everyone will forget in two weeks anyway.

Emotional safety means exactly what Hans, the skate sharpener, told Coach Gordon Bombay in *The Mighty Ducks*: “Show them how to play. Show them how to have fun. Teach them to fly. That’s what they’ll remember.” Hans nailed it.

### **1. Help your son or daughter try to win within the rules.**

Now that you have heard nine rules for making youth sports a more fulfilling experience for the players, what about wanting to win? I purposely cast this rule as “Number 1” for a reason. Too many people mistakenly believe that sportsmanship means downplaying the desire to win, but sportsmanship actually depends on the desire to win within the rules of the game.

Except in the youngest age groups, winning and losing matter. If the score consumes parents and coaches in a T-ball game for five-year-olds, the adults should have their heads examined. But when players get a little older, they understand the difference between winning and losing. They want to win, and their parents and coaches should want them to win, provided that sportsmanship does not take a backseat. Here is what I mean:

At its best, a game or match involves teams or competitors who each wants to win with clean play before shaking hands at the end. True sportsmen care about the score, and they do not let up on the opponent during the game. But true sportsmen also care about three basic values – fair play, adherence to the rules, and respect for the opponent and the game. In youth sports, sportsmanship and the desire to win are perfectly compatible, provided that the adults and players remain committed to this trio, and that the adults also remain committed to assuring fair and equal opportunity.

For the parents and coaches, the ultimate question is not whether they want the team to win, but what prices they are willing to pay to try to win, and what prices they are unwilling to pay. Benching or ridiculing players is too great a price, for example, and so is resorting to verbal or physical abuse that is meant to intimidate referees. But teaching skills and rooting for the players to carry the team as far as their abilities permit are perfectly sportsmanlike.

### **Words and Deeds**

I concluded my talk in Hallsville by candidly acknowledging how easy it is to approach a microphone or keyboard and deliver a sermon about values in sports, as I was doing that afternoon. Words come easy. Deeds are the tough part.

Every parent and coach knows that it takes extraordinary maturity and self-discipline to do the right thing when they are actually on the bench or in the stands during a game. Pressure can build mighty quickly. Good parents are emotionally invested in their children, and good coaches are emotionally invested in their teams.

As participants try their best to win, they may feel tempted to stray from the trio of values that define true sportsmanship — fair play, adherence to the rules, and mutual respect. The British Association of National Coaches marks the right path: *“Sport without fair play is not sport, and honours won without fair play can have no real value.”*