

Coach

I have a great memory of a soccer field under a full autumn moon. It is the mid 1990s and my son Christopher is about ten years old. He is very like me at that age with his compact frame, his close-cropped rug of curly hair, and the determined set of his features. We are on a practice field at a local elementary school near our home, surrounded by the other members of Chris's soccer team. I am their coach. The days have gotten shorter, and even in Arizona there is a crispness to the air that raises Goosebumps on our skin. Now the sun has gone down in a flaming light show, and that impossible saucer of a moon rises huge and opaque over the majesty of Camelback Mountain, purple now in the deepening dusk. I clap my hands to stop the action and call the boys' attention to the magnificent sight of the moon. We stand for a moment transfixed, oohing and aahing in unison before resuming the practice.

This memory is attached to the decade and a half that I coached my children in various sports, starting with a somewhat forgettable year coaching T-Ball for my daughter Alissa before she moved on to tennis and other interests, and continuing for a good fifteen years coaching both my sons in soccer and little league baseball. It is linked to many memories that give me a measure of satisfaction and pleasure in proportion to that which I received while I was doing it. It was through those evening practices and Saturday games—coaching Christopher for six years in soccer and five years in little league baseball; and Stephen in soccer for 10 years—that I bonded with my sons and found much of the balance that sustained me during the long hours in the operating room and office.

Whichever sport I was focusing on, my coaching philosophy was relatively simple: A person's every day values regarding thought and action should be applied when it comes to

coaching. In my case, the values I emphasized on the field were hard work, courtesy, being on time, doing the best you can, and respecting your fellow human beings. Having said that, since I coached primarily children, my foremost purpose was for them to learn the specific sport, but also to get in shape and have fun doing so.

Diligent in preparing for the practice sessions myself, I expected the players to come prepared, too, for practice and for the game. And I expected them to hustle and to trust each other. Many times I sat somebody on the sidelines when that individual thought he was better than the rest of the team, hogging the ball, or bad-mouthing somebody. I simply did not tolerate things of that nature.

I thoroughly enjoyed coaching baseball, but learning and interpreting the rules of the little league version of the sport proved to be extremely challenging. Any parent that has coached little league baseball knows exactly what I am talking about. The rules of little league were long, detailed, and to me often confusing. For example, we had to keep track of the innings pitched by each individual; how long an “inning” was and was not; how often a player could pitch and how many days in between the times he pitched; when to substitute a player and when not to substitute a player, and so on. Even though the point of all this was to protect the young boy’s arm, nevertheless, the rules seemed quite elaborate and detailed to me.

Fortunately, my co-coach/manager was a guy named Brad Jardine who had played baseball at Brigham-Young University and knew the sport inside and out. Over the five years I coached and he managed the teams, with preseason practices two or three nights a week, Brad taught me a lot about the sport.

On the whole we had very successful seasons and out of the five years, two to three times a year, both Brad’s son Jeff and my son Chris, were named to the all-star team representing our

neighborhood, Arcadia. Even though the team never went very far in the little league tournaments, the hours spent coaching were well spent since they meant hours together with Chris.

I have some great memories of those years coaching baseball and watching my son develop. Christopher routinely played center field and had quite an arm. One of the highlights from that time was when I overheard an opposing coach telling his players if they hit a fly ball to center, not to try to steal a base after the catch because “that Sonntag kid has quite an arm.”

Another one of my favorite times was when I was coaching third base and Chris was at bat. We were behind by one run and we had a man on first. It was toward the end of the game when Chris took one swing with the bat and the ball went over the fence for his first and only home run in his five years of little league. When he rounded third base, you can imagine the proud father I was. Chris himself has always been very quiet and did not make a big deal out of it.

With as many teams as we had, each year we had an individual or two who had that “don’t care” attitude: don’t care if they get in shape; don’t care if they know the rules; and don’t care if we win or lose. Sadly it was usually the parents of those individuals who were the most difficult to deal with. And though all-in-all we had excellent parents throughout the five years, I do remember parents of the opposing team obnoxiously hassling the umpire. I also remember an opposing coach and the home plate umpire getting into a verbal fight that lasted several minutes in front of the players, parents, and guests. After the game, the umpire came up to me and asked if he could use me as a witness to what had happened on the field. I agreed to that and sure enough several days later I got a call from the league office wanting to know my interpretation of what had happened. I certainly felt that the coach of the other team had been totally in the wrong and abusive to the umpire. In fact, I was surprised that this coach had been allowed to coach in

this league all the years I was coaching because his behavior never really changed and each year multiple complaints concerning him were brought forth to the league. It flew in the face of what we were trying to teach the kids about team spirit, sportsmanship, and strict adherence to the rules and regulations, all points that we went over with the players in detail before each game.

As much as I enjoyed coaching those little league Orioles and Dodgers and Cubs teams (the league always gave us major league team names and uniforms in those team colors), my major experience in coaching was in the sport that reigned supreme for me—soccer. My passion for soccer had continued throughout my life and coaching was a way for me not only to continue to be involved in it, but to share with my sons something that had played an important role in my own life.

My first major coaching experience as head coach was for Christopher whom I coached six years. This was when they were still giving out trophies and rankings. The winning team from the regular season would get a large trophy and this was followed by a tournament and by an all-star game. During those six years, we had a good measure of success, and Chris, playing middle field, became quite the soccer player. He was often asked to play competitively, and when he tried out twice for a competitive team, he made it both times. Unfortunately, I could not give the time commitment to be a coach in a competitive league, so Chris continued with the recreational league.

My philosophy in coaching was to practice hard and play hard, but also have fun during practice. Before a season, I always wrote an introductory letter to the parents in which I outlined the expectations for both the practices and the games. Practice would routinely be on Wednesdays and Mondays, usually from 5:30 to 7:00 p.m. or from 6:00 to 7:30 p.m. Because I

was in the league for a long time, I usually got the preferred practice fields, which was Hopi, which was fortunately only two blocks from my house.

I was also fortunate to have as an assistant coach Brad Jardine, whose assistant I was during baseball season. Brad's son, Jeff, played for us and as in baseball, he was a spectacular player. We were very lucky to have great teams and did very well in league regular play as well as the in the tournament. In fact, twice out of the six years, I was asked to coach the all star game because we were the leading team in wins.

The practices consisted of three phases: the initial conditioning phase, involving running sprints backward, forward, and different distances, usually half a mile twice around the Hopi field, followed by some calisthenics; learning specific skills such as, in the early years, when Chris was six or seven years old, how to kick the ball with the inside and the outside of the foot but not with the toe, the basic principle of passing, and the basic principle throwing the ball in from the sideline; and, wrapping it up at the end, some team play. The skills we practiced were always based on the age of the team, and separate coaching had to be carried out for the goalie, since that required a totally different set of skills.

When it came time to practice the throwing in skills, I would draw a line on the ground and then have the children throw from that line to an object, for example, the side of a building. Using chalk, I would outline a circle on the side of the building at different heights, requiring the kids to throw the ball higher or lower. I would then divide the kids into two teams—the Yahoos and the Dingbats—and whatever team got the most hits into the circle would be excused from a lap of running, while the side with the fewest hits would have to run a lap.

We did a variety of drills during this time, some of them rather brutal. One was called “crab fighting” where the players, divided into two teams with different identifying jerseys on,

would assume a crablike position on all fours but with their hands behind them, and then, on an open field marked by the cones, they would scuttle about and try to kick the ball through the opposing side.

We would also do another similar game with the kids now upright on two feet, but the same principle held, trying to kick the ball through the opposing goal in a free for all for the two teams. These and the many other drills that were done all served the purpose of getting the boys in shape and getting them to learn soccer, but also providing an opportunity to have fun.

As Chris and the team became older, around age ten, eleven, and twelve, we had more sophisticated practices such as set plays from the corner from set kicks, with names such as “the golden boot” or “kick ‘em high,” as well as set plays from penalty kicks and from when we kicked off the ball from the midline. The whole practice was one of constant movement; often times we would split the group under the assistant coach and coach, and have each do different drills.

The third component of a practice took up the last twenty minutes and was dedicated to playing a practice game, a scrimmage, on the field, with Jeff joining in on one side and me on the other. Although it was free play, it would not be unusual to stop the scrimmage five to ten times in order to make a point on where a player should have been and how to adjust the defense, or where a player should be on offense, and how the defense should shift depending on where the ball is.

One of the hardest things to teach at that age was the principle of keeping the eye on the ball, not on the goal. I would tell the kids to look out for that when they watched soccer on TV on Saturday and Sunday, to notice where the place kicker focused when he kicked for the field goal. The focus was not on where the field goal was; it was on where the ball was. The goal

didn't move, I would tell them, it stayed in the same place, and the player should have that in mind when he kicked. This was, for some reason, very difficult to teach.

Games were on Saturdays. We would usually meet ten to fifteen minutes before the game. If we were the home team and we were playing the first game, we were responsible for putting up the nets and the flags on the sides to mark the boundaries. We usually had five to ten minutes of warming up with calisthenics and then drills by shooting on the goal. Then I would gather all the players around and pick the captain, announce the starting lineup, and on the way to the sideline, talk to those players who were not the starting players on how important they were and how I wanted them to be ready when they did go into the game. It would be very unusual for any player not to get to play at least a half a game.

The games were always fun to watch those years because we were such a good team. In fact, one season, we were undefeated all the way through to and including the tournament. I believe that was the only time I ever participated in a season like that, and I attribute some of our success to the way Chris contributed to our domination of the field. Chris was a talented and tireless player, one who confirmed my belief that whoever controlled the midfield in soccer controlled the game.

The parents, although not very knowledgeable in soccer, were on the whole very supportive. They did contribute to a sense of confusion at times, though. I still remember one player's mom who would constantly yell throughout the game, "get the ball, get the ball, get the ball, get the ball," even though often times we had the ball.

Throughout my years coaching baseball and soccer, the parents were also generally well behaved. Many of them became friends of our family and still are. In my soccer coaching years, I remember only one occasion when a father of a player came up to me in the middle of a game

demanding to know why his son was not playing more. My initial gut reaction was to say that the kid wasn't any good; however, I toned down my response saying that he had really not participated very much in practice and did not seem to have his heart in it, which was more to the truth. That seemed to do the trick and eventually the boy did improve and ended up playing much more. That is the only time when a parent interfered with my coaching.

After coaching Christopher for six years, I had a year off before I started coaching Stephen. By then, the league had decided to start having players begin younger, so I was able to coach him from age four to twelve, and then again when he was eighteen. In the framed photo I have of Stephen from his earliest soccer years, he is an eager little stick of a kid with the straight hair and fine features of his mother.

I have explained how I was able to free up my time from a very busy neurosurgical practice to coach sixteen years of soccer. Now I will tell you that every Monday and Wednesday, as practice time neared, I would get antsy as hell before I could finally get away from the hospital. When I did get out, I would race home, grab the sandwich that Lynne would have waiting for me, and change into my coaching gear while still choking down the sandwich. Chris, or now Stephen, would be waiting for me with the bags of balls and cones, throw those into the trunk and off we would drive to the practice field.

Coaching four-year-olds could be extremely frustrating but also hilarious and even joyful. Due to the limited attention span of four-year-olds compared to twelve-year-olds, practice was limited to 40-45 minutes. Even so, getting and keeping the kids' attention was like getting a clutter of cats to follow a command. They were generally more interested in everything but the game, from the color of their uniforms and shoes to the shape of the ball.

The first weeks of practice with these tots was devoted to the simple task of getting them to understand that the purpose of the game was to get the soccer ball through the net of the opposing team. In the best scenario, this would be a challenge, but since the net for these youngsters was very small, about the size of a hockey net, this was almost impossible to achieve.

Even more difficult was to prevent the children from falling into “the beehive phenomenon” where the whole pack of them would fall over themselves to be around the ball at the same time. We only had five or six players on the team, with no goalie, and all five or six of them would be on top of the ball instead of spreading out to receive passes and cover the field.

Even that kind of attention to the ball was only attained if some other event did not snatch the children’s focus away. An ant hill in the middle of the field would be enough to captivate the players on both sides, rendering them totally oblivious to the ball rolling off unattended to the side.

As for any activity not obviously in the realm of play, such as practice running or any types of drills, it made no sense to them because it simply wasn’t what they considered playing a game.

Trying to corral these young kids into some kind of concerted effort was funny enough, but the parents often added to the anarchic spirit of it all. The parents were much more vocal when the children were younger, encouraging their children not only during the game but also at practice. You would hear endless exhortations from the sidelines, most of them failing to pierce the kids’ understanding. Game time encouragement by the parents included endless variations of the baldly obvious: “The ball is over here, the ball is over here. Johnny, the ball is over there, the ball is over there.” I suppose those parents were driven to their exhortations because, again, any little thing on the periphery of the field, be it a bicycle whirring by or a rider on horseback or a

police car, would have an immediate hypnotic effect on the kids. The soccer field was just about the last thing to hold their attention.

The first thing I would do at the beginning of every game was line up the players in the middle of the field and check to make sure they understood which direction we would be going during the half about to start. Routinely half of the six would point one way and half the other way, even though I would have just repeated four or five times the direction we were going in.

That scenario should give you an idea why score was never kept during those first few years as the four and five-year-old children were learning the game. Anyway, even as Stephen moved on through the years, and we became more sophisticated in our coaching methods, the emphasis was not on winning as much as it was on participating, and league standings were not kept as strictly as the years when I coached Christopher.

Nonetheless, we usually did have an end of the year tournament, and by then the kids would at least have a sense of belonging to a team. This was helped along by the efforts of the mothers, one of whom was voted in as Team Mother each year and would oversee the creation of a banner with the team name and each of the children's names on it. The moms would get very creative with this. When we were the Bumble Bees, I remember, each player was represented by one bumble bee on the banner. This banner was always proudly displayed on our side of the field and was our rallying point to encourage the players to play better.

One of the most rewarding aspects of coaching kids' soccer is the insight you gain into the way they think. One fine practice day when Stephen and his teammates were around eight years old, I was trying to teach them how to kick a penalty free kick: that is, how to aim with the inside of your foot; how to direct the kick to the corners of the goal; and how not to kill the ball by sending it directly to the goalie. I could see that I had their rapt attention as I kicked the ball,

and then immediately fell to the ground as a bolt of pain shot through my right knee. I lay there hanging onto my knee and grimacing for about two minutes.

The children all bent over me. “He’s really hurt,” one of them said. “Look at all the pain he has; he’s really hurt,” another chimed in. Then a voice from the back piped up: “He can’t have any pain; he can’t really be hurt; he doesn’t have any tears.” That summed up the interpretation of pain by an eight-year-old: If you weren’t crying, you weren’t in pain.

As it turned out, I had torn my meniscus and within two days had arthroscopic surgery on my knee. Fortunately, this was on a Monday and on the following Saturday I was able to coach, albeit on crutches.

Another endearing thing about children is how easily impressed they are, especially when they are younger. Many times when demonstrating how to kick a ball in order to try to get a curve into the ball or how to kick the ball while aiming at a particular object such as another player or an area of the goal, often times I would get comments like “Did you play professional soccer?” As they got older, they wised up and realized that my skills were not that impressive and those comments fell away.

I experienced many highlights during the years I coached Stephen. One is that I had the same assistant coach, Jeff Frye, throughout the whole nine years. His son, Connor, who played forward all nine years, was a phenomenal soccer player. I called him “Cannon Connor” because he had a cannon in his foot. Very early in his soccer playing days, he could really boot the ball and shoot from far off. He would also routinely kick our penalty shots.

We had other good players on the team, one of whom was Matt Miller, our halfback. This kid was a continuous buzz of energy on the field. As the years went on, we had a starting player after Matt, called Miller Time. As the boys got older and realized the other meaning for that, they

loved it thinking that it was Miller time and time for them to be adults and have a drink. I also remember a real classic of a goalie we had throughout these years, a fearless kid named Matt Mathers who never hesitated to fly out of the goal area and sacrifice his body for the benefit of stopping the ball.

We played some good seasons and some mediocre seasons during those nine years, but the highlight each year was when we went up against our arch enemy team coached by a jovial Irish American named Paul Boyle. Paul was a very good coach and a very nice person, and Lynne and I have known him and his wife, Lisa, socially throughout the years. However, on game day the niceties were set aside and we put our game face on.

The reason that Paul's team were our archrivals is that most of his players went to Hopi, which was the same school most of my players went to. Therefore, in the days leading up to the game, the smack talk started at school and continued onto the field. Our matches with our archrivals always came out very close, usually 1-0 or 2-1.

Paul had a sensational goalie named Pierce; in fact, he later became the lacrosse goalie on Stephen's team in high school and at a college level. His reflexes were unbelievably quick, and he had a great sense of where to be on the goal. He was also taller than most of the boys and could reach those higher balls. We always had a tough time scoring against Paul's team and specifically against Pierce.

The last game of the nine years was for some odd reason not our day, and we played badly. Paul's team started right off scoring three quick goals, and before we knew it, they were ahead at half time 5-0. This was a bitter pill, since before the ninth year, we had never lost a game by more than one or two points. Suffice it to say, our team's game did not improve and at

the end of the day, we lost 9-2. Losing so abysmally against our arch rival—and at the end of our last season to boot—was extremely embarrassing for me and for my team.

Fortunately, following that game we had a tournament with the four top teams competing. We were seated second after Paul's team, and consequently we played the third seated team. The games were half an hour long, and that team beat us 3-1. We then played the fourth seated team who had been beaten by Paul's team. We were fortunate enough to eke out a 2-1 victory. Now Paul's team, who was seated one, unfortunately (or fortunately for us) lost against the third seated team. That meant that we had to beat Paul's team since this was a double elimination tournament. If his team were to lose, they would be out of the tournament.

We all knew that it would be a tough game, especially since it was only half an hour long with only fifteen minutes per half. Each movement, each play, each defense stand meant a lot. It was still 0-0 and the third ranked team, which had been undefeated, were cheering for us on the sidelines, not out of comradeship but because they had beaten us before.

There were about five minutes left in the game when a penalty was awarded to us. Cannon Connor shot the penalty shot from the 11 meter mark, sending the ball soaring just beyond Pierce's fingers. We scored. That put on a tremendous amount of pressure on our opponents, and the next five minutes passed in a flurry of their attempts to make a goal. Matt Mathers was not going to let that happen, and he had one spectacular save after another. I vividly remember a moment when, seeing nobody in the way of the ball, I thought for sure they had a goal. But then, out of nowhere Matt's hand shot up, slapping the ball away at the last second. The game ended in our victory 1-0.

Now we had to beat the team that had walloped us, and we had to do it not only once but twice to win the championship. We all knew this, but we also knew we had to beat them in the

first game before we could get to the crucial second game. Going in we had a nice surprise when the league official came by and awarded our team, as voted by other coaches, the Most Congenial and Fairest Team. This was especially surprising since for this award not only the coaches and players were judged but also the parents, and often times our parents would get quite vocal. Still, the award would do nothing to help us get to the final match.

Since this was the end of the season, it was December when we squared off against our opponents. The sun was going down and it was getting cold by Arizona standards. To make matters more challenging, the field we were playing on had no lights. Nevertheless, our team fought hard and well, and we eked out a 2-1 victory.

We now had to face this formidable team, a team we had lost to once and then barely beaten, one last time. All we could do was hope and believe that if we played as hard as we had done in the last two games, then we would bring a successful ending to our season.

The children rose to the challenge. This was now their fifth game of the evening and they played their hearts out. We were soon up 1-0, and that completely took the wind out of the opposing team's sails. As the end of the game neared, and our crowd of parents, coaches, teammates, friends, and family, already tasting victory, went nuts on the side lines, we made one more goal and the game was over 2-0.

I have been involved in many games, soccer and otherwise, but I can honestly say that this was probably one of the most, if not the most, exciting and joyful moments I have ever had while participating in sports. We hugged and clapped each other on the back for what seemed like hours after the game. I individually told each player how much he meant to the day's outcome, and I am sure none of them will ever forget this day.

Through the ten years I coached Stephen's teams, we had just as many triumphs and good times as we had had when Chris was playing. What stands out in my mind now, though, when I remember coaching my younger son, was the lasting impact on the boys and the gratification I felt when they demonstrated this when older.

Several years later, when Stephen was eighteen years old and a senior in high school, several of his friends, most of them boys I had coached, were sitting out in the back yard when they approached me and said, "Coach, we would like you be our coach one more year." They explained to me they would like to join an indoor league that played on the west side of Phoenix and that it would not require much commitment on my part. There would be two games a week for a six-week period.

I looked into it and agreed to coach, but I must admit there was minimal coaching involved. These were eighteen and nineteen-year-old boys who had all played soccer now for many years. Nevertheless, it was great fun going to the arena and watching them play indoor soccer and "coaching" them.

Indoor is quite a different sport than outdoor soccer. For one thing, each side has only six players and a goalie. For another, the walls can be used to kick against and the pace of the game is much quicker. It is really a flash version of soccer. Substitution, as in hockey, is constantly in and out, and when the players are on the "field," they are constantly on the move and get exhausted very quickly, even the ones that are in excellent shape. Instead of the usual soccer score of 1-0 or 2-1, the scores tend to be 6-3 or even 14-12. Many of the rules are also different from outdoor soccer: There are no off-sides, no sliding and time is divided into quarters rather than halves.

Despite all these differences, I had great fun with those young men, watching them play a sport that they loved as much as I did. Even though, because we had had minimal practice and were now matched against teams who had been together for years, we didn't win a single game, feeling that old spirit of soccer rising up in us again was a great experience, as was feeling the parents' support well up around us and just witnessing these now-grown kids together again playing soccer and enjoying the game.

I coached a nucleus of approximately eight children through Stephen's soccer years, and now they are young men in their twenties. I still see them in the neighborhood or when they come over to visit, and one of the proudest things I've experienced is when they come in the house or when they see me and yell, "Hi Coach, how's it going?"

And that brings me to the most important point about my experience coaching kids' teams. When it comes to forming a lasting bond between father and son throughout the seasons, I have experienced nothing better than coaching. Going to the practice field and to the games together, season after season, afforded me precious time with my sons where we would "talk shop" about what type of practice we would have or how the upcoming game would go, about who should start, or who he thought should start. Coming home afterward was also cherished time spent one-on-one with my sons.

The importance—the sacredness—of that time together is something that I tried to impart to the residents I worked with for forty years as they struggled to find balance between the most challenging of professions and their family life. You can never replace the years when your children are young. Whatever wrangling or creative scheduling it takes to steal that time from a busy schedule to be with family will be a source of peace in your heart years into the future. Not taking the time might likewise be an eternal regret.

All those seasons coaching soccer paid off for me tenfold to the time I put into it. Through the cycles of the years, it verified my own love for the game, and it has proven to be a deep source of gratification to have passed on that passion to both Chris and Stephen. They both love the game of soccer, and even now Stephen plays intramural soccer in college.

If I have any niggling regret at all, it was that it was difficult throughout the years to not show any favoritism to my sons. I tried to be on guard against that as much as possible, although I must admit there were times where I might have kept Stephen or Chris in the game longer than I should have. I hope that the good that has come out of it all, not only for Chris and Stephen but for those boys I coached, has redeemed my small sin of proud fatherhood.