

Virginia Baseball Club
Coaches Certification

Setting the Table for a Successful Season

by Mike Murray

Your Role as a Coach – A Positive Approach

Coaching can be a rewarding experience. Like most things, the more you put into it the more rewarding it will be. A positive coach challenges his or her players to be the best they can be and puts a great deal of time and effort into making sports a positive experience for all of the players on the team. Positive coaching is harder to do yet more rewarding. It is more rewarding because you are setting high standards for yourself, your players, your parents, and your assistant coaches.

A positive coach is concerned with these principles:

- 1) Striving to win is important
- 2) Creating a fun and friendly sports environment
- 3) Building and reinforcing positive character traits is more important

Striving to Win

We all recognize that competition challenges our abilities. When presented in a setting that promotes fair play, competition forces us to become better. Good coaches utilize competition to teach players how to set goals and push their players to reach their goals.

The key word in the phrase above is “striving.” The result of “winning” is not the sole focus of a double-goal coach. The coach that emphasizes the **process of improving** is the one that will get the results that he or she desires.

Making Friends and Having Fun

Regardless of age or competition level in youth sports, one of the main goals for each coach is to create an environment that is enjoyable. Youth sports are a place to make friends and have fun.

Building and Reinforcing Positive Character Traits

Sports offer us a tremendous opportunity to teach valuable life lessons. Positive coaches look for these opportunities and take advantage of them. Regardless of a team's win-loss record, characteristics such as *hard work, determination, respect, teamwork, and resiliency* can be taught and reinforced on a daily basis. There is no other setting like a sports environment that can offer the opportunity to youth to learn and practice these valuable skills. In this chapter we will provide you with tools to accomplish this.

Establishing and Reinforcing A Positive Team Culture

“The Way We Do Things Here”

The leadership of successful organizations establishes a clear set of expectations that the people in that organization follow. As the coach on your team you should be equipped with a well-developed set of principles and expectations for the players, parents, and assistant coaches on your team. Clearly define these expectations and reinforce them as “the way we do things here.”

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By setting these expectations before the season and reinforcing them throughout the season you will create an enjoyable environment for all the members of the team, including yourself. You will avoid many of the problems that arise during the season that result from poor communication.

You probably have a good idea of the type of team culture you would like to have. It may include ideas like no arguing with umpires, shake the opponents hand after the game, and play together. Putting these ideas into a clear, well-articulated format is the next essential step.

Introduce your goals and expectations to your parents and players at the first parent meeting and team practice. Throughout the season you should find creative ways to reinforce these principles at each practice and game, for parents as well as players. For example, you may invite to a practice a parent who has been somewhat rude to umpires. Have that parent play the role of umpire during a scrimmage game. You can also practice on players 'picking each other up' after a miscue.

The result will be a clear picture of "the way we do things here," and a more enjoyable sports experience for everyone.

Connecting with Kids

More important than knowing the skills and drills is knowing how to teach that information. There are plenty of coaches who can "talk" about hitting. But can they "teach" hitting? Do players listen to that coach, digest the information, and make adjustments? Does the coach connect with his players? A coach that connects with his or her players will be able to teach.

Creating the Coachable Player

Coachable players are open to suggestions, willing to listen to criticism, and willing to make adjustments.

"But don't coaches need to correct mistakes?" Yes. But, in order to effectively correct players we first need to connect with them. We need to strike a balance between positively recognizing players and correcting mistakes. Actually, this balance should be weighted heavily on the side of positive recognition.

Studies show that kids (and adults) are more open to criticism when the positives to negatives are 5:1 or greater. In one study, a classroom teacher purposely used a 2:1 ratio with her students. The attitudes of the kids were described as "*despairing*" (Robert & Evelyn Kirkhart, 1972). In another study, researchers charted the positive to negative ratio in marriages and relationships. They found that those relationships with a ratio below 5:1 were likely to end in separation or divorce (Gottman, 1994).

Another study found that male baseball players, whose coaches used positive coaching techniques such as frequent encouragement, positive reinforcement, and corrective feedback, had significantly higher self-esteem ratings over the course of the season than players whose coaches used these techniques less frequently. (Smith, Smoll, and Curtis, 1979)

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Reaching the 5:1 Ratio-“Connecting with Kids”

By providing frequent encouragement and recognizing the good things players do, you will be connecting with players and building their self-confidence. Players who have high self-confidence are more likely to respond to your suggestions. Steven Covey, author of The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, described this process of connecting with people as “making deposits into the relationship account.” Below is a description of some tools you can use to effectively connect with your players and reach a 5:1-plus ratio.

Be Truthful and Specific – It is important that you give very specific recognition. Players are likely to repeat a behavior which is reinforced, if they know exactly what that behavior should be. Avoid saying “good job, good job” all the time. Instead say, “that-a-way to be aggressive!” or “Nice throw to the chest!”

Ask rather than tell – In many instances, you may know exactly what’s going wrong with your player. Rather than telling him what you see, ask him to give you his thoughts and ideas as a way to start the conversation. When reviewing skills ask him to tell you or demonstrate what the correct skill looks like. This will help him feel more control over his situation and will help him to see and feel the correction.

Charting Effort – Make a chart with a list of all the team members. Put the names of your players in a column. During the game look for good things that each player does and write them down. Try to get at least three positives for each player. At the end of the game or at the beginning of the next practice, review the list.

Positive Non-Verbal Reinforcement – Powerful tools such as fist pumps, thumbs up, eye contact, smiles, and pats on the back make an impact on how a player feels and reacts to your coaching.

Connect with One Player – Before practices choose a player (only you need to know who that player is) who you feel needs some confidence lifting. Perhaps this player has low self-esteem and has not responded well to your coaching. During practice for that day, only recognize the good things that that player does. Avoid making any corrections with that player for the day.

Fun Activities – Create fun games during practices that reinforce skills. For example, you may want to emphasize bunting the ball away from the pitcher. Have the players take off their hats and put them on the ground near the foul lines. Divide the players into teams and have a competition. Players get extra points if they bunt the ball into a hat. They get even more points if they bunt the ball into their own hat.

Praise in Public - Recognize the good things that your players are doing in front of everyone.

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By utilizing these techniques you will build the players' confidence and create more coachable players. Their self-esteem will increase and they will be more willing to try new skills. Moreover, by observing your behavior the players will be learning the important skill of positive reinforcement. You will find that players will be more likely to "pick each other up" and less likely to criticize one another.

Dealing with Behavior Problems

One of the more challenging aspects of coaching youth players is dealing with behavior problems. It is sometimes very difficult to keep the attention of players, particularly young players, and get them to do the things you would like for them to do. Here are some tips that will help you keep the players on task while keeping practices and games fun for all the players and you.

Get Organized – Make sure your practices are well organized. Keep things moving with various well-structured drills. Keep the groups small to avoid long lines and standing around.

Reward good behavior and Ignore bad behavior when you can – Most kids crave attention. Some players will try to distract you to gain negative attention. When there is no danger to the player or anyone else, ignore poor behavior and recognize good behavior. For example, if two players are goofing around while you are trying to talk to the rest of team, avoid acknowledging their poor behavior. Instead, thank the players who are listening and making eye contact with you. You will notice that all the players will then pay attention to you, since they will be rewarded for doing so.

Give players choices – When players are misbehaving and you must address that poor behavior, give the player a choice. Calmly ask the player to the side where only he can hear you and give him a choice between sitting out or participating. You may say something like, "Billy. I would like for you to participate in this drill, but your behavior right now is disruptive. You have a choice. You can behave properly or you can sit over there until you are ready to behave properly."

Remember the three C's – Whenever disciplining a child, remember to stay Calm, be Consistent, and make clear the Consequences.

"The Mastery Orientation for Improving"

The Virginia Baseball Club strategy for training is founded upon sports psychology research. Evidence is clear that athletes increase performance and thrive in a setting that emphasizes "mastery of a task" rather than just focusing on "results."

The reason players excel in a mastery climate is that they have a sense of more control. In an environment that focuses solely on results the outcome is largely dependent upon the skill of the opponent.

In mastery settings players can improve because they focus on things that they can control. They focus on making maximum Effort, Learning new skills, and they don't let Mistakes (or the fear of making mistakes) prevent them from trying.

Research demonstrates that when players train in a mastery climate their anxiety goes down and their self-confidence goes up (Roesser, 1992). And as their self-

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confidence goes up they are more likely to try harder and stick to a task longer (Bandura, 1980).

Tools for Improvement

Set Effort Goals – Work with your team and individual players to set effort goals rather than result goals. Examples of effort goals are: running hard through first base; swing aggressively; and diving for balls. Keep track of these goals. Write down how many times players dive for ball or run hard through first base. Try to increase that number at the next game or practice.

Symbolic Rewards – Recognize players with symbolic reward throughout the season. This symbolic reward (e.g., buttons, stickers, baseball cards, gum) is given when players make effort toward achieving something that you are emphasizing on your team. The symbolic reward could be given to players that “get dirty,” or “sprint to their position,” or “pay attention to the game while on the bench.”

Get player input – At all levels of play players generally know what they are doing well and what they need to work on to improve. After a game or practice ask players, “What do we need to work on to get better?” Take this input and include it in your next practice. Players will be more enthusiastic to work on something that they had a say in. They will feel a sense of control.

Mistake rituals – The ability to bounce back from mistakes is one of the more important characteristics a ball player can have. You can teach players to put mistakes behind them by having a mistake ritual. This ritual will symbolize that the we are putting a mistake behind us. We teach players to use the “flush.” After a player makes an error, for example, his teammates and even the coach make the motion of flushing a toilet. It symbolizes that the mistake is done, and we can now focus on the next play. This ritual is important because it reinforces that “on this team mistakes are OK.” When players are not afraid to make mistakes, they will be more assertive and play aggressively.

Make Setbacks Temporary – In the same vein as mistake rituals, teaching kids to accept mistakes as part of the game is very important. This is particularly true in baseball. People that tend to make excuses do not recognize mistakes and therefore are unlikely to correct mistakes. Reinforce the idea that mistakes are OK by teaching them that mistakes are temporary, not permanent. For example:

Permanent – “I can’t field a ground ball. I stink!”

Temporary – “I didn’t stay down on that last ground ball. I hope the batter hits me another one.”

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Forming a Coach-Parent Partnership

*“A preseason meeting is a wise investment. People tend to live up to expectations **if** they know them.”*

– Jim Thompson, Stanford Business School Professor and PCA Founder

One of the more challenging aspects of coaching is dealing with parents. Often the relationship between parents and coach becomes very stressful. So much so that coaches, even though they enjoy coaching the kids, walk away from coaching. We have found that coaching is much more enjoyable when the coach takes the initiative in establishing a coach-parent partnership.

Now that you are equipped with your goals for the team it is time to present your game plan for the season. You will find that by having a parent meeting, many of the problems that often arise during a season will be avoided. You will create a culture that you, the parents, and the players will enjoy being a part of, regardless of the win-loss record at the end of the season.

Have a parent meeting around the first practice. You may want to have a pizza party at a local restaurant or at someone’s house.

Parent Meeting

Here is a sample Parent Meeting outline.

- I Welcome and Introductions
 - Coach’s background as athlete, coach, parent, etc.
 - “We’re going to be spending a lot of time together so let’s get to know each other.”
 - Each person share their best, worst or funniest personal moment in sports

- II Coaching Philosophy
 - Our team values
 - Making Friends and Having Fun
 - Always demonstrate respect for each other, officials, and opponents
 - Improve skills as players and as a team
 - Policy on playing time, missing practices, etc.

- III Goals and Hopes for the Season
 - Coaches Goals and Hopes (for example; strive to win the league championship; every athlete will want to play again next year).
 - Parent Goals and Hopes

- IV Logistics about the Season
 - Practice Schedule
 - Game Schedule
 - Phone Lists
 - Equipment

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- Extra Training and Camp Opportunities
- Other

Other suggestions to further strengthen the coach-parent partnership. Ask the parents to observe the following during the season.

1. Let the coach coach. Avoid giving instructions during games.
2. Observe a 24-hour “cooling off” period when upset.
3. Encourage all parents to cheer for all team members.