

Another View: Coaches teach valuable lessons in life



By **Stephen F. Gambescia** , *Times* Guest Columnist

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Yo coach! It is a title of great importance, similar to doctor, professor, or reverend. It deserves such deference because these people have such great influence in our lives. Anyone who has played organized sport at any level recognizes that these people are remarkable (hopefully for the better, but sometimes for the worse) for what they do. And such influence can be lasting.

Generally they are asked to serve, or hired, to develop in us the skills of a sport – to show us “how to play the game” and to be competitive. They motivate us to be all that we can be at a sport and gain a desire to win. This is commendable. In fact, the ancient experience with play and sport was one pathway to show one’s *arête*, a Greek value showing how you can be the best you can be.

Coaches at the beginning levels of sport – maybe the Ys, little league, or scholastic play – are charged with teaching us “the fundamentals.” But the real fundamentals, and ones that should continue through every amateur level, are developing in us values of the organization for whom we play and developing in us and showing through example good character.

Check the values explicated by youth organizations, the Ys, elementary and secondary schools, and universities and you will find value statements that should be part and parcel to coaching jobs. These include characteristics such as respect, truthfulness, tolerance, integrity, and overall civility.

Coaches should agree to these, not simply as platitudes, but as a fundamental responsibility so they are deserving of the title: coach. This goes for coaches at any level of amateur play and cannot be offset by the number of wins and championships. Unfortunately we read in the news too often about disturbing

transgressions by coaches that run counter to this fundamental responsibility. When these occur, many are faced with what to do.

Reaction to transgressions should not be so difficult for officials of the sponsoring organizations, if a few expectations are made before giving someone the title “coach.”

First, those responsible for the sponsoring organization should make part of the coaching contract (volunteer or paid) value statements or a code of conduct that must be signed, or the person does not get the job. Second, and certainly related to the first, is to communicate to prospective coaches that they must demonstrate such values (in thought and deed) regardless of their team’s or an individual athlete’s performance. Yes, coaches are role models; it’s what they sign up for! Third, those responsible for hiring a coach communicate that no coach is beyond reproach. Expectations for developing character and engendering values as stated in the mission of the organization take priority over the temporal responsibilities of a coach.

Fortunately, most coaches do this naturally. While one may not be the likes of a barrier breaking coach as was Cathy Rush for the Mighty Macs (Immaculata University women’s basketball coach); or the avuncular John Cheney who influenced so many urban kids who played Temple basketball; or even reach sainthood, as did Joe Paterno at Penn State. But every coach at every level of sport should act caringly, civilly, and with utmost integrity. Otherwise, they should throw in the towel.

Stephen F. Gambescia of Havertown was fortunate to have two coaches who demonstrated character and integrity in their coaching: Steve French, Archbishop John Carroll High School, and Kevin Quinn, Saint Joseph University.