

## St. Paul coach: The high school sports culture



**Parents have suddenly been given a green light to publicly and privately harangue the efforts of a coach - often undermining their child's enjoyment of the sport.**

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The gym was empty except for three coaches and three hopeful athletes. The three walk-ons, competing for the final roster spot on a Big East men's college basketball team, had already completed shooting, ball handling and defensive drills. The head coach gathered them at midcourt and explained that the next drill would be based on a game scenario.

"Your teammate," he explained, "makes a lay up and draws a foul. The opposing coach immediately calls time out. You are sitting in the last seat on our bench. When I blow the whistle, demonstrate how you would react and how you would greet your teammates as they jog towards the bench."

Athletics, especially team sports, provide opportunities for young athletes to develop life skills - traits that transcend the gym. The same qualities that make a great point guard - dedication, unselfishness, discipline, strong communication skills, passion and a willingness to work - just so happen also to make a great friend, spouse, parent, coworker, neighbor and global citizen.

There is arguably no better place for young men and women to hone these skills than the gym or playing field, an engaging and safe environment to take risks, get feedback and see firsthand what it takes to succeed.

Yet "success," if defined by winning, was only experienced on the final day of the season by, for example, two of the 63 boys' basketball teams in Minnesota's Class 4A - Apple Valley and Edina. That means 61 teams in Class 4A ended their season in failure.

while a coach must accept the attack as "feedback" and attempt to mend the player-coach relationship.

My mother has always said, "If a mom didn't think her kid was the best, nobody would." Every young athlete deserves a mother and/or father who tells them they are the best. But if parents were half as committed to facilitating their children's personal growth as they are to monitoring playing time and coaching errors, teams could actually demonstrate teamwork, athletes could feel good about their efforts, players could trust and respect their teammates and coaches - and at the end of the day each kid could sit around a dinner table and feel like a star.

The culture of high school sports is in the midst of a dramatic shift. Sit among the fans at a game, a booster club meeting or an end-of-the-year banquet, and it will become alarmingly obvious that youth athletics are becoming an investment - of money, time and pride - and parents are going to expect a return.

Unfortunately for such parents, fundraising doesn't buy minutes on the court, chauffeuring youngsters to tournaments across the metro for nine years doesn't guarantee championships, and sending a child to offseason workouts doesn't earn them anything except an opportunity to improve, to stay or get fit, and to do what youngsters should do with their friends - have fun.

Back at the tryouts, the gym suddenly echoed with the loudest holler it had ever heard. A young man landed with a two-foot thud. Jumping as high as he could three more times, he gave two high fives and sprinted 15 yards before finishing with an air-born chest bump to an incoming teammate.

The role-playing ended there. Smiling, the head coach tossed a jersey to the young man and said, "Son, that is what this team needs."

I didn't witness this event. But when the phone rang and an excited voice exclaimed, "I'm on the team," it didn't sound like a prospector hoping for a big return on his investment. It sounded like a young man who had earned an opportunity to play a game he loves with a bunch of his buddies.

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