

# For kids' sakes, give volunteer coaches a break

## *A disgruntled parent or 2 can ruin the season*

By Christine Long

It's the end of another season of coaching youth basketball and, again, I feel beat up.

There ought to be a postseason therapy group for volunteer coaches who have to suffer the stares and bad-mouthing of those parents who feel compelled to complain if their child doesn't get enough playing time or doesn't score enough points. We could sit around on folding chairs and vent about them as they do about us; we could justify our coaching decisions, explain our various no practice/no play rules, share anecdotes of unsportsmanlike conduct among those who should be our closest supporters. We could make placards for each other, addressed to the complainers that read: "You Do It!"

But that wouldn't help the kids - which is why we signed up for this thankless job in the first place. Only the parents can help the kids. The kids are great.

But I am becoming increasingly disappointed in parents. Somewhere between their own junior high failures and the social slights now endured by their children, some have lost perspective and good manners. And it doesn't help the cause - which I assume (because I have a child on the team too) is to raise children who are grateful, selfless, kind people - to let this attitude of entitlement and negativity filter down to the kids.

Not all parents are a bane to the coach's existence. Most are wonderful: They offer to make phone calls; they attend parent meetings; they carpool; they cheer on their kids regardless of points scored or minutes played; they have a healthy sense of I-don't-know-the-game-but-I-trust-you-do that coaches appreciate. But it only takes one or two disgruntled parents and by association (or rather, influence) their children to cause a virus of dissension among an otherwise healthy and happy team.

I've come to realize in almost 10 years of coaching that the most important things I teach them, life lessons about teamwork and sportsmanship and being proud of themselves, are like a house of cards

easily toppled by a parent who can't see the big picture, who breezes past in a torrent of peevishness because he or she can't see a good pass or a well-executed screen for the basket their child didn't score or the minutes he or she didn't play.

In fact, I can sit all 10 of my players down after a game and say something positive and remarkable that each of them has done; I can praise each one for some area of improvement — a block-out! A screen down low! Helping out when your teammate got beat! Tying up a loose ball! - carefully try to impress upon them the idea that it all fits together, that we are a team; we help each other out; every game is different and we all contribute at one time or another in our own way. Good job! Go team!

And I look at them all, and I understand their junior high angst, and I know that every day at school is a new struggle with self-esteem and friendships and schoolwork and that there are a thousand injustices throughout their day. I know that they'll leave practice carrying the shaky foundation I've laid out for them about teamwork and test it in their homes where they'll throw down their backpacks and rant about their playing time or that they had to run a lap at practice or that they didn't score because so-and-so didn't pass to them.

It is at this point that a parent can decide whether to reinforce my stack of cards or blow it apart altogether. A parent can decide here: Do I teach her how to complain or do I teach her how to be a member of a team?

In his book "The Young Athlete," Bill Burgess lays out his Ten Commandments for Parents of Athletic Children. I've adapted some and created others in light of my own experiences with youth coaching over the years. Here are a few:

> Be a source of positive reinforcement for your child. Make sure that win or lose, play or not, you appreciate your child's effort not only in games but in practice. Praise her even if the progress she makes is not visible to your cronies in the stands. Teach her to enjoy the simple thrill of competition, of being a member of a team, of being out there giving it her best.

> Don't let your child get away with crying after a game because she didn't score enough points or play enough minutes. Send her back to her teammates to celebrate their successes, however small they may seem. Again, reinforce the team aspect of the game. Explain that a team sport does not by definition mean that everyone scores the same number of points or plays the same number of minutes or even excels at the same things.

> Go to parent meetings. Most coaches will explain their philosophy and their rules for playing time. Some coaches limit playing time if practices are missed. Understand that the coach doesn't have a spreadsheet on the bench to calculate every player's minutes, nor should she. Nor should you.

> As a parent, be a good example of sportsmanship and team: spirit. Pick up your children on time. Make an effort to meet all the players on the team. Don't say negative things about either team's players or coaches in the stands or at home - and don't let your child do it either. Help your child see the positives in every situation.

After 10 years of coaching kids, I just might hang up my high-tops. Every year at this time I'm usually asking myself: Why do I bother? I love the game; I love the kids. But every year there is that parent who comes across the court at me with that look on his face. Who needs that? I don't give 10 hours of my week and a big chunk of my weekend to be sneered at by someone who doesn't know weakside help from a backdoor cut and can't even notice when his child accomplishes either.

I'll try to be a good sport about it if these rules aren't abided by, but let's give it the old elementary school try and teach the kids the bigger picture, and give the volunteer coaches, who feel pummeled enough, a break.

- *Christine Long, a Minneapolis writer, played basketball for Southwest High School and Santa Clara University.*