

Players, ADs, Coaches, and Parents: What's Your Motivation?

By Jim Charles

I'm going to spend the next 3 or 4 paragraphs talking about myself. Not because that is my favorite subject, but to provide you with information as to my own background and experience in youth sports. Hopefully, that information will help you better understand all the commentary and opinion that follows.

I have been involved in youth sports as a coach, administrator and fan off and on since 1981 at the ripe old age of 22. In that year, I was given the privilege of coaching (as a *head coach*, no less) a boys Little League Baseball team consisting of 18 kids from 8 to 12 years old. From that point on, I had the coaching bug. In the nearly 30 years since, I have met more fantastic people from my youth sports involvement than I can count.

From the coaching end, I still consider my season spent with "The Legend" Jim "JB" Blunt at St. Matthew's the highwater mark on my learning curve as a basketball coach. He was a knowledgeable and skilled coach, but he was an even better role model for the kids and mentor for his assistants. Diabetes took JB away from us years before his time. I hope his soul has found the warmth of heaven.

I've met some awesome parents along the way, too. Some are parents of "name" area players, but I don't want to get caught up in listing one or two parents and not mentioning dozens of others that are deserving, so we'll just leave it at that.

Last, but certainly not least are the student-athletes. I began as a baseball coach, a sport that I had some background and experience in. But when I converted over to hoops, I had to start from the very bottom. I had never played the sport on any kind of organized team, and didn't even know what any of the positions were called! When I got my first team as a head coach in CYM 7th/8th grade ball, it was literally true that the girls playing for me knew more about the game than I did. While I had two basic on-court philosophies that I was unwilling to bend on, I often deferred to the wishes of the players in real time game situations. The girls rewarded my confidence in them by posting a 10 – 0 record in their division and an average game score of 34 – 14. From that time to present day, I've had the honor to coach so many great kids. A good many went on to play college ball. A couple

even made it to Division I. But, to me, even the kids whose basketball careers peaked with my CYM teams – the girls who didn't even play high school ball – were as important to me as the D1 players.

As an administrator, I have served as Vice-President for a large local parish Athletic Association. I also founded and was first President of the Wilmington Tigers.

I have learned many life lessons in my 3 decades of youth sports involvement, most learned from observation or by going through some coaching "rite of passage."

Now, I come to you with this editorial not to gripe or complain about anything, but to, with hat in hand, offer all of you some positive advice – sincerely *constructive* criticism, if you will....

To the student-athletes: There is no score, no championships at The Bob without you. There are no intense interscholastic rivalries, no cheers, no high fives in the stands without you. Without you, there is no game. Your participation in sports, *collectively*, enhances the local quality of life immensely. But I am just as concerned with your participation, *individually*. Are you playing for fun? For competition? Are you playing to see how good you can get at basketball? All of those are great reasons. Any one of them or any combination of them are. But one other question needs to be asked: Are you playing for someone else? It's rarely ever mentioned, but with girls sports particularly, there are many student-athletes who sign up year in and year out for tryouts because it pleases someone else. In most cases, we're talking about their fathers. Sport is a powerful bond between father and daughter. For some girls, it seems the only time they see or talk with their dads is at their games. So, many girls will stay in a sport that, for them, is uncomfortable at best, or a real misery at worst, just to maintain that relationship with their father. That's sad. And it is not a good, practical, long-term vehicle to keep in their dad's good graces, or to preserve their own mental health and well-being. You have to play for yourself. Oh, basketball is a *team* game. I'm certainly not advocating playing the game selfishly! Only that the root of your participation should spring from within you and not in order to make someone else happy. That is the only way to achieve true fulfillment in sports.

To scholastic athletic department heads – high school, CYM, and grade school: You guys and gals are last thought of when it comes to the general spectator or fan in the stands. Generally, outstanding or legendary players and coaches are the "faces" of area scholastic sports programs. ADs are

“behind the scenes”. Faceless. And yet, for the near-anonymity in which you toil, you have a disproportionately large impact on your programs. While it may be quite tempting to run those programs in a heavy-handed way, you should always keep in mind that you are there *to serve*. It is your mission to promote and nurture your sports programs and the careers of your student-athletes; and to aid and assist your coaches in any way that positively leads to their improvement as teachers of their particular sport. With all of that in mind...

Don't cut the legs out from under your coaches by allowing or bringing in committees to select team rosters unless your coaches specifically request that. No head coach with any pride or self-dignity would continue to coach in a system where his team is picked for him by others. Only a team's coaching staff can decide the rosters. If you are so gung-ho on these selection committees, then let the committee coach the practices and games, too.

Please care about the student-athletes in your charge. Please develop, institute, and embrace a culture of history within your programs. Honor past champions. Pay tribute to former standout players by retiring their uniform numbers. And for Pete's sake, please make sure that someone in the system is keeping track of your players' career point totals. If you are not doing all of these things, you are not doing your job. If your plate is too full with all the other sports at your school, then appoint a special Basketball Coordinator to make sure these things get done on your basketball teams. Make your program a shining, positive, progressive example of what scholastic basketball once was and can be again!

To coaches: In recent years, I had a high school coach tell me words to the effect of, “You don't know the sacrifices coaches make.” Well, I suppose that gentleman had little familiarity with my own history and background. While I haven't coached a high school team and gone through the 6-days-a-week, 5-months-straight grind, I nevertheless have a real good idea how it must be. Coaches DO make sacrifices. Especially high school coaches, for whom coaching is almost a second full-time job. For half of the year, it takes coaches away from their families and spouses. It leads to poor eating habits and sleep deprivation. But coaches continue to do it year after year after year. If those coaches are motivated by a natural love of the game, more power to them. If they are in it because they enjoy teaching a young person skills and then watching them execute what they are taught, all the better. And if you are in the coaching business because you think it's fun and you want to bring that same sense of enjoyment and excitement to the youth in your charge, you have my deepest respect. But, there is also another side.

There are coaches, at every level, who are in the profession for self-aggrandizement. They are promoters. And the product they are selling is themselves. Whereas the athlete is justified in playing for their own enjoyment first, a coach's role is different. A coach must be "other-centered" right from the get-go. Now, if you make the athlete's your priority, and as a byproduct, you have a great time – fantastic! Nothing wrong with that! But I do occasionally see coaches who seem to be about themselves first. You can see it in how they treat their players. The level of respect that they show their players. A coach who is abrasive, demeaning, and overbearing with his team is a coach who is in the profession with a questionable set of motivations. So, to coaches I say, please be in your vocation for the right reasons. If you're not – if you and/or your team are miserable more often than not – strongly consider retiring.

That only leaves parents left to read my words of wisdom! In the last 30 or 40 years, perhaps THE single element that has changed the most in youth sports has been the attitude and role of the student-athlete's parents. In an earlier time, parents respected the "territory" of their children's coaches. Unless a coach was flagrantly abusing a player, parents kept their distance. There was an understanding that "the coach knows best." But, in recent decades, parents – *and especially dads* – have gotten far more involved in their daughters' sports lives, and far less respectful of the old player/coach/parent boundaries. Fathers continually interpose themselves between their daughters and the coach. The result is that dads are acting like their daughters' player agents, but without any of the professionalism. Instead, they fight for what they imagine are their daughters' best interests, even when that often means that they are tearing away at the very chemistry and fabric of their daughters' team. All that matters to an aggressive, out-of-control dad is *his* kid's playing time, *his* kid's plum role on the team, *his* kid's "college look." All else be damned. While this by no means describes every dad (nor does it let moms off the hook!), the problem is now so pervasive that just about every *team* from 5th/6th grade onward has at least one dad who plays the part of the bully. If you're a dad or a mom who needs to bring a blood pressure monitor with them to every game, you might be a problem parent. If you find yourself while in conversation with other adults in the stands saying, "He doesn't know what he's doing!" and you're *not* talking about a politician, but rather, your daughter's coach, you might be a problem parent. If you bring pen and paper with you to the games to help you track your daughter's on-court playing time, you might be a problem parent. Your obsession with your daughter's place on the team will, more often than not, backfire on you. She will feel pressured and embarrassed, which is not the ideal mindset for a player to be in. The coach will feel resentment to you for what he sees as harassment. Some coaches –

not all – might even react by *reducing* your daughter's role and standing on the team. Such a coach may feel that the only way he can strike back and assert his authority is by taking it out on your kid. It's a lose/lose scenario. My advice? Be a friend to your daughter's coach. It's a natural alliance. Ideally, you should *both* want what's best for your kid. The coach will also have ten or a dozen other girls that he also cares about, but life isn't perfect! Be supportive of the coach. After all, he serves for precious little pay and a world of aggravation at the high school level, or, no pay at all in CYM. Another piece of advice: Let your daughter grow up. Let her find her own way. Chances are that most players are being used correctly and are in the role best suited for them. Why would a coach not want to use his best players most? Every coach wants to win. And the easiest way to do that is to use your lineup in such a way as to apply the most talent in every game. If your daughter is sitting a lot, there just might be a good reason for that! But let *her* figure it out. Be a shoulder for her to lean on. Be a comforting voice for her to hear. But keep a respectful distance and let her find her own way through sports. She'll be a better person for it, too.

So, that's basically it! That's my plan for, if not world peace and harmony, at least getting a small patch of it to grow here in DIAA and CYM.

See you at the game!

(posted 12-14-10)