

Let's not take ourselves too seriously now.

A few months ago, I read a great book called "Coaching Coaches: For Players, Parents, and Coaches from Youth through High School Age Sports." It brought up an endless number of topics that would be appropriate fodder for Wisconsin Preps, but one of the simplest messages I got out of it is to remember that extra-curricula are supposed to be fun and leave athletes with a lifetime love for their sport.



It's a pretty basic idea really, but with parents having visions of D-I scholarships for their kids dancing in their heads, and coaches hoping to make a name for themselves to get a job at the collegiate level...you get the idea. And while there is certainly a place in high school sports for the pursuit of the "W" and individual and team glory, I encourage all athletes and coaches to take a step back every now and then to get back to the basics of sharing love for their sport.

Many of our readers are coaches of high school students and younger age groups, and even the preps themselves often coach a greener bunch or plan to in the future. In the midst of a myriad of programs geared to getting kids better, faster, stronger and to do that all as early as possible, sometimes the bigger picture is lost. In an excerpt from veteran Coach Bob Finnie's book, he looks at a third grade basketball league championship. Of the 22 players on both teams who made the final, only one went on to play varsity basketball in high school.

"This is a typical example of why this age group needs to focus on the fun and fundamentals and not the win," he wrote. He emphasizes that at this early age, coaches need to recognize most of the players haven't reached maturity, and with that in mind, it's best not to pigeonhole a kid into one particular position, or to play only the biggest or tallest players in pursuit of the league trophy.

In a past interview with Don Beebe, NFL football legend and founder of the athlete training program House of Speed, Beebe said he actually almost quit football during high school to focus on basketball. Luckily, his Dad thought that was a bad idea, and the rest, as they say, is history. With that in mind, just how many potentially great athletes are turned off to a sport because of a lack of playing time, or opt to focus on only one sport, before they even come into themselves physically?

One of the best experiences I've had in sports was being a part of a program founded by another long-time coach from the Stevens Point Area High School, Terry Smith. It was called Lifetime Sports and we had 40 junior high kids, a few kind-hearted, activity-loving teachers, and some high school assistants. Every day for four hours we played – and the teachers and high school kids played right alongside the junior high kids – whether the sport of the day be flag football, soccer, basketball, or Frisbee golf. I don't remember who won a single contest that summer, even though we kept score, but I imagine most all of those Point kids have developed a lifelong love for playing sports.

My point? If you're a coach of greenhorn players, focus on skill development and nurturing a passion for sports. If you're leading veterans – keep in mind you probably won't have a single athlete who will make their living on the court or field – the love of the sport you cultivate, the values you instill in your players, and the way you lead them will always be remembered, for good or bad.

Scott Huenik, Sheboygan North's assistant football coach said it even better.

"It's about winning the games and going to state," he began. "But, it's not. If the kids come out with something more valuable, like life's lessons – it's worth it. Every high school coach has such a huge influence on the kids."

Keep On,  
Laura Ritchie

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