

## **Really, Bounty Gate in Youth Sports?**

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### Abstract

Developing a sound coaching philosophy is one of the most important tasks associated with a quality coaching education program. The philosophy must be based on one's own values and beliefs, but it must also be congruent with the values of a particular model of sport. Thus, the processes of sport participation should exceed the product of sport until one reaches a business model level of competition. However, there is enormous pressure on coaches in all models of sport to win. Kids engage in sports primarily for fun, but parents want to win, and it seems like the larger the margin of victory, the better. Therefore, it becomes vitally important that coaches resist all temptations to fall prey to this thinking and remain steadfast to the goals of fun, enjoyment, and personal development of their participants.

## “Really, Bounty Gate in Youth Sports?”

How do you transcend from the noble ideal of “Muscular Christianity” to a mindset of vigilante justice and the willful intent to do bodily harm to an opponent? An extreme shift in thinking, to say the least, but the change would appear to be a fact of reality. As such, it reflects how the product of sport has taken center stage over the processes associated with sport participation in our society today. The ultimate prize, winning, has surpassed all other values associated with sport participation. Unfortunately, we are seeing this “win-at-all-cost” mentality emerging in virtually every model of sport.

Those people who have an avid interest in professional sport, especially the National Football League, are well aware of the recent bounty gate scandal. This was an in-house incentive program by the New Orleans Saints’ coaches to give financial rewards to Saints players for disabling key performers on opposing teams. The underlying goal of bounty gate was to increase the odds of success for the Saints in each week’s game by eliminating the potential productivity of key performers on opposing teams.

Unfortunately, what happens at one level in sport can and/or does ultimately filter down to each of the subsequent lower levels. The process is reminiscent of an hour glass. The following examples are illustrations of bounty gate mentality sifting down to a youth sport and/or a recreational model of sport.

In his book entitled, “Why Johnny Hates Sports”, Fred Engh cited some statistical information about abuse and youth sport programs. Chief among six pieces of data was the

fact that “eight percent of youngsters surveyed said they had been pressured to intentionally harm others” (Engh, 2002, p. 140).

More recently, Athletic Business E-News Daily published an online article entitled, “Study Reveals Alarming Safety Trends in Youth Sports” (Gaio). The article contained several pieces of statistical data from survey research that emulated the concept of bounty gate’s existence in youth sport settings or in a recreational model of sport. Specifically, the following facts or trends were revealed from the study:

- (a) “Eleven percent of youth athletes claim to have been offered some form of reward, or “bounty”, as an incentive to injure an opposing player;
- (b) 30 percent of respondents have been “secretly glad” when a player on the other team got hurt; and
- (c) 16 percent of respondents say either they or a teammate has ‘tried to hurt a player on the opposing team’”.

Finally, two recent Orange County Register articles (Sharon & Mickadeit, Mickadeit) disclosed “Pop Warner football coaches reportedly offering cash incentives to their 10 and 11-year-old players for particularly violent hits, and even larger incentives for knocking opponents out of games” (Gaio).

The preceding examples serve to illustrate how unethical behaviors and conduct have evolved in all levels of sport because of a “win-at-all-cost” mentality that is so pervasive today. In fact, a recent study by the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) showed

nearly 67% of U.S. adults contend that sport overemphasizes the value of winning and 41% who self-reported cheating did so because they were obsessed with winning (USADA). This flawed thinking and its associated transgressions are the antithesis of values, actions, and conduct espoused by eminent advocates of recreational and educational models of sport. Therefore, it is the writer's contention that we must steadfastly adhere to a cultural climate that is recommended by the leading spokespersons affiliated with recreational and educational models of sport.

One essential step toward fostering the above cultural focus may well rest with the availability and implementation of quality coaching education programs. Appropriate coaching education programs should contain a variety of built-in safeguards that would discourage or deter a "win-at-all-cost mentality" on the part of coaches. For example, it is imperative that coaches understand the basic mission and values associated with the five commonly accepted models of sport. Figure 1 displays an outline of these models and the corresponding mission and values of each structure.

This display affords a mere snapshot of the most commonly accepted models of sport. A more detailed examination and description of these models can be found in Character Counts! excellent training program for coaches or other interested parties which is entitled, "Pursuing Victory With Honor". Character Counts! is a youth ethics initiative that originated at the Josephson Institute in Los Angeles, California. The institute itself is devoted to seeing sport utilized as a positive mechanism for proper ethics, sportsmanship, and character development.

Ideally, the recreational, educational and Olympian models of sport do not attach a significant premium on the value of winning per se. However, the value of winning is rapidly becoming an all-consuming goal in virtually all models of sport because it is often used as the key factor to define the success and/or failure of athletic programs. In many instances, it is the most commonly used marker to assess whether or not one's coaching efforts are deemed to be successful or unsuccessful.

Developing a sound coaching philosophy is one of the most important tasks associated with a quality coaching education program. The philosophy must be based on one's own values and beliefs, but it must also be congruent with the values of a particular model of sport. Thus, the processes of sport participation should exceed the product of sport until one reaches a business model level of competition. However, there is enormous pressure on coaches in all models of sport to win. In such cases, the means justify the end. Any coaching behaviors or actions are justifiable as long as they facilitate winning on the scoreboard! In turn, the idea is constantly reinforced by timeless adages such as "just win, Baby" or "winning is not the most important thing, it is the only thing". Kids engage in sports primarily to have fun, but parents and coaches want to win (Lumpkin) and it seems like the larger the margin of victory, the better. Other prominent professionals have addressed the issue of placing too much of a premium on winning as well. For example, Mark Hyman, an assistant professor at George Washington University, recently published two excellent books on youth sports. These works include Until it hurts: America's obsession with youth sports and how it harms our kids and The most expensive game in town: The rising cost of youth sports

and the toll on today's families. In his opinion, the adult focus on winning by coaches and parents has eliminated the "fun" principle associated with sport participation plus kids are "tired of being yelled at by coaches and parents" (Toporek). In similar fashion, Nichole LaVoi, an associate director of the Tucker Center for Girls and Women in Sport, said "to keep [youth-athletes] playing, parents and coaches must imbue sport with a spirit of fun, mastery, and team work and leave the all-or-nothing win mentality to the professionals" (Toporek). Therefore, it becomes vitally important that coaches resist all temptations to fall prey to this thinking and remain steadfast to the goals of fun, enjoyment, and personal development of their participants.

Granted, there are occasions when teams end up playing against an opponent of far less ability so the potential of winning by a lopsided margin exists. In such cases, many sport leagues have adopted "mercy rules" to shelter teams that are grossly mismatched. The underlying intent behind a sport's mercy rule is to teach compassion for an inferior opponent, teach sportsmanship, and create a level playing field when there is an enormous disparity of talent between opposing teams. Many parents and coaches, however, are adverse to the use of mercy rules. They believe that such rules are counter-productive and view them as the "wussification of America" and a "ridiculous rule," saying they teach "lesser teams that there's always someone there to cushion the blow" (Urbanski).

One inherent part of any coach's philosophy is the arch-rivaling issue of process versus product. Many coaches believe that if you attend to the process of preparing to

win, then winning will ultimately take care of itself. Tom Osborne's More Than Winning illustrated and served as a classic example of this tenet. In its simplest format, if each and every athlete prepares to the best of his/her ability in every practice or training session, winning will take care of itself. Thus, it becomes imperative for each participant to maximize their practice and conditioning preparations in order to strengthen the team. The epitome of the forgoing principle is to "create a situation in which the players feel a responsibility to their teammates to perform at a high level with a winning attitude" (Dawson, 2013, p. 52).

The adoption of a particular coaching style usually emerges as a result of one's personality type, their coaching philosophy, and the manner in which she/he may have been coached. Most coaching education programs customarily acknowledge three distinct styles of coaching (Martens). They include the cooperative (democratic), command (autocratic), and submissive (anarchic) methods of teaching.

The cooperative style of coaching has, in most cases, surpassed the more traditional command style of coaching. It recognizes the value of an athlete-centered approach which means that all coaching behaviors or actions are enacted with the health, safety, and well-being of each and every athlete as its major guiding principle. As a result, this style of coaching seems to be more conducive to creating an environment that is fun, enjoyable, and lends itself to the development of important life skills and life lessons. It embraces the value of process over product because it

recognizes the total athletic experience as a viable educational tool that can have positive, lifelong implications for participants.

Another area in the list of safeguards to create a positive sport environment is reflected in the Positive Coaching Alliance's sportsmanship promotion concept of "honoring the game". According to the PCA (Thompson), good sports respect the game's rules, their opponents, the officials, their teammates, and oneself. This process of fair and exemplary conduct is summarized by the Positive Coaching Alliance through its use of the acronym ROOTS.

Contrast, if you will, some of the typical bounty gate behaviors with having a true respect and sense of admiration for a worthy opponent. Quality opposition should be viewed as a gift because it requires you to compete at your maximum ability level. This presents a totally different environment than a "no place for second place" scenario where *winning* is all that truly matters so any and all behaviors are tolerated to accomplish it.

My final step toward fostering a positive sport culture entails using the National Association of Sport and Physical Education's National Standards for Athletic Coaches (NASPE) as the guiding framework for one's coaching education curriculum. This publication comprises eight domains and forty national standards that should be present in quality coaching education programs. Key benchmarks exist for each standard to ensure that future coaches are equipped with solid, core coaching competencies. Unfortunately, there is a multitude of individuals involved in the



coaching profession who have never had any type of exposure to this set of standards which are designed to produce a positive framework of coaching competencies. The problem is further compounded by a majority of parents. They become consumed with winning and forget about the fact that sports have the potential for enormous educational value and that they should also be fun and enjoyable. However, a recent article in the *Albuquerque Journal* indicated that beliefs on the part of some sport moms may be changing when it stated that “80% of sport moms wanted an alternative to the “win-at-all-cost” culture in many youth sport leagues” (Olmstead).

It is crystal clear that recreational and educational models of sport are under siege today. The principle culprit is clearly identifiable. It is a “win-at-all-cost” mentality that has taken a toe-hold on coaches and parents alike. The need to win has become an all-consuming focus and, unfortunately, it is taking priority over the mission and values that should accrue from the participation of athletes in quality sport programs.

A critical question to the above dilemma is how do we stem the tide against this ill-conceived or distorted thinking? I believe the answer lies in quality coaching education programs. Such programs will provide a variety of built-in safeguards that will insure coaches focus on those factors that make sport participation truly recreational or educational in nature. For example, sport will be used to teach life lessons and life skills through the process of athletic participation. Coaches will keep winning in its proper perspective and openly defy the current “winning-at-all-cost” syndrome that has gripped society as a whole. The welfare of athletes will be the first and foremost

priority of quality sport programs because they are athlete-centered in their philosophical approach. And finally, sports must be used to support the academic mission and goals of our educational institutions. If we cease to use sports as the viable educational component they can and should be, provided they are administered via the right philosophical approach and quality leadership, then the time has arrived to outsource them to external agencies and/or sport clubs who are seeking potential clients and added sources of revenue.

Figure 1

Model Type	Basic Mission	Values
Recreational Model	Fun and Enjoyment	Importance of team Balanced competition Participation of all athletes Positive coaching
Educational Model	Personal Development	Placing athletes' welfare first Sports as a setting for learning Supporting academic goals Educational value of competing
Olympian Model	Competition for its own	Preparation processes to be successful
Business Model	Money and Glory	Winning Recruitment or develop exceptional athletes Showmanship and "star quality" Violence Commercialization
Personal-Career Model	Self-promotion focus	Self-centered advancement of coaches/athletes

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[www.CharacterCounts.org](http://www.CharacterCounts.org)