Is Winning Everything?

It was the 7th inning with two outs and runners on first and second. I was pitching my fourth game in a row in a Southern California Little League game. I was tired, sore, and was having trouble getting the ball over the plate.

After pitching my third ball in a row, my coach called 'time' and came out to the mound. He didn't ask how I was, didn't offer encouragement, rather, he shouted at me to bear down and quit being such a sissy about my arm! He stormed back to the dug out and after my next pitch (which was a ball), he unceremoniously pulled me out of the game and instructed me to sit on the far end of the bench. Oh, did I mention I was 10-years-old?

This situation may sound like fantasy, but it was my reality as a 10-year-old pitcher in little league. It was ultimately what caused me to stop playing baseball. Not because my arm was sore, not because I walked the batter, and not because we lost the game. But for the most heinous reason of all: because it made me stop loving the game.

As many youths at that time, I was a baseball fanatic. I collected Topps baseball cards, having a complete collection of the 1968 series. I played over-the-line. I sat in the bleachers at Dodger stadium with my glove, time and time again, waiting to catch a homerun ball. I was glued to the radio every time the Dodgers played. But after the 1968 little league season, I never played again, never collected another baseball card, and rarely went to Dodger games.

Winning at All Costs

My coach was only concerned with winning. He wanted that 12-inch pennant trophy so badly, that any 10-year-old that stood in his way was toast. He'd start the same pitcher on the mound every weekend until he lost, and then switch to another until he lost. Basically, he had no idea what it means to 'coach,' and ultimately had no business being a coach in the first place.

So what's the point here? Why am I digging up the past? Mainly to make a point about how coaches can impact young athletes. Sure, others have endured worse, and continued to play baseball, but that's not the point. The point is that athletes play the game of baseball mainly because they love it.

Helping Young Athletes

Coaching young athletes is a challenge. They have much to learn, and many are at different stages of body development and coordination. Heck, as a ten-year old pitcher, just getting
the ball to the catcher somewhere in the vicinity of the strike zone of a 5'2' batter, is an achievement!

Helping these young athletes develop to their potential means being able to assess their current abilities, finding their strong points, helping them with their weak points, and organizing them into a team that can make it through six innings.

**Coach's Effect**

Studies have been done with young athletes to see how coaches affected baseball play. In one of the studies, they equipped teams of young baseball players with equipment and just let them play ball. They played and enjoyed themselves for hours.

Then they introduced coaches into the mix. Not long after the coaches got involved, the players lost interest and wanted to quit the game. The study didn't quantify the coaches' activities, but it is obvious that their approach did not fit with the players' idea of a fun game.

This doesn't mean that any coaching interaction takes the fun out of the game of baseball! Obviously coaches are needed to help teams organize, strategize, and to effectively work together as a team.

A good coach will help athletes develop their potential and become better players. A coach's goals for his team should be focused on the development of his athletes as players, and people. It's only when a coach's interest in winning supercedes both the physical and mental well being of his team, that there is a problem.

**Eyes on the Prize**

Most of all, coaching athletes, especially young athletes, means being patient, supportive, and understanding of the different levels of ability. Young athletes are there to compete and have fun. They are not there to win a pennant, or lead the league in RBI's, or have the lowest ERA. Don't get me wrong. Those things would be wonderful for any young athlete, but it is not their primary focus. And of course, as they get older these achievements become more and more important. But coaches who think that young athletes are there to win and only win, are sadly mistaken, and should reassess their own interest in being a coach.

**The Role of Parents**

Parents of athletes play an even more vital role in the support of young athletes. Before the game and after the game, it is the parent that is the key support system. As parents, we all want our children to be winners. It's a natural thing. We want to see our children succeed. We want them to feel the thrill of victory, not the agony of defeat. Many times losing a game is a greater learning experience than winning.

But whether they win or lose, we need to be there for them to help them through bad days, good days, hitting streaks and slumps, and to ensure that they continue to love and play the game if that's what they want to do.
Many times parents can be seen projecting their own wishes and desires onto their children athletes. I have been at more than a few games where the parents are seriously hasseling the umpires, or heckling the players.

What kind of example does this set for the young athletes? And at times I have witnessed a parent scolding his child for making a bad play or an error!

It's in situations like these that the pressure on young athletes starts outweighing the fun of playing. They want nothing more than to please their parents and their coaches. But we all make mistakes. And when those mistakes are made, parents and coaches have a responsibility to let their young athletes know that doing your best is all that matters.

Win or lose, the best thing you can do as a coach or as a parent, is support these athletes as they develop so that they improve, and most importantly, so that they love the game of baseball even more. It's not whether they win or lose, it's that they are doing something they love.