

Seven Ways Coaches Can Keep the Game Fun (Helpful Hints)

Written by: Wayne Kraus, Jr.

Coaches Quarterly Winter 2008

About the Author: *Wayne Kraus, Jr. is a former professional baseball umpire and sports talk radio host and currently teaches communications at Trinity High School in Louisville, Kentucky. Kraus has coached high school soccer and swimming as well as several levels of various youth sports.*

Have you ever participated on a sports team because it was absolutely no fun? Of course you haven't. You join a team because you expect to enjoy it. You want to have fun!

As a member of a team, every student-athlete will undoubtedly experience times that are less than fun, such as long practices, lopsided defeats or perhaps a nagging injury. However, the enjoyable aspects of the competition outweigh any negative aspects of a player's involvement. A high school athlete may choose to be part of a team for many different reasons, but one of the most important is the coach.

Outside of parents and teachers, coaches have arguably the most influence on the lives of young people. Of course coaches need to teach the fundamentals of the game, but it is also very important for them to give time and energy to making high school athletics *fun*. Here are seven simple pointers to guide you along that path.

1. Smile

This sounds so simple on the surface. Just smile at your players. This task is made tougher when your star player is sidelined with the flu, your team has lost five in a row, and your office computer crashed earlier that afternoon. But keep this in mind: Twenty years from now not a single player on your team will remember the score of the sixth game of the season, but they will remember if their coach was a pleasant person.

2. Show that you care

Odds are everyone realizes that you care about winning. But do you care how your power forward did on her algebra exam? Do you care why your goalie was late for school? Do you care if anyone on your team had to serve a Saturday morning detention? Of course your players will try to keep things from you – can you imagine a teenager voluntarily telling his coach why he didn't complete a science project?- but coaches who have a genuine interest in their players' lives off the field will be more respected. A student-athlete knows when a coach puts victories ahead of his or her well being.

3. Be a model of sportsmanship

Go to any ball field from T-ball to the major leagues, and you are sure to find somebody heckling the umpire. It's part of the game, right? Well, maybe for the fan who has paid \$50 for a ticket to Yankee Stadium, but not for the high school coach. It is perfectly acceptable to question a call, so long as it is done in a civil manner. Remember, you are molding the minds of adolescents. No one is paying you \$1 million to coach this team and the ESPN cameras are nowhere to be found. Poor sports are no fun, so keep things in perspective.

4. Accentuate the positive

It's very easy for a coach to point out mistakes at practice and in games. How else are you going to get your players to make the necessary improvements? But constant negative comments will eventually wear on your athletes. You need to recognize a job well done to keep up morale. While different coaches certainly have different styles with regard to criticisms vs. compliments, don't be that coach who never has anything positive to say.

5. Be prepared for practice

Student-athletes are being pulled in so many different directions nowadays that for many it may be difficult to get focused at practice. As the coach you have put in an eight hour work day and you still need to pay bills and fix a leaky faucet later in the evening. Nevertheless, you need to find time in your day to put in writing a schedule for your practice. You don't need a 15-page manuscript, just an outline of what you want to get accomplished and how much time to devote to each task. Though your players might not be able to express it, they want and need structure at practice. Having a plan makes practices more enjoyable.

6. Give'em five

Slap hand! High five, low fives, taters...and pat them on the back. Kids like contact. But in today's politically correct world of "who can sue whom next?" you might want to avoid hugs and the old pat on the bottom. Stick to giving 'em five.

7. Speak from the heart

A pep talk delivered to your team before leaving the locker room is more important than you might think. All players want to hear that the game is important to their coach right before they take to the field. A sincere pep talk can go a long way toward motivating the team, and, on the flip side, players will be wise to the coach who is just going through the motions with his or her speech. Say what you mean and mean what you say. You will be respected and your athletes will respond.

High school athletics is a wonderful thing, but participation is voluntary. Students have to want to be part of the team and the actions and attitudes of their coaches will greatly influence their desire to play. The late baseball Hall-of-Famer Willie Stargell put it this way: "The umpire doesn't say, 'Work ball!'; he says, 'Play ball!'" It's a game. It should be fun. **CQ**

It should be FUN!