

Sports & Youth Sports Issues Angle: Kirk Mango

Athletic Codes

Athletic codes of conduct are normally set up to help support and shape the character and integrity of participating athletes, keep them healthy and safe, deter activities that diminish the likelihood of achieving team and individual goals, and set a precedence of good behavior that others can follow. In addition, when an athlete chooses to abide by the rules they have agreed to (the expectations within the code for which they have signed), they build stronger foundations within. Following an ethical code of conduct helps create a deeper sense of commitment and discipline opening doors of athletic opportunity that may not have existed without this choice.

Yet, as a former athlete, 32+ year veteran in education (with 17 of them coaching), and a parent of two athletes who have experienced sports from youth levels on up through college, I have come to realize how rare it is to find high school age athletes who abide by the promise they have given. Looked at simply as a part of the paperwork process they must go through in order to play high school sports, many, maybe most (along with parents), fail to even read them, let alone understand their overall importance and purpose.

Quote: ***We are who we are based on the choices we make, so make good ones, for it truly is your character that is at stake.***

Sports Parenting

With the conglomerate of choices for young athletes today, it is imperative that parents have a good understanding of their role in the process. Giving solid guidance that helps their aspiring athletic offspring navigate through the quagmire of issues in our current youth sports culture is one important aspect, with support and encouragement being two more essential pieces of the puzzle.

Taking it a step further, finding ways to help your youngster develop their own sense of responsibility for, and ownership over, their interests, as well as holding them accountable for the choices they make, help create a sports environment that extends beyond the athletic arena.

All of this while keeping the focus on intrinsic components (fun, work ethic, sportsmanship, discipline, enjoyment over a job well done, etc.) over extrinsic components (winning, trophies, awards, scholarship, fame, etc.) helps support a more positive youth sports experience.

And keep in mind that these experiences must be about *them* as becoming overinvolved, boisterous at games, or unsupportive of the coach can create an environment where positive life-lessons are lost.

Quote: ***Creating opportunity where options abound and proper lessons are taught has lifetime value so let's do it right the first time, you don't really get a second change.***

Specialization

There are always two sides to every coin, and sports specialization certainly demonstrates the trueness of that cliché. From my perspective, absolutes in either direction of the sports specialization scale are ill advised as neither accommodates the multidimensional aspects of the athlete and what they bring to the table (age, talent, etc.), the sport or sports for which their interests lie, and what it is they are hoping to achieve (objectives, goals, etc.). Not taking into consideration these three important aspects, along with simply dismissing any careful thought to well-rounded physical development, can leave an athlete at a distinct disadvantage.

Quote: ***To become the very best one can be at something, anything; there will certainly need to be some level of concerted and focused effort beyond what the average is doing. To not understand this fact is to not understand the idea of mastery. The question really boils down to when this should occur and to what extent.***

Winning at all Costs

It is not that winning in-and-of- itself is a bad thing, or that it should not be an objective, on the contrary, that is the reason for scores and statistics. It is a major component of competitive sports—one (winning) cannot exist without the other (competitive sports).

It is just that winning at the expense of everything else (health, safety, character, integrity, sportsmanship, etc.) is an ill-advised path that sacrifices the intrinsic components so many subscribe to as being part of the positive life-lessons taught through participation in competitive sports. Better viewed as an outcome of hard work, commitment, perseverance, sacrifice, proper priority setting, etc., winning becomes merely a result of the efforts one puts forth rather than the only reason for competing.

Quote: ***The real value in athletic endeavor is in the willingness to go through a process, and all that comes out of that process, that many fear, rather than the “win” that occurs as a byproduct of that process. Winning is simply an outcome of the efforts one puts forth toward achieving what it is that they want.***

Trophies for Everyone

A trend we have seen in recent years is this idea of giving trophies and awards to all who participate, no matter what their efforts or achievement. The underlying thinking behind such a change from yesteryear, where only the “best” got a trophy, centers on the notion of *not* hurting feelings by singling out the better players or teams for fear diminishing self-esteem.

I suppose, in theory (and on paper), this idea may hold some merit at younger ages. It is important to build a love of the game when kids are first starting down the competitive sports path. However, as is the case with many things, making this an absolute is not necessarily in the best interest of *all*—at least if life-lessons are to be part of the equation.

The whole meaning of a “life-lesson” is that it has a strong relationship to what life is actually like, only, at times, maybe a little more tempered. And in life, not everybody wins, sometimes, even when their efforts exceed others. If everyone is rewarded and becomes “outstanding,” then where is the incentive?

Don’t get me wrong, I am not talking about rewarding only the best with a trophy and everyone else gets nothing. Nor am I in support of pounding a “some are winners some are not” philosophy at younger stages of the game, actually at any stage of the game. On the contrary, this is all about balance, along with what is appropriate at what age. It should be gradual in nature, becoming more and more like real life as athletes enter and move through their teens.

Quote: ***Rewarding extra effort and achievement can inspire all, giving incentive to those not yet deserving; while rewarding mediocrity tends to instill the same, bringing with it a sense of entitlement.***

Steroids & PED’s in Sports

Aside from the risky, illicit, cheating, and winning at all costs behavior that these substances represent lies the false sense of achievement one gains through their use. Steroids & Illegal PED’s change ones chemical biology and in doing so they represent a way for athletes to become something they are not, something they were never intended to be.

Quote: ***An athlete who “wins” something, anything, through the use of the use of Steroids & Illegal PED’s really did not win anything at all for they are not them anymore.***

Playing time in competitive sports

Even though I might agree, at young ages, that giving playing time to developing athletes is important and needs to be appropriated to all, just because we pay a fee for our youngsters to be in a program or play on a team does not guarantee such. All that the fee should do is secure proper, developmental training and practice. Playing time in competitive sports, especially in the teen years (for the most part) should be earned, not automatic. As athletes start to develop, this *earning* of playing time becomes an incentive to work hard, contrary to the opposite where playing time is automatically distributed equally—something more supportive of entitlement type attitudes.

Quote: ***Playing time should be much more equally distributed to younger, beginning athletes in order to develop a love for the game, as athletes age and become more mature, a shift toward the earning of playing time would be best for furthering their development.***

Loss of perspective in Sports & Youth Sports

As the focus of sports participation has shifted, from one where sheer enjoyment, satisfaction, and inner reward (intrinsic components) were primary, to one where outcomes (scholarship, popularity, fame, fortune, etc.) have become the reason for participation (extrinsic), the result has been a real, true, and pervasive loss of perspective in sports.

This loss of perspective is no less apparent in the winning at all costs and entitlement type attitudes we see from too many (participant or spectator) at all levels of sports. Whether it be through the use of steroids and PED's, poor behavior from some at games, and/or the insolent, illegal, poor character driven choices we see plastered all over the media, it is obvious that a shift in some of our core values has taken place.

Quote: ***When sports participation becomes solely outcome and reward driven—best represented by the statement “what’s in it for me,” than the more important, foundational, life changing intrinsic components that were once held in high regard are devalued, thus, supporting and perpetuating the attitudes and issues we see exemplified in our current sports and youth sports culture today.***

No Cut Policies

The idea of not cutting anyone who tries out for a team might seem attractive to many as it does allow opportunity for all, however, the push to make it an absolute for all sports and in all instances is simply impractical, possibly unsafe, and could be detrimental to higher levels of athletic development. In a perfect world where facilities and equipment abound, coaches are plentiful, and time is not an issue, no-cut policies across the board might be viable; however, that “perfect world” simply does not exist in reality.

In addition, there does come a point where the life lesson that “not everyone makes the team” just like “not everyone gets the job” does come into play. It may seem harsh but, many times, when one door closes another opens, and the new open door may never have been seen without the closing of the first.

Quote: ***Even though it might not be something we teach at younger ages, there does come a time when “not making a team” because one is not good enough becomes a life-lesson for further growth, development, and even inspiration for some.***