

ARTICLE

Coaching Players Who Seem Like They Don't Want to Be There



LIBERTY MUTUAL

RESPONSIBLE SPORTS

BSC

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Liberty Mutual's Responsible Coaching Definition

A Responsible Coach is someone who:

Exhibits a high level of coaching competence

- Personal commitment to coaching excellence – on and off the field
- Commitment to constant development of personal coaching skills
- Collaborates and partners with other coaches for personal and game improvement

Achieves and maintains excellence on-the-field

- Maintains paramount concern for the health and safety of the athletes
- Focuses on mastery of skills over winning; effort over outcome
- Fosters success through positive feedback, valuing teamwork and consistently providing support to players

Demonstrates an on-going commitment to the well-being and development of athletes off-the-field

- Concerned for the development of the athlete as a whole person – emotional, physical and intellectual
- Understands and embraces their role as mentor and role model
- Respects the rights, dignity and worth of every athlete and treats everyone equally regardless of background or ability

Honors and respects the Game

- Upholds the spirit as well as the letter of the rules of the game
- Respects all opponents, officials and opposing players
- Instills a love of the game to players and parents alike

DEALING WITH RELUCTANT ATHLETES

Too often, youth sports coaches encounter players who seem like they just don't want to be there. We're referring not to players who are occasionally a little low on energy or attention span but to players who seem consistently disengaged from practices or games.

You are most likely to meet such players – let's call them "reluctant athletes" -- at younger ages, when parents may be searching for the right activities for their children, who in turn may be uncomfortable

with a new sport, team or organization. However, at middle-school age and beyond you still may find players who participate because they're "supposed to" and frequently just go through the motions without any apparent joy or competitive spirit.

While reluctant athletes are hardly an exciting prospect, Responsible Coaches embrace the challenge of doing the best they can by all of their players. Following are a few ideas on how to handle these situations.

Responsible Sports™ supports volunteer youth soccer coaches and parents who help our children succeed both on and off the field

Recognize “Reluctance”

Like any problem, you first must be able to recognize reluctance. It's not necessarily indicated by lack of skill (in fact, some very skilled players confess to hating their sport as Andre Agassi did in his recent autobiography).

Instead, consider players' level of effort and enthusiasm for practices and games. If those traits are in short supply, you can address the issue through private conversation with each individual player who seems reluctant.

A simple question, such as “Are you having fun?” can yield a surprising range of answers. A “no” to that question actually gives you a great chance to improve the situation. Asking “What would make this more fun for you?” starts to empower the reluctant athlete. Their sense of empowerment – and their recognition that the coach listens to and cares about the players – may be all that is necessary to stimulate those players.

Plus, their answers to “What would make this more fun?” can give you ideas for new drills, contests and communications techniques that engage the reluctant athletes and even heighten enthusiasm in the rest of your team. On many teams, players already are friends through school or other activities, so when stronger players see their friends take a turn for the better, the stronger players also get a lift.

Some people are “naturals.” They have an innate sense of how to communicate the game, of what is important, and of how to challenge children in a child friendly environment. Unfortunately, most people are not naturals.

When It's Not So Simple

When your attention and concern alone are not enough to help a reluctant athlete, you may have to dig deeper to learn the reasons. Among the most common:

- The player does not enjoy the sport and is out there only because mom or dad said so.

- Sensing a lack of skill compared with other players and despairing of the ability to fit in.

- Difficulty in other aspects of life, such as school, social relationships, or health, nutrition and sleep issues.

If your reluctant athletes are not forthcoming about what's bothering them, raising these possibilities in conversation may elicit the responses necessary to help you understand the problem. You might also ask the players' parents (again, privately) for any insights into their children's experience or mindset about the sport, team and, yes, even the coach.

Sample Solutions

Once you understand why a player is reluctant, it is on you, as a Responsible Coach, to help the player. For each of the root issues cited above, here are examples of what you can say and do, careful to stay honest and avoid making promises you can't keep.

“I Don't Enjoy the Sport”

“Let's find a way to help you enjoy it. If you can tell me any part of the sport that you enjoy – running, jumping, throwing, and thinking of strategy – I will do my best to put more of that into our team's practices.”

“I'm just not good at this game and never will be.”

“I value you as a person, not just as a player. I enjoy having you out here, and so do your teammates. You are capable of learning and improving, and I am willing to spend some extra time and attention with you to make sure that happens.”

“I'm having a hard time here because things are not right at home.”

“I'm sad to hear that. If you want to tell me more, I will listen. Meanwhile, when you are out here with us,

you're among friends and people who believe in you. If you can focus on maximum effort during practice and games, it may take your mind off of other things.”

The End-Game

Despite your best efforts, it may turn out that your sport or team is not the right environment for the player you are trying to help. If reluctant athletes tell you they want to leave your program, it may be right for you to advocate for that move with the players' parents. Ideally you would suggest another sport, team or activity – and help facilitate a player's move to another program that offers similar chances at development and learning life lessons.

Although the issues that can cause a player's reluctance are complex, the guideline for addressing these issues is simple: provide an environment that is fun and safe (physically and emotionally) and you likely will succeed at the most important level of Responsible Coaching

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