

Youth Sport : Saving the Children

by Richard E. Lapchick

I teach my first class in Ethical and Moral Principles in Sport in the new graduate program at the University of Central Florida on August 19, 2002. I never dreamt that the first subject that I would be raising was a girl's Little League softball game in Oviedo, Florida during which I witnessed numerous ethical boundaries crossed by a coach. But that is how bad it was.

For months, my wife Ann and I had spent 2 to 3 days a week watching Emily, our 12 year old daughter, grow, build confidence, develop a sense of teamwork, and have, most of all, fun by playing in this league. In the stands, Ann and I intermingled with almost of all of the parents and grandparents of the children playing there in a remarkable family atmosphere.

As the season progressed, I wondered what all the fuss was about regarding the criticism of youth sport in America. My daughter played for the Diamonds, which were coached by Jose Diaz and Lee Muldoon. Their regular season had concluded and they were starting in the playoffs in a four game series that could ultimately lead to the championship. The Diamonds' season was characterized by learning, fun, and growth but not necessarily a championship-caliber season.

Everybody came to the opening game thinking there would be more growth and more fun. While we knew the Diamonds could win, it was never a forgone conclusion. The game before ours ran almost an hour late because there were no time limits in the playoffs and, we presumed, no curfews. Our game started at 9:00 pm and everybody assumed that the normal 10:00 pm curfew would not be enforced.

The Diamonds fell behind 2-0 in an unusually tight pitchers battle in a league where 13-11 games were common. At 9:50pm the Diamonds' opponents came to bat. The first girl inexplicably swung at pitches that were nowhere near the plate and struck out on three swings. My first reaction was "it's so great that way all the girls get to play no matter what their skill level."

The next girl came and also swung at three pitches that were nowhere near the strike zone. Now we knew something was happening. During her turn at bat, she didn't swing at a ball and her coach screamed at her from the third base line. Everyone in the stands, for both teams, was shocked by his tirade as this girl began to cry.

As the third batter came up and swung wildly, we now realized that the coach was trying to end the inning early so that the Diamonds would come up before the re-imposed 10:00 pm curfew. He was taking a chance that the Diamonds would get up, not score, and his team would win.

Several of our parents started to shout at the coach because of this deliberate change of the field of play that he was imposing on his players in order to win at any cost. The coach took two steps toward one of the mothers on our team and shouted, "shut up" but he stopped short of approaching the fence that separated the fans from the field.

The parents on our team who, were great sports throughout the season and regularly cheered the opponents for good plays, were now incensed. The Diamonds came to bat, got two players on base but did not score and the umpire gave the victory to the opponents.

Tempers and emotions were high in the stands and among the players. The opposing girls looked as embarrassed and confused as the Diamonds. The girls lined up for the traditional high fives between the teams. This opposing coach, who by now had transgressed at least two key elements of any code of sportsmanship,

got in line and by the time he reached the fourth girl, he turned his back and walked off the field.

He went to file a protest complaining that our girls were hitting the hands of his team too hard and that one of our girls, perhaps the team's most popular and mild-mannered player, had slapped one of his team members in the face. All of the girls on the Diamonds said that their teammate would not do this and that none of them had seen it.

Yet this man, whose sportsmanship could have led to his suspension as a coach, was actually filing an official protest with the Little League board that the Diamond's should be suspended for poor sportsmanship.

It seemed as if all the good things that had taken place all year long had been smashed. The Diamonds' parents and coaches were angry, not that they had lost, but that this coach had taken the fun out of the game and had gone to any length to win.

An umpire, who was not involved in the game, explained that this was simply the coach playing within the rules in order to manipulate the outcome and to have his team win. When he said, "if I was the coach, I would have done the exact same thing," the parents were even more disheartened than before the discussion.

However, as the parents met with the Diamonds after the game, we realized they were going to move beyond this more quickly than the parents. They were such great teammates and they would live through this to realize that they were there to enjoy each other and their game.

But it was a lesson that none of us wanted to see. We saw how easy it was for the games of 12 and 13-year-old girls to get out of hand. It wasn't as dramatic the Danny Almonte Little League case but you could easily see how things like this can lead to an escalation of bad things for our children.

Thank god the Diamonds were the Diamonds and came back to play the next day. Determined, smiling, ready to have fun.

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