

Hershey Girls Softball Association "HGSA" Coaching Philosophy

The following articles provide an overview of the coaching philosophy we'd like to promote. We encourage you to read these articles and use them in developing your own style and coaching philosophy.

Article 1: You're a Role Model

It doesn't matter if you're coaching Instructional/Coach Pitch Softball or coaching at the college level, you're probably the most important role model that your players have during the season. Players are going to look to you not only for guidance and instruction, but they will be watching and listening to how you react to every situation. I'm a strong believer that a coach can be one of the most influential people in a young player's life. Many players and former players attribute a large portion of their success in life to the things they learned on the softball field and from a few great coaches. We're not talking about fielding ground balls or how to hit, we're talking about teamwork, perseverance, work ethic, having a positive attitude, to just name a few. Skills that not only helped them on the softball field but helped them in life.

Often coaches think only of the present year; how am I going to develop the players to have a successful season. We'll get into a definition of successful in a bit, but the point here is often coaches don't realize the influence they have on their players. Coaches can help instill a love for the game that can last a lifetime. Good coaches can keep players interested in continuing to participate from year to year.

As a coach you have to decide how you want to be seen by your players and their parents. What type of example do you want to provide? I hope everyone takes the responsibility of coaching youth softball very seriously. It takes a lot of hard work and effort to be a successful coach. The following paragraphs discuss some important issues that you should consider incorporating into your coaching philosophy.

Key Aspects of A Coaching Philosophy: Be Positive

Players need a patient, supportive coach that can teach and motivate in a positive way. Knowing how to be positive and having the ability to communicate with your players is more important to a successful season than knowing many aspects of the game.

Show Them You Care

Each player needs to know that you care for her as an individual and that you believe she is an important part of the team. Take time to talk to all players individually. Try to take interest in what is going on in their life outside of softball.

Have Fun

Fun is essential for kids of all ages. Develop practices that let them do the things they enjoy. It's also important for you to have fun. Create an environment that is structured and varied enough for you to enjoy what you're doing. If you're having fun, chances are your players will be having fun also.

Emphasize Improvement

Players want to improve and gain new skills. Make sure that you challenge all your players at an appropriate level to foster improvement. This may require that some players focus on different skills than other players during practice.

Organization and Discipline

Kids quickly pick up on a coach that is unorganized and doesn't communicate his or her expectations. If you don't establish certain rules and don't follow up with an appropriate punishment if the rules are broken, you will quickly lose control of your team. I always have a rule about talking when I'm talking during practice. I expect when I'm explaining something that the players will have their eyes on me and pay attention. If they interrupt or don't pay attention, I stop talking and we wait as a team for the individual to stop. If she does it again in the same practice she sits down and watches for awhile. I rarely have a player sitting on the sidelines after the first couple of practices.

Players Learn By Doing

I love the quote in Mike Krzyzewski's book 'Leading with the Heart'. "When teaching, always remember this simple phrase: 'You hear, you forget. You see, you remember. You do, you understand.'" Often coaches try to teach players a skill by talking about it. The younger the player the less effective it will be. Give a quick explanation while you show them the skill you want them to perform. Then have them do it.

Attitude and Effort

Coaches that believe winning is everything have only one direction to take the team...down. Everyone wants to win, but when main goal is winning a really good season can be lost. If on the other hand you emphasize attitude and effort, a successful season can be had without a league championship. Winning games really will take care of itself, if you prepare the team to play hard and always give their best effort.

Sportsmanship

The idea of sportsmanship seems to be lost on many youth players. The fact is, sportsmanship must be taught. If children watch professional sports then their idea of sportsmanship may be to trash talk, spike the ball in the opponents face, or to mimic some other visual statement that demonstrates their superiority. As a coach it's important that you teach the value of sportsmanship. I want my team to show joy when they make an exciting play, but not at the expense of the player on the opposing team. I want my players to always show the other team respect. Your leadership is the best way to get this across to your players. Interact with the players on the other team. Compliment them when they make a good play. Show your players that you appreciate the other team and the opportunity to play against them.

Dealing with Parents

Dealing with parents might be the most difficult part of being a coach. Research suggests that it's the single biggest reason that coaches quit. It's a common problem, but one that can be difficult to solve. In my experience as both a coach and a parent I have found some common mistakes that coaches make that can bring on the wrath of a parent along with some ways to deal with a parent that is causing you grief.

Communication - Parent Meeting

I believe that communication is the single biggest reason behind coach/parent problems. Many coaches don't take the time at the beginning of the season to hold a parent meeting and discuss with the parents how he/she is going to run the team. Hold a parent meeting right away. This will give you a chance to communicate your philosophy with your parents. The topics should include the importance of winning; how you are going to distribute playing time; how are you going to determine who plays where; what skills and values you are going to emphasize. Try to hit all the areas that are important. If for example you don't start a player if he is late or missed a practice, let the parents know that. It's important that they are aware of team rules and expectations.

Be Consistent

Stating your philosophy is one thing; implementing it consistently is another. Make sure you make rules for your team that you can follow up with. It is very frustrating for a parent to be told one thing and then see something else happen. I went through this myself last year with the team my son was on. We were told by the coach that all players would get a change to play many different positions and playing time would be distributed equally. The coach said that the emphasis would be on building skill not winning. Well, after 3 losses to start the season, the coach abandoned his philosophy and had the best players play more and play the most important positions. He would simply rotate those players around those positions. You can imagine the grumbling in the stands as parents began to realize that their child was going to play outfield all year and hit near the bottom of the order. There were complaints and it ended up being a frustrating season for many parents and the coach.

The lesson here is making sure you can live with the guidelines you set down. By sticking to what you told the parents at the beginning of the season, you will alleviate a number of parent problems.

Listen to Parent Concerns

I've seen many coaches with the "I'm the coach, don't question me" type of attitude. With some parents it can be difficult to not get irritated and show this type of attitude. Many parents won't say anything unless they are angry about something. When they finally do, they often are worked up and at that point can be difficult to deal with. I've found that when dealing with difficult parents, it's important that you listen to their concerns and take a real interest in what they are saying. Don't feel like you have to defend yourself right away. Sometimes listening to the concern and telling the parent that you will think about the situation and get back to them is enough to diffuse the situation. Just by doing that you validate the concern and show that you're open to suggestions. Parents want to feel like their input is taken seriously and that they have a say in what's happening with their child. You then can take the time to analyze the comments and see if there's any validity to the concerns. When you call the parent or talk to them at the next practice they will most likely be much calmer. It will also give you a chance to calm down. Parent complaints at the end of a game can be infuriating. Remember that you are a role model to the kids. If you can't handle the situation without getting upset, then it's best to tell the parent that you have to go and you will call them later.

If the parent is complaining and you don't like the attitude they have towards you, take them away from the crowd and the kids and let them know that you don't like the way they are talking to you. Let them know that you want to work out any concerns that they may have, but it's everyone's best interests to do so in a calm manner.

Article 2: Coaching with Constructive Criticism

Kids can be very critical of themselves when they make mistakes. In addition to that if they are also criticized by a parent or coach, it can lead to a player losing confidence in her ability and playing tentative for fear of making another mistake. As a coach or parent you can help build the confidence of players by handling mistakes in a positive manner. John Wooden, the great UCLA coach, understood the importance of positive reinforcement. It didn't mean he wasn't critical of his players, but he would provide feedback in a way that was beneficial. Constructive criticism is the process of providing both positive and negative comments in a friendly helpful manner, instead of a negative manner.

Fear of Failure

Watch any game from youth through the professional level and you'll see plays not being made because the player was more afraid of failure than anything else. In my opinion, fear of failure, is a more important factor in a player not being able to perform during a critical situation, than any other factor. Sure it's true that a player may be over matched in a given situation, but even then, the fear of failure will often take the small opportunity for success and reduce it even further. Young players are motivated by achievements and most do not respond well to criticism. They want to get better and they will try hard when they feel

good about what they are doing. If a player is practicing ground balls and her coaching is yelling, "Stay in front of the ball", "Keep your glove down", "Use both hands", and the player is struggling, she may want to give up. Her confidence is being reduced by each instruction being yelled in her direction. As you read this over, you might think, "So, how else is she going to learn if I don't tell her what she's doing wrong?" This is a very natural way of providing feedback for most people. We compliment the good plays and criticize the bad plays. We label the criticism as "constructive criticism" which makes us feel like it's not a negative thing. How do the kids feel about this constructive criticism? It, like many things, depends on the individual, but if they are not feeling good about their play or their ability, then this criticism isn't going to help improve their performance. If it's not going to help them, then we can't label it constructive criticism, in a game where we want our players to have very short memories. We want them to forget about a bad play and focus on the next play and the rest of the game. Does criticism of a bad play, no matter what the intention, help the player do that? In my experience, the answer is no. It will not help lift them up and get them prepared for the next opportunity, it just gives them reinforcement that they did something wrong. So that leaves a bit of a problem: How do we provide feedback to our players during a game that will help prevent the same mistake from happening again, while allowing them to move on and focus on the rest of the game? The method I use came from a coaching effectiveness training seminar that I have been to a couple of times. It was presented by Dr. Frank Smoll, a Professor of Psychology, at the University of Washington. He covered a number of topics during the session and one of the strategies I have found very effective in dealing with mistakes. This strategy is not unique to this coaching seminar, as I have seen it written about in a number of different publications. Here is my interpretation of that strategy:

1. Not every mistake requires that you give instruction. If a player knows what she did wrong and knows how to correct it, there's no need for you to tell her. Simply encourage the player with a positive statement.
2. If you feel the player needs some instruction or reminder to keep from making the mistake again, "sandwich" the instruction inside of supportive statements.

Here is an example:

A player picks her glove up on a ground ball and it gets by her, letting a run score. She comes to the dugout after the inning. She's upset and knows she cost her team a run.

Coach: "Sally, you did an excellent job of getting in front of that ground ball, your footwork was perfect." (positive supportive statement about what she did right)

Coach: "Remember to keep your glove on the ground and then move it up if needed."
(instruction)

Coach: "In practice we worked on that and you were fielding really well. Now on the next ground ball that is hit to you, field it just the way you have been in practice and make a strong throw."
(supportive statements that reflect on a positive experience along with the potential positive outcome of the next ground ball.)

By using this approach, I have found that the player will see that I'm confident in her ability to make the play and won't dwell as long on the mistake. I have found that timing is also important. Some kids need a couple of minutes to deal with the mistake before I talk with them, others will look for that support right away. It takes practice to make this type of feedback a habit, especially during a game, when you have so much going on. I hope you find it to be a helpful strategy in dealing with player mistakes.

Article 3: The Importance of Winning

A major theme in youth softball, is the need for players of all ages to have fun while they're playing and learning the game. By advocating the need for fun, I have unknowingly put myself in a position where many people assume that I don't think winning is important. Just to set the record straight, I love to compete and I love to win. All things being equal, it's much more fun to play for a team that wins the championship than it is to play for a team that just wins a few games. Like most people who have played the game for a number of years, I have been on both sides and most of the time the winning side is more enjoyable. Now you'll notice that I qualified both of the statements above to give myself a way out. As a coach and parent we have to look at how we emphasize winning with our team and be honest about whose ego is being inflated by having a championship team. In general terms, I believe that the joy of winning and being part of a special team can be ruined by parents and coaches who only have the goal of winning. On the other side, players can feel like they have had a great season without winning their league if they believe they not only improved but had a fun season.

Definition of "Fun"

Part of the confusion, I believe, stems from the definition of "fun". I think many people equate fun on the softball field to a coach that has little control and provides a supervised recess instead of a softball practice. For parents and players alike, that type of atmosphere is frustrating and while it may provide moments of joy, most players hate playing in a non-structured environment. My definition of "fun" out on the field is "having structured and organized practices where players are challenged and are allowed to enjoy playing and learning the game". I'd like to highlight the second part of that statement because I have seen many coaches that are very organized; run well structured practices; teach great fundamentals; provide positive feedback; but do it in a way that doesn't promote fun. Drills are great, but they can be boring. You may be proud of your 12 station batting practice that runs as smooth as silk, but if the kids aren't enjoying it, then chances are they aren't trying hard to master the skills either. While the practice may be organized, it may not be challenging the players to improve. This is often where coaches will become frustrated and begin to rely on yelling and punishment to get players motivated to play harder. In my experience, if players aren't willing to play hard during practice, then they either don't like softball and are playing because they were signed up by a parent or more likely, they're bored. I never have a goal for my team of winning the league or winning a certain number of games. If the kids bring it up, I just let them know that my expectation is simply that they always give their best effort. Now I believe in positive coaching, but I believe you also have to be honest with your players about the effort they are giving. If the goal is effort, then you have to let players know when they are not meeting those expectations. Don't embarrass or belittle the player in front of her family and teammates, but let her know that she needs to always give her best effort. Winning and losing is a result that can't be guaranteed, but good preparation and effort are things that everyone can achieve.

The Goal of Winning

So what's wrong with setting goals and talking about winning? Often those goals are unrealistic or wishful thinking. In an 8 team league, if every coach told his team that the goal is to win the league, it would lead to 7 teams that fail. In addition, if winning is the only goal, the pressure to perform can be very intense for young athletes. We see college and pro level athletes that have failed to perform up to their ability when under extreme pressure situations. These are athletes that you would expect could handle the stress and many times they can't. Take this down to the youth level and you can see that adding pressure to a young athlete to perform will decrease, not increase, the chances of success.

It's Okay to Fail

What gives your players and team the best chance of success? I want a team that gives great effort and isn't afraid to fail either individually or as a team. While this is easier said than done, if I can get them close to that, then I have a team that will play loose and play with confidence because they aren't afraid of what will happen if they don't perform or they don't win. Fear of failure is a major reason why many players fail in critical situations. I try to get my players to understand that the best athletes in the world fail

on a regular basis and one aspect that makes them special is their ability to learn from the failure and try to improve. There are many quotes that you can give as examples from professional athletes to emphasize this point. Here's one from a major league baseball player, Greg Maddux. "Failure is the best teacher in the world; you get to learn from what happens to you, both good and bad, in a real live game situation." And another quote from a Collegiate All-American, USA Women's Softball Team player, Cat Osterman. "It's always about wanting to one-up myself from the day before. There's never an absolute 100% perfect performance, but going out and striving for that perfect performance is what keeps me going."

Summary

Is winning important? Yes, it's important. Kids know the score. They get disappointed when they lose and they're happy when they win. They often see greater pride and acceptance from parents and coaches when the team wins and they perform well. That desire can place a great amount of pressure on the player. As a coach and parent it's important that you put winning and losing in the proper perspective. Make sure goals are achievable and tied to effort not results. If you focus on creating a positive and productive practice environment, your players will flourish and the wins will come on their own.