

Sandlot or Structure? A Question of Balance

Let's begin with a short story that will help us on a journey toward exploring a unique approach to coaching children's sport. This is a tale about a group of children who took the traditional game of baseball and modified it to suit their needs. Simply, those needs were to play, to learn and to have fun. The young players involved in this game encourage us to think about and examine the role adults play in children's sport activities and they help pose this question - Is there a better way for adults to be involved in children's sport? This story challenges both the reader and some of the conventional views our culture presently holds toward children's sport.

While on a cycling trip along the Oregon coast, my friends and I came upon a rickety old barn that had been converted into an antique shop. Feeling a little weary from a long day's cycle, we took a break and began exploring the endless collection of treasures scattered throughout the barn. Soon I heard children shouting and laughing near a grassy area adjacent to the barn and I wandered outside to find out what all the commotion was about. I sat on the steps and watched the shop owner's children play a game of baseball. Soon I realized that this was not baseball as we know it, but a modified child's version where everyone took turns pitching, hitting and chasing after the ball. Without innings, batting orders and umpires, everyone had the chance to play. They hadn't yet acquired the level of skill needed to catch or hit the ball consistently but it didn't seem to matter much to them. They had fun chasing and rolling around on the ground after the ball. I closed my eyes for a minute and listened as the air was filled with sounds of laughter, excited shouts and children having fun. It occurred to me that they were 'playing' the game of baseball the same way they might play on the playground or at the beach.

I was enjoying watching their game when one little person ran up to me and asked if I'd like to play too. I agreed to join in and before long my friends were also invited to play. We were somewhat tentative at first, as we had a keen awareness that this was their game and we were guests in their play world. It didn't take long for us to fit in and

the magic the children had created continued with us playing. One little boy (we'll call him Chris) with bangs hanging over his eyes was putting a great effort into hitting the ball but he kept missing. Chris was determined, and after each miss he'd bring the bat back, ready to try again. It hadn't occurred to him to feel bad about missing the ball so he just kept swinging.

Chris asked me if I could give him a few tips to help him hit the ball. I responded by asking if I could give him a little demonstration and true to his character, his response was an enthusiastic 'yes.' He was ready to learn! After a brief demonstration, we continued playing and when Chris came to bat I would offer a few simple tips like "keep your eye on the ball", and "swing straight through". He started getting closer to hitting the ball and everyone began to encourage his efforts. There was an air of excitement building, as each time he swung the bat the feeling grew stronger that he was going to 'tie into one'. After a brief time and a few pitches later, Chris felt the smack of the ball hitting his bat for the first time in his life! His face lit up with a wide grin and everyone cheered! Chris paid little attention to the congratulations he received and with a determined, confident look he cocked his bat back ready to hit again.

After a while Chris was connecting with about one out of every three pitches thrown his way. This was a pretty fair average for a youngster who had never hit before. The game went on, the grin remained pasted to Chris' face and the laughter and excitement of people playing together filled the air. This magical event brought me back to my childhood when we would invent our own games and play until exhaustion, darkness, or my Mom calling me to come home, would break the spell.

That night I sat outside our tent, reflecting on the game we had played and I thought about the nature of organized children's sport in North America. Several questions came to mind. How could a young boy who had never hit a baseball before learn this complex skill in twenty minutes? Why do adults consistently design children's sporting activities with a high level of structure, rigid rules and an emphasis on winning contests? Could adults change how they interact with children and with each other in sport, so that more play, creativity, fun and learning takes place?

My friends and I began to talk about how a young child's sport experience could be enhanced by making it more playful, skill-based, inclusive and less structured, particularly at the early stages of development.

We agreed that young people have fun, and learn to develop skills in playful, natural ways when they have some freedom and choice in creating their own games. We had the privilege to be part of a game that was created by uncluttered, free minds. These children had invented their own 'sandlot' version of baseball and it turned out to be an excellent environment for them to enjoy learning to 'play' with a bat and ball. Perhaps Chris learned to hit quickly and easily because we didn't try to change their game too much. We honoured the game they had created and we maintained our role as visitors in their play world.

This (true) story hasn't been written to suggest that structure, competition and teaching skills shouldn't be part of a child's sport experience. It has been told to illustrate that first and foremost, adults need to be aware of a child's needs and interests when coaching sport. Making sport fun, playful, social, challenging and an opportunity to develop athletic skills and character will help coaches in their efforts to ensure that the needs of children are met. Coaches and leaders will be successful in doing this if they develop and maintain the attitude that they are guests in the child's sport experience (particularly at young ages, 5 to 10).

Coaches need to search for and find the balance between the playful sandlot environment described above and the more serious side of sport where teaching fundamental skills and attempting to win are important elements necessary to enjoy competitive sport. Collaborative Community Coaching (C3)[™] is an approach to teaching children that helps coaches provide a good balance. This method demonstrates how seemingly opposite concepts such as cooperation and competition can co-exist and support each other. The C3 model has been created because much of children's sport is too serious and competitive at young ages which has resulted in less play (fun), poor skill development and too many young people dropping out of sport. We invite your comments.