

Coach, Are You Nurturing?

Verbal abuse, lack of concern harm relationships with players

By Michael Giuliano

If you were walking on a dusty road in small town America in the 1800s, it would not be uncommon for you to notice a small gathering of people around a brightly covered wagon. As you drew closer, you would hear a man, dressed in a borrowed Indian buckskin, proclaiming that his magical wonder elixir could cure anything that ailed you. One sip of his elixir and you would enjoy a state of health never thought possible before.

As I consider the ways in which we talk about the value of sports participation, it occurs to me that we tend to suggest that sports are the wonder elixir of our age. We proclaim that membership on a sports team teaches you the value of teamwork, how to work hard to accomplish your goals and a host of other indispensable life lessons. We cry out for more funding of community youth sports programs to help solve the problems of gangs and teen moral decline. Indeed, at times it seems that we suggest that mere involvement in athletics, mere “drinking up” of the sports team experience, magically transforms young athletes into physically, mentally, socially and emotionally healthy and productive citizens.

What we do not communicate as often is that athletic involvement can actually have damaging effects. Even worse than the empty claims of the medicine man, this elixir can actually harm us. Involvement on a sports team is more like involvement in a family unit. Family life can transform us, but throw in a careless, or even abusive parent, and family life can actually hurt us more than help us.

Metaphorically then, coaches are more like parents and less like medicine men. They do have a powerful elixir (sports), but depending upon how they administer that medicine, it can build up or tear down.

I have found that some of the wisest advice I have been given as a parent has equal merit for me as a coach. Here are four things to remember:

DON'T SAY ANYTHING THAT YOU WOULD NOT SAY IF YOU WAITED FOR ONE MINUTE TO SAY IT.

Words wound us in family life, and they can wound us in team life as well. What parent has not regretted speaking out of anger instead of waiting for a more calm, rational moment to explain their concerns? What child cannot remember the pain of being the recipient of something said in a moment of rage, sometimes years earlier?

Sadly, coaching is one of the few professions where verbal abuse is still considered acceptable. Recently, a player from another college confided to me that it was very common for players to be brought to tears in practice by her coaches' verbal attacks.

“But he knows the game and he knows how to win, so I guess it is worth it,” she concluded. A few days later, a father of a teammate of hers echoed those same sentiments: “I know he’s brutal. But he’ll teach my daughter how to be a winner.”

I am afraid that what he is teaching those young ladies is that verbal assaults on the dignity and esteem of others is acceptable as long as the external goal (i.e., winning games) is accomplished. I don't think that is a lesson we would want our children or players to live their lives

by.

Our goal must be to nurture the discipline of developing a time gap between the thinking of something to say and actual saying it. If we did, much of the wounds we inflict through words would never occur.

Try this experiment: Have someone videotape your sideline behavior (with sound) for a few matches. Is there anything that you would not have said, or at least not have said in the same way, if you would have waited for a minute?

LOOK FOR “MOMENTS OF TRUTH.”

Good parents are constantly on the hunt for situations that offer an opportunity to demonstrate to their children the values that they hope the children will embrace. As coaches, we should be on the same quest. We claim that the value of athletics is that it teaches us how to live, but how often do we seize the potent teaching moments that sports offer?

A phrase I use to describe this to my students and players is “moments of truth.” Moments of truth are those opportunities that give us a chance to publicly proclaim what we privately value. For example, *Soccer Journal* published **some time ago the story** of a high school player from Illinois who persuaded match officials that his game-tying goal should be disallowed because he knew that it was scored after time had expired. Through his actions, he demonstrated to his teammates (and through the Journal article to a national **audience**) that the value of telling the truth outweighs the value of a mark in the win column.

One way to monitor this is to keep a communication inventory. At the end of practice or a match, recall how many times, if any, you pointed out how the events of that day taught a more important lesson. If weeks go by and you still cannot recall such a conversation, chances are you need to look and listen more carefully for such opportunities.

INVEST MORE IN PEOPLE THAN YOU DO IN TASKS.

We all have heard stories of parents who placed career above their families, and in the end, lost their families. This can easily occur to coaches, even when their players are their career. The machinery of coaching can easily overshadow the relationships of coaching.

I have vivid and somewhat painful reminders of this in my own experience. Publicly, the 1994 season was the most successful of my coaching career. My squad ended the season in the final four of the NAIA National Tournament, and I was awarded conference and regional Coach of the Year honors. But back at the college, a different story was emerging. For the first time in my career, the postseason player evaluation of the coaches revealed that I had a number of strained relationships with certain players. The reason soon became clear; I had become so caught up in the task of reaching the national tournament that I had communicated a lack of interest in and concern for the individual players involved in that task.

How often do we talk with individual players about their interests and other activities, as opposed to their shooting technique? When was the last time a player confided in you concerning a struggle he or she was having that did not include a soccer ball? Considering the **likelihood** that, outside of their parents, we are among the most involved adults in their lives, would not a healthy relationship suggest this should be happening?

KEEP TALENT OUT OF THE RELATIONSHIP EQUATION.

Another family story line: The parent who obviously delights in the child who is the super athlete or the accomplished musician while ignoring the quiet and somewhat ordinary sibling. I am convinced that as coaches we often commit the same mistake with our front line versus

supporting players. As a college player, I vividly remember the transformation of my relationship with my coach as I went from the second team to the first team.

Suddenly, Coach was talking to me more, he called me by my first name more often, he even looked me in the eye more often.

Let's be honest, those players who see the most playing time occupy more of our thinking time. By necessity, we spend more thought on how the major contributors on our team will contribute to the next win. But just as we do not want to communicate to our own children that their worth is determined by their talents, neither do we want to communicate that our players' worth is determined by their athletic talent. There may be no more valuable lesson they can learn from us than how to look beyond the external packaging of an individual to see the potential and good in all people.

Do you treat your first team players differently than you do your second team players? If you are not sure, ask them. An evaluation given in anonymity may reveal some arresting, and perhaps uncomfortable, perceptions.

Imagine the shock of an unsuspecting buyer of the medicine man's elixir when the buyer discovered that not only did he not feel any better, but he actually felt worse. Our players will be changed by their involvement on a team and by their relationship with us. With coaching as with parenting, we can build them to be stronger, more responsible persons or we can tear down the good qualities they already possess. Sports are not a guaranteed elixir, but in the hands of a careful and caring "parent," they are a powerful character-building tool.

Editor's note: Michael Giuliano is professor of communication studies and women's soccer coach at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, Calif. He received a Ph.D. in communication studies from Northwestern University. He has guided Westmont to the national title three of the last four years and has won NSCAA/adidas National Coach of the Year honors each of those years, joining an elite group of coaches with three National COY honors and doing it faster than any other.