

# Coaching has a major impact on youth

By Jim Cornelius  
News Editor

Youth sports can be one of the most significant life-shaping experiences a child has. The impact of that experience can last a lifetime — for good or for bad. Good experiences can imbue a talent for teamwork, self-confidence and the sheer grit to persevere through adversity. Bad experiences can leave lasting scars.

A lot rides on youth sports coaches. And it's a tough job. They have to balance the various needs of their athletes — from the stars to the role-players — with the sometimes-unreasonable expectations of parents, and they must adapt to social mores that are different from those they operated under when they themselves were athletes.

Problems with coaches, parent-coach conflicts, and high-profile firings and resignations are a fixture of the news in towns across the nation. In Sisters, lacrosse coach Andrew Gorayeb resigned last June after a group of parents complained that he harassed and intimidated players, and used inappropriate language. Former high school girls soccer coach Nik Goertzen is involved in legal action against the Sisters School District and parents who complained about his conduct and competence as coach. A beloved Springfield basketball coach lost his job — then got it back — after parental complaints about “abusive coaching.”

In each case, some parents and athletes felt strongly that

the coach's style was negative and damaging, while others found the coaches inspirational and a positive influence in student athletes' lives.

Most people would agree that a tough coach is a good coach, holding athletes accountable and setting high expectations. And virtually everyone agrees that there is no place for a bully as a coach.

But where do you draw the line? What defines a tough coach vs. a bully?

“A tough coach holds you accountable; he doesn't degrade you,” says Tim Roth, athletic director at Sisters High School. “That tough coach may ‘light you up,’ but never in a method designed to humiliate or degrade student athletes.”

Sounds simple enough, but it's not easy to deal with 20 different temperaments and backgrounds on a squad, and the right way to motivate one athlete may not work at all for another. And what one parent understands as holding their child accountable may be perceived by another as picking on their kid.

“We recognize that how and when they provide this type of feedback is truly an art form that is nuanced and situation-specific,” Roth noted.

John O'Sullivan operates a program called Changing the Game Project out of Bend. The mission of the program is “to ensure that we return youth sports to our children, and put the ‘play’ back in ‘play ball.’”

O'Sullivan is a strong advocate for mandated coaching training at all

levels.

“Poorly trained coaches can be bullies, they can demean kids, and their actions can leave emotional and physical scars that last a lifetime,” he says. “We often allow coaches to treat athletes way worse than we'd allow a teacher to treat a student.”

Roth notes that that is not the case anymore at Sisters High School.

“Years ago, you'd hear things on the playing field that you'd never hear in a classroom,” he told *The Nugget*. “Now, if you wouldn't say it in the classroom, you don't say it on the field.”

Roth says that “our general athletic department mission is to compete with honor and dignity, to serve community, and pursue excellence. This means our coaches are teachers, held to the same standards as teachers, who work to develop lifelong values of teamwork, leadership, dedication, sportsmanship, goal-setting, maintaining composure, poise, developing a strong work ethic, balancing busy schedules, and living a healthy lifestyle — and they do this in a very public classroom.”

O'Sullivan notes that a coach is not a bully if he simply pushes your kid harder than you do. Bullying involves a deliberate abuse of power to humiliate and make fun of a child. He believes that the term “bully” can

be over-applied to the point where it loses meaning — and obscures what's really going on and what needs to be corrected.

He notes on his website: “Coaches don't get to decide which words stick, and which ones do not, so we must be intentional about everything we say and do.”

“A lot of coaches coach with sarcasm,” he told *The Nugget*. “They're being rude.”

Sometimes a coach can be mean. And often, it's not intentional.

“It's hard working with kids,” he says. “It's public; it's emotional. You could be nine times great and one time not — and that's what sticks. That's what makes coaching a hard job.”

One critical coaching technique is the art of the sincere apology.

“If you cross the line and you realize it, be proactive and say, ‘I crossed the line and I apologize.’ Don't apologize because your AD (athletic director) made you do it; don't apologize because a parent demanded you do it.”

O'Sullivan notes that “the number-one thing athletes want from their coach is to be treated with respect.”

Roth says that Outlaws coaches are expected to “coach for character.” The program is built around principles articulated by the Positive Coaching Alliance ([www.positivecoach.org](http://www.positivecoach.org)).

“We ... have systems in place to provide ongoing education to coaches, parents, and players and we look at these every single day,” Roth says.

One of those systems is regularly scheduled “Coach's Coffees.”

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“Coach's Coffees are held once a month before school,” Roth says. “We use this time to discuss expectations, coaching philosophy, athletic department systems, coach's education, and methods for handling situations in coaching. We also meet before each season and at the end of the sports year as an entire department to discuss the vision and mission of the department.”

Parents play an equally important role and can have a significant positive or negative impact on their child's experience, depending upon how they behave and how they interact with coaches and players. *The Nugget* will explore that part of the equation next week.



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