

Conceiving a new view of youth activities

By Brian Meehan of "The Oregonian"

What is the most daunting challenge in sports?

Coaching an NBA team in this age of enormous contracts and bigger egos might get a few votes. Chasing Lance Armstrong through the Alps certainly is intimidating.

But my ballot goes to the challenge taken on by Jim Thompson, founder and executive director of the Positive Coaching Alliance at Stanford University.

Thompson has conceived a mountain of a task: he wants to change the culture of youth sports.

Perhaps when he finishes he will turn to solving the

federal budget deficit or teaching Shaquille O'Neal to convert free throws.

"Youth sports is really about teaching life lessons, but too often adults behave like they would at professional events," Thompson said. "It's this win-at-all-costs mentality that is the enemy."

Thompson was a mid-dling athlete growing up in North Dakota. His love of sports re-emerged when he began coaching his son, Gabriel, 20 years ago in Northern California. He read books on coaching but couldn't find one that broke down the intangible aspects, such as mo-

tivation. So he began work on what would become his first book, "Positive Coaching."

"There were too many parents and coaches overly focused on winning," he said. "They had good intentions but were doing exactly the wrong thing."

Thompson thinks coaches who motivate by fear stifle their players' performance, chase away kids and lose opportunities to use sports as a teaching tool.

"How do you teach character in a classroom?" said Thompson, 56, who once taught leadership seminars at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. "It becomes too abstract. But youth sports is a totally underutilized classroom for teaching kids about life."

Thompson developed a new coaching model. He calls it the "double-goal coach," a mentor who wants to win but is more focused on developing character in kids.

"What is the best thing a coach can do?" Thompson asks. "A coach can make it OK for a kid to make a mistake."

In 1998, Thompson sounded the alliance at Stanford and began giving seminars to high schools and youth sports groups. The alliance now has more than 400 partnerships nationwide and presents workshops to coaches, athletes and parents. Nike thinks enough of the alliance to provide \$240,000 in grants so Thompson can take his message to urban neighborhoods in Los Angeles, New York and Chicago.

The nonprofit alliance has drawn support from coaches such as Phil Jackson, the alliance's national spokesman; Dean Smith, the former North Carolina men's basketball coach; and Herman Edwards, coach of the New York Jets. Detroit Pistons coach Larry Brown also is on the advisory board. Thompson said Brown offered to help after his

young son had a bad experience with a baseball coach.

A key to Thompson's double-goal coaching model is positive reinforcement. Thompson encourages coaches to follow the "magic formula," which is five positive comments for every negative one.

"John Robinson, the former USC (football) coach, once said something that stuck with me," Thompson said. "Robinson said, 'I never criticize a player until I am totally convinced that they believe that I believe in them.'"

Before you conclude Thompson's approach is the product of too much new-age thinking, consider the evidence that shows his strategies lead to victory.

He cites studies by sports psychologist Joan Duda. In one study, Duda tracked 62 athletes at the 2000 Olympic Games in Australia. She found that athletes who were coached to master their skills and compete to the best of their ability won more medals than athletes whose coaches focused solely on winning gold.

It makes sense: Athletes perform best when relaxed and confident, not when looking over their shoulder at a slightly apoplectic coach.

Thompson thinks a coach can free his or her athletes by erasing fear of failure. In its place, confidence and joy take root. The kid continues to play and bump into the life lessons sports offer.

That's Thompson's view of a new youth sports culture, and a grand one it is.

As we approach fair time let's all try to keep in perspective what we are trying to accomplish with the 4-H program and projects. "Winning" should not be the goal. Doing the very best we can should be the goal. If 4-H members have worked hard on their projects all year, doing well in their classes will come.

Have a great fair and good luck to all.



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