

Coaching as Ministry

By Matt Schwartz

“Parishes should have programs that recognize youth’s special talents and role in the life of the Church. In parishes, young people need to have a wide variety of opportunities to use their gifts and to express their faith through meaningful roles. They will develop a spirit of commitment within a community only through actual involvement in the many ways the Church exercises and carries out its mission” (*Renewing the Vision*, 1997). While *Renewing the Vision* is directed towards youth’s involvement in church programs and functions, one can see the striking parallels that exist between what the church hopes for in terms of youth involvement and what athletics actually provides.

When you hear people say that they grew up playing sports, there is great truth in that statement. Sports provide a self-image and worth that facilitate the discovery of self in the process. Because so much time and energy is spent practicing and participating in athletics, one’s sphere of influence in terms of peers and adults is centered on their particular sport.

Whether sports are something that disinterests you or excites you, we have to deal with the fact that kids will play sports whether we like it or not. Given a choice between sports and parish functions, we all know that youth will choose sports. But is it possible to not force youth to decide between the two? It is no secret that some parents chose schools for their children based on that school’s athletic success. If that is the case, do we not see the captive audience ripe for evangelization of the Catholic faith? It is good to remind ourselves that sports are not the enemy but an ally in terms of the total religious and personal growth of youth.

It would take me a long time to recall all of my high school teachers. However, I can give you the name and description of almost every coach I ever had. For many youth, the high school experience is not defined by academic studies. Instead, there are ingrained memories often centered on athletic success and failure- whether it is participating in the big game, attending a significant sporting event, or countless other connections between sports and the life of a high school student-athlete.

Coaches are those adults that spend the most time with kids outside of home and school. Let us not devalue that role in the life of our children. Let us uphold and praise that role even if we dislike the coach’s techniques. We have all had coaches, (whether they were our own or our children’s) that were very good at their craft. We have all seen coaches that were less than perfect. We should be thankful for the time and energy they spent with us and our kids. Coaches would not leave their own families and children to spend three or more hours and a Saturday with other kids if they did not love the sport and care for other kids.

However, there is always that group of parents that thinks they know better than the coach. Stories of the broken relationships between parents and coaches are too numerous to mention. We need to respect our coaches for what they are trying to do with the talent available to them. Coaches have to tread that balance between the parental pressures (some parents actually believe their child deserves more playing time!) and what is good for the team. Not all coaches' sole focus is about winning. I am a believer that coaches are meant to coach and parents are meant to parent. While it is quick to blame a coach for the demise of a child's future professional success in a particular sport, it could be that the coach is the first to realize that the child simply maximized his athletic potential years ago i.e. the kid is just not good enough to make the team.

Coaches are needed in today's world. The role of a coach is to make players know and feel they are part of a common goal. That common goal is different for each team. A good coach knows youth and knows their sport. Pulling athletic talent out of a teen who lacks motivation is one of the hardest jobs of being a coach.

Coaches are teachers. Their classroom is the locker room and the playing field and the long bus rides. Their curriculum is the play book and drills that work. They do not grade with tests, but rather with effort and determination that their athletes put forth, win or lose.

Coaching is a ministry. Our church needs these coaches who find their strength in faith and character. A coach takes what he or she knows about a particular sport and works tirelessly to bring out the best from the athletes. A coach who brings their faith perspective to their ministry of coaching is one that may not have the most wins, but undoubtedly will be forming quality young men and women into adults.

Although athletics is often seen as the impediment to Church involvement for the youth of our culture, I say that the Church needs to adapt some principles of coaching found in athletics for it to remain relevant to youth. What athletics provides in terms of ownership of ability, investment of talent, positive communal activity and personal accountability is something that is often lacking in the ministry to, with, by and for the youth in the Church.