



About a year ago I received a phone call from Patrick, a former high school player I had coached. He had graduated college and was going to medical school.

“Coach,” he said, “I just wanted to let you know that I am studying for my medical school exams, and it is really hard. But every time I want to put down my books, or if I am in the gym working out, I think of you coaching our team. I picture you telling us “Is that the best you can do? Can’t you do one more? Can’t you do it a bit better?’ and I keep going.”

“Really?” I said. “You still remember that?”

“I think of it every day,” he said. “Your words and your coaching really have made a huge impact on me, and many of my teammates. So, I just wanted to say thanks.”

I didn’t know what to think. I was proud, but more so, I was scared. I was scared because for every kid like Patrick – a player whom I had a great relationship with – I could think of a few players I didn’t serve well. I wasn’t always positive, and I certainly was far more concerned with results than I was for how I made players feel. I reached a lot of kids, but I know others quit because of me and the environment I created. I know some grew to hate a sport they used to love because, as Joe Ehrmann puts it in his amazing book *Inside Out Coaching*, I was transactional in my coaching, and not transformational.

No one ever taught me differently. They certainly didn’t talk about the relationship part of coaching in traditional coaching education. I am not blaming anyone here. I just didn’t know better.

Every week we discuss ways to be better coaches and parents for our kids. We speak about creating a positive, supportive and enjoyable environment. We speak about putting the needs, values and priorities of the athletes first and foremost. We talk about making youth sports an environment of respect and trust, not fear and intimidation. And we speak about focusing on the development of the person and the athlete, and not just the outcome of the game or season.

Yet for many years, I was not that coach. That eats at me every day.

One phone call changed everything for me. Because of that call, the coach I am today is a far cry from the one I was when I started coaching over two decades ago. It taught me that our influence as a coach is never neutral. It taught me the tremendous impact of our words and actions on kids. Most importantly, it taught me to be intentional about every single thing I did as a coach.

Today I want to share with you 5 things I wish I did differently.

We don’t get a do over, but we all can “do better.” I share these because I know there are others out there like I was, and I want them to know it’s OK not to be perfect, as long as you are honest with yourself and not afraid to change.

1. I Focused on Outcomes (Instead of Learning): I was so competitive as a player, so naturally when I started coaching, that carried over. Results mattered. A lot! I judged everything by whether we won or lost, not how we played, or how much we improved. When we lost I questioned my players effort, attitude, focus, you name it. When we won, nothing else mattered. Instead of focusing on “did we win?” I should have focused on “did we learn?”



2. I Tried to Inspire by Demeaning (Instead of Being Demanding): I sometimes tried to inspire athletes by demeaning them. I coached through sarcasm and personal attacks. I thought if they got angry enough, they would perform. Instead of being demeaning, I needed to be a demanding coach. A demanding coach expects more out of people than those people expect of themselves. They say “good, now do it better.” They inspire performance by helping athletes find their inner greatness, instead of thinking that humiliation will drag it out of them. Demanding coaches make their athletes’ eyes shine, while demeaning coaches extinguish the fire. I confused the two. Coaches, please be demanding, not demeaning!

3. I Did Lots of Talking (Instead of Listening): I was pretty full of myself and my perceived knowledge, and was certain that the more I poured into my players, the better. I was the sage on the stage. I gave all the answers, instead of asking kids “how can I make this better so you will play more?” I was very good at lecturing my kids, when instead I needed to be a better listener. Sometimes our kid’s actions and words tell us they need a down day, some time off, or even to be pushed a bit harder. Sometimes they will tell you exactly what they need to be inspired, if you take the time to listen to them. Great coaches are people who listen, who interact, and who learn as much from their athletes as their athletes learn from them. I missed out on a lot of learning.

4. I Acted Like a General (Instead of a Teacher): Recently saw a game where a 7-year-old flag football player was visibly startled by his father yelling “catch it!” a second before the ball reached his son. His son dropped the ball and when he got back to the huddle, said, “Sorry. Throw to someone else, please.” I used to be one of those joystick coaches. I solved every problem on the field. I constantly instructed. I took away responsibility from the kids, and limited creativity, in order to get a result. I was a general, instead of a teacher. I should have guided and mentored them, and accepted failure as a natural part of the learning process.

5. I Used Fear as a Motivator (Instead of Love): While I didn’t realize it at the time, I tried to lead and motivate through fear and intimidation. “Do this or lose your starting spot! Do this or you are off the team! We better win or you will regret it tomorrow in practice!” Sure, this can work in the short term, but it is not a long-term plan. The chances of sustainable growth, participation and enjoyment are slim to none. Instead, I should have been more like today’s most successful coaches, and motivated through love and connection. Coaches such as Pete Carroll, Steve Kerr and Joe Madden are very demanding, but instead of fear they inspire through love and respect. Think about how you would react if someone threatened your child, or your spouse, or your sibling? No athlete will play harder for a coach than one who feels cared for and loved.

I plead guilty to every one of the five charges described above. But that is OK, because years ago I learned about lessons in coaching that changed my life. I am not the coach I used to be; far from it. I am not perfect, and I am not supposed to be. As Rod Olson says, “I’m not the man I want to be, but I am glad I’m not who I used to be.”

But all that is OK because the journey is not over. It should never end. I want to help coaches to be better each season than the their last.

Coaches, we owe it to the kids to honestly evaluate our coaching, and if necessary hit the reset button like I did. Have the courage to change. Take ownership of who you are and what you do. Be a difference maker.