

Raising the Bar in Youth Sports – Home plate is still 17”

“In 1996, Coach John Scolinos was 78 years old and five years retired from a college coaching career that began in 1948. He shuffled to the stage to an impressive standing ovation, wearing dark polyester pants, a light blue shirt, and a string around his neck from which home plate hung — a full-sized, stark-white home plate.

Seriously, I wondered, who in the heck is this guy?

After speaking for twenty-five minutes, not once mentioning the prop hanging around his neck, Coach Scolinos appeared to notice the snickering among some of the coaches. Even those who knew Coach Scolinos had to wonder exactly where he was going with this, or if he had simply forgotten about home plate since he’d gotten on stage. Then, finally ...

***‘You’re probably all wondering why I’m wearing home plate around my neck.** Or maybe you think I escaped from Camarillo State Hospital,’ he said, his voice growing irascible. “No,” he continued, “I may be old, but I’m not crazy. The reason I stand before you today is to share with you baseball people what I’ve learned in my life, what I’ve learned about home plate in my 78 years.”*

“How many Little League coaches do we have in here?” he asked as several hands went up.

“Do you know how wide home plate is in Little League?”

After a pause, someone offered, “Seventeen inches?”

“That’s right,” he said. “How about in Babe Ruth? Any Babe Ruth coaches in the house?”

Another long pause.

“Seventeen inches?” came a guess from another reluctant coach.

“That’s right,” said Scolinos. “Now, how many high school coaches do we have in the room?”

Hundreds of hands shot up, as the pattern began to appear. “How wide is home plate in high school baseball?”

“Seventeen inches,” they said, sounding more confident.

“You’re right!” Scolinos barked. “And you college coaches, how wide is home plate in college?”

“Seventeen inches!” we said, in unison.

“Any Minor League coaches here? How wide is home plate in pro ball?”

“Seventeen inches!”

“RIGHT! And in the Major Leagues, how wide is home plate in the Major Leagues?”

“Seventeen inches!”

“SEV-EN-TEEN INCHES!” he confirmed, his voice bellowing off the walls. “And what do they do with a Big League pitcher who can’t throw the ball over seventeen inches?” Pause.

“They send him to Pocatello!” he hollered, drawing raucous laughter.

“What they don’t do is this: they don’t say, ‘Ah, that’s okay, Jimmy. You can’t hit a seventeen-inch target? We’ll make it eighteen inches, or nineteen inches. We’ll make it twenty inches so you have a better chance of hitting it. If you can’t hit that, let us know so we can make it wider still, say twenty-five inches.’”

Pause. “Coaches ...” Pause.

” ... what do we do when our best player shows up late to practice? When our team rules forbid facial hair and a guy shows up unshaven? What if he gets caught drinking? Do we hold him accountable? Or do we change the rules to fit him, do we widen home plate?”

*The chuckles gradually faded as four thousand coaches grew quiet, the fog lifting as the old coach’s message began to unfold. He turned the plate toward himself and, **using a Sharpie, began to draw something.** When he turned it toward the crowd, point up, **a house** was revealed, complete with a freshly drawn door and two windows.*

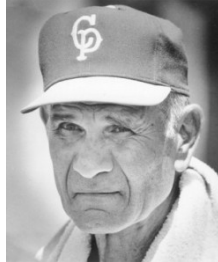
*“This is the problem in our homes today. With our marriages, with the way we parent our kids, with our discipline. **We don’t teach accountability to our kids, and there is no consequence for failing to meet standards. We widen the plate!**”*

Then, to the point at the top of the house he added a **small American flag**.

“This is the problem in our schools today. The quality of our education is going downhill fast and teachers have been stripped of the tools they need to be successful, and to educate and discipline our young people. We are allowing others to widen home plate! Where is that getting us?”

Silence. He **replaced the flag with a Cross**.

“And this is the problem in the Church, where powerful people in positions of authority have taken advantage of young children, only to have such an atrocity swept under the rug for years. Our church leaders are widening home plate!”



“I was amazed,” Sperry told me. “At a baseball convention where I expected to learn something about curveballs and bunting and how to run better practices, I had learned something far more valuable from an old man with home plate strung around his neck. I had learned something about life, about myself, about my own weaknesses and about my responsibilities as a leader. I had to hold myself and others accountable to that which I knew to be right, lest our families, our faith, and our society continue down an undesirable path.”

“If I am lucky,” Coach Scolinos concluded in his 1996 talk, “you will remember one thing from this old coach today. It is this: if we fail to hold ourselves to a higher standard, a standard of what we know to be right; if we fail to hold our spouses and our children to the same standards, if we are unwilling or unable to provide a consequence when they do not meet the standard; and if our schools and churches and our government fail to hold themselves accountable to those they serve, there is but one thing to look forward to ...”

*With that, he held home plate in front of his chest, **turned it around**, and revealed its dark black backside.*

“... dark days ahead.”

“That talk from John Scolinos changed my life,” said Sperry. “It made me who I am today.”

In the past twenty years, sadly, not much has changed. We are still widening the plate. We are widening the goal posts. We are lowering the basket. And we need to stop.

Here at the Changing the Game Project, and at great organizations such as the Positive Coaching Alliance, Proactive Coaching, ETA356, and others, we are dedicated to stopping the rot by educating athletes, coaches and parents, and providing access to a better sports experience.

We are dedicated to creating a culture of accountability for athletes, parents, coaches and youth sports organizations that holds the line, and no longer widens home plate. We recognize that sport is not only a critical part of raising healthy, active kids, but it is an educational tool for life when used the right way.

But we need your help.

To hold the line we must ask the following of our ATHLETES:

- Be a teammate who asks what can I give, not what can I get
- Be grateful for the coaches who ask you to go the extra mile
- Hold yourself to a higher standard
- Prepare and compete your very best
- Realize that you only get out what you put in
- When things go wrong, do not blame, but instead ask “what can I learn from this?”

To hold the line we must ask our COACHES to:

- Keep being positive role models and mentors for our athletes
- Respect and encourage your athletes
- Value and serve the person first, and athlete second
- Earn the trust of both athletes and parents
- Keep asking more of your athletes than they ask of themselves
- Be clear and consistent in your communication
- Have standards, not rules
- Be the coach you always wished you had

To hold the line we must ask our PARENTS to:

- Step back, release your kids and let them own the experience
- Just be a parent and a fan, and not the coach (unless, of course, you are the official coach)
- Let the ride home belong to your kids, and let them dictate the conversation
- Allow coaches to hold your kids accountable for their actions at practice and in games
- Respect the coaches that show respect and love for your kids, even when it makes your kids uncomfortable
- Help to create a safe to fail environment
- Be patient, focus on the process instead of outcomes, and let your athletes develop at their own pace
- See your kids, and simply love watching them play

To hold the line, we must ask our SCHOOLS AND YOUTH SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS to:

- Have clearly defined core values and mission that everyone is held accountable for
- To stop creating obstacles to participation by having tryouts, all star teams, and high-cost travel sports too soon, at ages where we must develop every player to truly identify all potential future talent
- To recognize that the things you teach will be put into practice by 99% of your athletes in places other than the rink, the field, and the court.
- To hold everyone accountable for serving the athletes first, and not being afraid to tell a coach or parent who does not get it “We will miss you!”

If you are not on our email list, please [click here](#) and join the tens of thousands of parents and coaches who are part of our movement to transform youth sports, and give the game back to its rightful owners, the youth. If you join us, in 2016 you will be the first to have access to some amazing opportunities: