

Where Pride Still Matters

Want to raise a kid who's polite, respectful, even neat? Forget school or church. Send him to a good coach

Like most middle-aged American fathers, I drive to work lamenting the decline of Western civilization - the erosion of standards, the lack of responsibility, the inability of morning disc jockeys to shut up. But something happened one morning last summer that lifted my spirits from gloomy to positively rosy. I dropped my two eldest kids off at John McCarthy's baseball camp in Washington, D.C.

There were 150 6-to-12-year-olds sitting on some wooden bleachers, their little baseball hats on their heads, their gloves in their laps, when McCarthy opened camp by outlining his priorities. The first was playing safe. "Safety is your responsibility. I will not tolerate unsafe behavior," he said with a stern authority that had the kids rapt. Then he talked about neatness - in 2001! He pulled forward one of his coaches. "Look how he wears his uniform. Neat. Shirt tucked in. You will wear your uniform properly and look sharp." Later he pulled out another coach. "Look at the way he shines his shoes. A good shoeshine is a foundation for everything else."

Then he started introducing his 30-odd assistant coaches, who were in a line behind him. Some were college players with impressive athletic and academic records. Others were high-school kids who started at McCarthy's camp when they were 8 or 9. McCarthy said of one young coach, "I always remembered him because he came up to me at the end of each day and said 'Thank you.' Politeness is important to me." McCarthy went on to describe how one coach had impressed him because he always made eye contact when he spoke. Another drew praise because he came early to help prepare the field.

McCarthy went down the line and asked each coach what book he was reading. Then he dared to talk about the difference between being a successful player - thinking, hustling, encouraging - and merely winning.

I left and headed off to my office feeling that something unusual had happened. Here was a man willing to stand up in front of an audience week after week and actually talk unironically about honor and character and saying thank you.

We've all heard plenty about the fascist coaches who have turned their youth teams into little professional academies for trophy accumulation. But there's also a positive side to the increasing organization of kids' sports: the emergence of good coaches, more and more of them each year. As I've reported other stories on college campuses, in high schools, and around neighborhoods, I've begun to notice something: Coaches have become the leading moral instructors in America today.

We no longer regard them as dumb ex-jocks with whistles around their necks. In fact, now our talk of coaches is infused with moral meaning. Notre Dame named a

research institute the Center for Sport, Character, and Culture. David Maraniss wrote a best-selling book on Vince Lombardi called *When Pride Still Mattered*. Nobody makes movies about streetwise young priests the way they used to, but there are dozens of movies, such as *Remember the Titans*, in which the coach is the beacon of virtue.

And when you think about it, you realized there actually aren't that many professions in American life in which people feel that their job is to build character. Lord knows, neither Hollywood nor the music industry offers much instruction on how to build character. Many religious leaders seem so desperate to appear "with it" to young people that they don't dare impose high standards on children. Even schools don't talk much about character. They tend to treat kids as little brains who have to master certain skills and do well on certain tests. I get the impression that a lot of today's teachers would like to instill good values, but they don't want anybody to accuse them of being judgmental, or of imposing their personal values on some else's kid.

But coaches are different. You rarely see a teacher tell a kid to tuck in his shirt and have some pride in his appearance, but coaches do it all the time. The best coaches still live by a code, and they make no apology for demanding that kids live up to it.

Why do coaches talk so confidently about character when so many others are morally tongue-tied? First, they still command authority. The same kids who've decided it's cool to dismiss teachers or parents will still listen to a coach. Go into a high school and watch the dynamics of a classroom. Very often it's the rebel flouting authority who's the coolest. But then go into a locker room. Nobody wants to be around the guy scoffing in the back. Everybody admires the team players.

Second, sports involve suffering. Grade inflation being what it is, and the self-esteem ethic being what it is, lots of kids can go through school and other parts of their lives without ever having to deal with humiliating failure. Everybody is above average. But in sports there is no escaping failure. In baseball you strike out, you walk in a run, you drop a ball. And you don't confront failure in the privacy of a small conference room or on a confidential report card. It happens to you on the field, in front of everybody.

Brandon Sullivan, another young coach who gives baseball clinics in the Washington area, calls these events teachable moments. "There are more teachable moments in a game of baseball than in a month of school. There is so much loss and failure and having to deal with them."

If you listen to coaches talk, or if you read through some of their advice books, you'll notice a consistent echo of chivalry. They tend to be fanatical about assuming personal responsibility and not blaming others for bad breaks.

In his book *Leading with the Heart*, Mike Krzyzewski, coach of the Duke University basketball team, tells of a time when, as a cadet at West Point, he was walking down the sidewalk and somebody stepped in a puddle, splashing mud on his shoes. Seconds later, an upperclassman barked at him for being dirty. Krzyzewski's first impulse was

to blame the guy who'd splashed him. But then he realized it was his fault. He should have turned around immediately to go clean up. That's a story he tells his players about accepting responsibility when bad luck happens.

The best coaches, the McCarthys and the Sullivans, don't emphasize winning as much as effort. They demand practice. They demand unselfishness. If Sullivan's team is winning by 15 runs and a player is goofing around in the dugout, that player's in big trouble because he's not respecting the game and he's not respecting the other team.

Coaches are also zealous about work and preparation. The typical coach was once the kid who didn't have as much talent as some of the others, but figured he could bull his way to the top through hard work. These guys are still at it, which is why so many of the best coaches are up nights studying game films, and are sweating through their clothes while pacing up and down the sidelines like madmen. In his book *Competitive Leadership*, Brian Billick, coach of the Baltimore Ravens, quotes the military strategist Carl von Clausewitz: "The personal physical exertion of leaders must not be overlooked. It is as important as any strategy or tactic." And what they expect from themselves they also expect from their players.

Finally, good coaches believe in loyalty. So many relationships in life are conditional. You can change jobs, switch parties, or leave neighborhoods. But the best coaches give the impression that team loyalty is inviolable. That's because, while the rest of us work with keyboards or machinery, coaches work with people. Their tools are individuals. They often feel fiercely protective of them.

My own kids sometimes have trouble with the rudimentary techniques of cleaning up their rooms. But during the weeks they are at Coach McCarthy's baseball clinic, you can see my eldest son and daughter out in the backyard polishing their cleats. When we found them some fluffy polishing mitts to help them do a better job, they were as happy as if they'd been given a new bat.

The ultimate lesson good coaches offer is that if you demand that people live up to a rigorous code of honor, they are excited by the challenge. Unless I'm mistaken, kids are quietly ecstatic to find authority they can respect, learn from and admire.

Each week McCarthy opens his camps with straight-ahead homilies about kids whose families can't afford baseball camp, or kids who don't respect their gear or take the time to learn from players less gifted than they are. The campers sit on the stands during these sermons, their parents in a reverent semicircle behind them.

One day, I heard a mother ask her boy what he thought of Coach's speech that day. "Aw, parents love that kind of stuff," he said.

True enough. Sometimes, you can look at the parents' faces and see the tears welling up in their eyes.

Men's Health Magazine

- David Brooks