Puppet Players

By MITCH ALEXANDER

"Debbie, when you go out on the field I want to make sure you know that you need to back up every throw from the catcher back to the pitcher if there's a runner on base." "OK coach." Does this sound familiar? This type of brief conversation happens all the time in all sports. It's one of the ways we teach our 8-12 year old student athletes. The younger the athlete, the more we need to remind them what they need to do, but is there a downside to this type of training? You bet there is. I call it the "Puppet Player syndrome." Most teams have puppet players in this age range. These are the players who cannot think for themselves. They are literally puppets that won't do anything until Coach tells them what they need to do. Most of the time, the puppet strings are simply one word actions: Run!, Down!, Back!, or simply Go!

As players move up, coaches need to start cutting the strings and let their players think for themselves. Usually, this magically happens when Coach is busy working with another player and sees that the puppet player acted on their own and performed the expected action without direction. However, sometimes, Coach doesn't want to cut the strings. After all, the strings are what gives Coach control, right? There is a subtle transfer in coaching from string puller to respected master. The transfer isn't obvious or planned, it just happens as both players and coaches mature. Some coaches fight this transfer and instead choose to keep pulling the strings.

Players have the most problems being independent thinkers when Coach's style makes use of yelling, threats, and embarrassment. In this case, players stop thinking for themselves and don't want to make mistakes of their own choice. They much prefer to only do what Coach tells them to do. What kid wants to get yelled at? So they stand in their ready positions, looking like mini-professional athletes waiting for the play to start, and when it does, they do exactly NOTHING but wait for Coach to yell over commands. "Debbie, Back up the pitcher!" The yellers force these children to submit to their commands through the players' defense mechanisms. Coach is an authority figure, she's much older than the player, and seems to know everything about softball. The player doesn't want to get yelled at or do the wrong thing, so they only do what they are told to do.

Many researchers including Mandigo & Holt (2000) have found that student athletes need to be increasingly allowed greater input in decision making in their play to keep them interested in playing sports. Players that are micro-managed tend to drop out of sports because at some point they resent being told what to do for the thousandth time. Statistics show that 73 percent of the student athletes who participate in organized sports quit by the time they're 13. Instead of shouting out action commands to your puppet players every play, or every time they do something wrong, try saying something positive after the play and then give instruction on what needs to be done better followed by another positive comment. For example, "Debbie, I really like the way you got in your ready position and then broke off to second base when you saw the ball wasn't coming your way – Good Job! Since we have a runner on third, you need to back up the throw from the catcher to the pitcher in case it gets past Taylor. You did a great job with this in practice yesterday."

Mitch Alexander is the CIO for a major electronics company and coaches both Little League and Travel softball teams and is currently completing his PhD. He is a certified SUNY, ASA, and Double Goal Coach. His wife, Marie was one of the first female student athletes in the country to play Little League softball after Title IX was passed and played in the first Little League Softball World Series. Over the years, both have managed teams together and helped spark a love for softball in their student athletes. In his spare time, Mitch designs websites for fastpitch teams and businesses and can be reached at mitchalexander@optonline.net.