

YOUTH

By MITCH ALEXANDER

Softball Goals

The goal of youth sports should not be the same as professional sports. The goal of pro sports is to entertain sports fans and of course to make money. One can also argue that pro athletes also (hopefully) act as role models. This sounds like common sense, but many parents believe the goals of youth and pro sports are the same – to win. What then about youth sports? The goal of youth sports varies with the type of play. Let me state that again - The goal of youth sports varies with the type of play. This is not obvious. However, parents' expectations may not take this into account and they may believe that the goals are consistent throughout the various programs they can enroll their kids in. Parents and coaches speak about building self-confidence, leadership, increasing fitness levels, learning new skills, laying a foundation for higher levels of play, building concepts of self-discipline and respect for authority figures, among others. Parents need to understand the varying goals of these different programs before enrolling their children and to manage their expectations of the outcomes based on these goals.

“Coach, our new short stop only throws sidearm. How can we fix it?” “Is she making the plays?” “Well, sure....” “Then don't change anything. We're winning our games.” If you're a youth coach, I bet you've heard this type of exchange. This type of conversation typically happens in short season play, like community or intramural play. The perception that a problem can't or shouldn't be fixed is largely due to the short season or the nature of the program. For example, during a Fall ball program, a team may only be together for 8 weeks. Coaches often focus on the win and feel that they don't have enough time to work

with the player to correct major issues with mechanics in such a short time. Also, things may get worse before they get better. Take batting for example, if the youth player was taught a baseball type swing, her batting may get worse over the short-term as she adjusts to a “knob to the ball” softball swing. Some coaches may not be willing to sacrifice performance (even mediocre performance) for good mechanics. Often, the goal for short season play (try-out teams) is to have the best win-loss record possible or the complete opposite (intramural teams), for the kids to get exercise and have fun without regard for the team's record.

School softball is often the middle ground in youth softball goals. While the season may be just as short as in short season play, the majority of the team stays together for a longer period of time and there is more time to work out issues. The team may practice several days a week, or most days a week when they aren't playing games. The focus is often still on the win, but it's balanced with training to improve the individual player as well as the overall team over several years. School ball is a longer term project and coaches know they have the time to work on issues with mechanics. The concept of getting exercise and having fun are often secondary to improving skills and the win-loss record.

Travel or club ball is often the purest form of youth softball. Teams often stay together for years. Higher level coaches and often paid coaches are used to train the players. Travel teams usually concentrate on scrimmages and tournaments so the pressure to win at all costs is off – after all there's a new tourna-

ment next weekend. The goal of many travel teams is to train players to improve and progress through the organization: from 10u all the way through 18u. The end goal is to obtain a college scholarship. Therefore, what really matters at levels below 18u is to make sure each player uses correct mechanics, has passion for the game, and a coachable attitude. Wins are secondary. There isn't that much riding on the outcome of any particular tournament, but there is a lot riding on the outcome of years of training.

Parents need to be aware of the varying goals of these different programs. However, even the informed and conscientious parent can still end up enrolling their

young athlete in the wrong program! This can happen in a few different ways. First, is when the goals of the program are not publicized. For example, a try-out travel team that focuses on fun and exercise, or an intramural team that focuses on winning. Second is when the administrators of the program are not careful in selecting coaches that are in alignment with the goals of the program. This usually happens with try-out short season teams. If parents are looking for their kids to have fun and get exercise, they shouldn't enroll them in try-out travel teams. Conversely, if parents are looking for their kids to get a high level of training, they shouldn't enroll them in intramural or community-based programs.



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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.

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