

Mitch Alexander's SOFTBALL ACADEMY

Parent Coached v.s Paid Coached

The backbone of youth sports is comprised of volunteer parent-coaches. For softball, this typically starts with recreational play in the local town leagues. The conscientious parent-coach researches best practices (often on the Internet or through books) and attends clinics to improve their coaching skills to (hopefully) keep up or exceed the skill level of the players being coached. The average parent-coach starts teaching their young student athletes how to catch, throw, hit, and the basics of base running. As the players get older, more is required of the parent-coach. Now it's not just about the basics, it's about teaching best practices. Many parent-coaches start teaching younger players baseball mechanics not softball mechanics. Somewhere between 10 and 12u, the better coaches realize the swing they have been teaching needs to change over to a softball swing to decrease the time it takes to snap the bat out front.

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Of the downsides to parent-coached teams is a phenomenon known as "Daddy Ball." Parent-coaches don't like to talk about this topic as it has negative connotations. The issue is that the parent-coach can favor their daughter over the other players and give them preferential treatment with more playing time, positions played, or they just allow their kid to be lazy at practices. Many of you know all too well the effects of a Daddy Ball team: the parents of the other players grumble in the background about how the coach's kid is getting all the playing time and never sits. Even the players are aware of this, and they grumble to themselves wanting to know why the coach's daughter doesn't have to work as hard as everyone else does. Parent-coaches who are aware of the Daddy Ball syndrome and try to avoid it try to be fair to all of the players, but often end up going in the other direction to their own child's detriment.

An alternative to the parent-coach is a paid coach. Paid coaching can be accomplished in several ways. Sometimes they are used in concert with

parent-coaches or the complete coaching staff is paid to run a team. Paid coaches in youth sports can either be a blessing or a curse. There are plenty of examples of both of these. Let's first look at the combination of parent-coach with a paid coach. In the case where the parent-coach runs the team (manager) and a paid coach helps with practices and running the drills, this can be a great youth sports experience. The paid coach is often a current high school or college player or college graduate looking to experience coaching. Both the parent-coaches and the players benefit from the paid coach's experience and knowledge. The practices tend to be great teaching and learning tools and the teams tend to be high performers. In theory, this scenario can give some of the best results.

Teams where the paid coach is the manager and the parent-coach is the assistant can be a nightmare. In this scenario the person who is being paid for their time, typically does not understand the commitment required to run a team. Those of us who have been volunteer coaches know this too well. Running practices and games account for less than half of the time required to run a team. The behind-the-scenes work is often overlooked: recruiting players,

speaking with parents, ordering uniforms and dealing with size issues, procuring training equipment, handling conflicts (both player and parent conflicts), contracting insurance, selecting and booking tournaments or league play, planning practices, analyzing player performance, communicating with the team, etc. all take lots of time. The paid coach may either choose not to perform some of these other activities or assign them to the volunteer parent-coach. Many times, the paid coach has a primary job and may not be able to attend some practices – what then? Well, the responsibility falls to the parent-coach who really isn't in charge of the team. This sets up a conflict that usually does not make for a good team experience. This is not to say, that this scenario can't work well, but the potential problems need to be understood before committing to this type of team.

The all-paid coach team can suffer from many of the same issues that the previous scenario deals with, but this isn't usually the case. The all-paid coach team can be of two flavors: all of the coaches are truly compensated for their time, or the coaches are volunteers who do not have daughters on the team. The first type is typically very expensive and although the paid coaches may not have time to

finesse every aspect of the behind-the-scenes tasks, they usually have lots of experience and know where to focus their energies so that what is really important gets the most attention. The coaching responsibilities are usually well known and respected and the players typically get great instruction. One caution here is to make sure you understand what you are getting for your money. The paid coaches' qualifications and expertise should be clear before joining these types of teams.

The case of the volunteer coach team where none of the coaches have daughters on the team, can also be a great experience. The volunteer coaches are involved because they want to be – they love the game and teaching student athletes how to get better. There is no possibility of Daddy Ball. These volunteers have typically gone through beginning level all the way through

advanced levels of play with their own daughters (who sometimes come back and help with the team!) and now want to use that knowledge and experience to help other players and families. These teams are also typically high performers as the volunteer coaches have lots of experience running and training teams.

The bottom line is parents of the coaching variety or the cheering variety both need to understand the composition of the coaching staff before getting involved with any team. The person running the team should be able to explain the hierarchy and responsibilities of each of the coaches. Paid coaches should be known up front. Insist on definitive answers and not vague responses. Based on the information provided in this article, you should be able to ask the right questions to make sure your daughter is going to have a great experience.

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.

