

Mitch Alexander's SOFTBALL ACADEMY

Youth Sports Coaching Certification

If you've been following this column, you know my area of focus is youth sports. Primarily, 8-18 year old softball players – recreational level, summer Williamsport competition, and travel ball. Last week, Marie and I had the opportunity to be re-certified by the State University of New York through their Youth Sports New York program. Certification is required by our Little League District. I believe we are the first district in New York to require every manager, coach, and volunteer who comes in contact with youth athletes to be both certified and pass a background check. Sounds kind of boring? So what, who cares? As a parent and possibly a coach, you should care that the people who are providing guidance and leadership for your children know something about coaching. I'm not just talking about sports skills, but more about the soft skills and management skills that are not specific to one sport but apply to all sports.

We went through nine modules of training, each focused on a different key aspect of coaching youth sports. We

were reminded of many INTERESTING facts and coaching tips. Many of these you may never have heard before! Here are the highlights:

- 30 – 40 million kids participate in organized sports per year

- 80% of these kids play sports away from school

- The amount of time kids spend on organized sports has doubled over the past 20 years

- However, over the past 20 years, kids spend less (up to eight hours less) time per week on unstructured sports or free play.

- Over 45% of kids surveyed said they have been called names, yelled at, or insulted by coaches

- 21% were forced to play with an injury

- Over 17% said they were hit, kicked, or slapped by their coach

- 20 years ago kids learned to play sports in their backyards without the help of adults

- Over 65% of kids surveyed said they play sports to be with their friends

- Only 20% of kids surveyed said they want to improve their skills

Winning is not very important to kids
70% of kids drop out of sports by age 13

Half of the top six reasons kids quit sports involved the coach: played favorites, poor teacher, or don't like the coach

Organized sports often require both excessive psychological and physical demands

Reduced team size allows younger or less skilled players to get more action time

Coaches are often more interested in winning than player development

A coach's manner determines how they are remembered

Coaching relies on the art of communicating with the youth athletes and connecting with them

Good coaches tend to be good teachers

A good story or probing question can help make practices interesting to kids

Use the sandwich technique when giving constructive feedback: give a positive comment, the constructive feedback, followed by a positive comment

Try to provide 15 minutes of fun time per practice for team building, creating great memories, and growing their passion for the game

Establish the parents' expectations on

day one with a communications plan

Discuss on-field behavior, sportsmanship, and responsibilities with your players

Coach to the middle players, (not the top players) who will improve through confidence and practice. Top players help the middle players and weaker players see that it's possible to excel

"For kids, a loss lasts about a day but a barbecue lasts a lifetime" – Timothy Donovan

Don't coach your own child, have another coach do it and you coach their kid

Never let players instruct other players as if they are the coach

Pay attention to off-ball activity as this is where dirty play frequently happens

Coaches need to be aware of how to prevent and detect concussions

Almost 6% of softball injuries include concussions

The most common types of softball injuries are shoulder and arm injuries including strains, pulls, and tears

Dehydration is a common problem for softball players in warm weather

Players should drink 8 ounces of water 15 minutes before a game, 4-8 ounces every 15 minutes during the game, and 16-32 ounces after the games are over

Do not allow energy drinks in the dugout

Sports drinks are made for adults. Kids can get stomach cramps by drinking them in large quantities

Dilute sports drinks 50% for kids to drink

Monitor the heat index to prevent heat-related injuries

As a coach you need to check your playing field before each game and determine if it's safe. If not, either correct the problems or don't play the game

The certification class lasts about three hours. We had a great instructor with lots of experience coaching and refereeing many sports. Many other important topics were covered. This is a crash course on how to be a good coach. The instructor did not talk about how to swing a bat or throw a softball. Instead, he talked about how to

connect with student athletes, how to run practices, the key aspects of player and parent compacts, and safety issues. No one was bored or nodded off! This is important stuff and it matters, especially to your kids.

If you happen to live in New York, try to attend one of these certification sessions. Even if you live outside of New York State, you can still learn lots more about these topics by going to the Youth Sports New York website at www.youthsportsny.org. They have sample practice plans, communications plans, parent and player compacts, lots of information about concussions, videos, and a whole lot more to help you be the best coach you can be – a coach that kids twenty years from now will remember as someone who inspired and influenced them to be a better person and a better athlete.

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.

