

Mitch Alexander's SOFTBALL ACADEMY

Commitments in Youth Team Sport

Team sports are all about commitments, and there are lots of commitments made by everyone involved. Some commitments are explicit: contracts between players and coaches, contracts between parents and coaches, etc. Other commitments are implied, nothing is written or even verbal but the commitment is understood nonetheless. When any of these commitments are broken or neglected, problems are created. These are usually the kind of problems that cause rifts or giant upheavals between many or all of the parties involved because honoring one's commitments falls in the area of morals and ethics. We'll take a look at these commitments. I'm sure you can think of many more. Because softball is a team sport, commitments are taken seriously and a big part of softball teams. Being part of a team means that each team member

acknowledges and accepts the explicit as well as the implied commitments.

PLAYER COMMITMENTS – When a player joins a team they are accepting many types of commitments. First they have a commitment to the team: to attend practices, to arrive at practices early or at least on-time, to stay for the entire practice, to work on improving themselves outside of practice, pitchers may be expected to take pitching lessons, catchers may be expected to take catching lessons, all players may be expected to take batting instruction or at least go to the batting cage, to try their best, and to support their teammates. Next, they have a commitment to their parents: to be ready for practice, to care for their equipment, to complete the season or other time period that the parents paid for, and to make the most out of the experience. Players make commitments to themselves: to play

with sportsmanship, to work hard, to be honest about their abilities compared to their teammates, to be persistent and to never give up.

COACHES COMMITMENTS – Coaches also make commitments. They also have commitments to the teams they coach: to be fair in assigning positions (not to play favorites), to be fair in assigning playing time, to provide adequate training so the players can improve, to provide meaningful and worthwhile practices, to protect the players from unfair treatment by other teams or umpires, to enter the team in skill and age appropriate competitions, to dedicate enough time to keep the team operating smoothly, to be a role model and to set an example on and off the field, and to complete the season or other agreed upon time period.

PARENT COMMITMENTS – Even parents have commitments: to get the player to practices and games at the requested time, to make sure that the player gets enough rest to be effective, to make sure that the player doesn't injure themselves horsing

around off the field, to provide adequate hydration for the player to bring to practices and games, to provide the necessary equipment to play the sport, to not interfere with the coaches during practices and games, to not enter the dugout or immediate area during games, to be supportive of their daughter and the other players, and to pay the team dues when required.

As I was contemplating this topic over the past few weeks, I became very sensitive to the idea of broken commitments in youth sports. I found it very easy to look for evidence of commitments, commitments that were not honored, and the effects of not honoring commitments. Some players, parents, and coaches do not take their commitments seriously. Since the focus of this column is youth sports, we have to consider that commitments may be the MOST important concept our kids get out of participating in softball. Therefore, everyone involved with these commitments needs to understand the moral and ethical implications of breaking team commitments.

Consider the little league player who part of the way through the season decides she doesn't feel like playing any more. She made many commitments when she signed up. So did her parents. She broke those commitments to the team, to her coaches, to the league, and most importantly to herself. The team lost a player, and had to borrow a player for every remaining game. She gave up not only on the team but on herself. She made extra work for the coaches, and reduced the effectiveness of the team.

Consider the coach who agreed to manage a summer team and when the team does not win the district, decides he doesn't have the time to lead the team. Instead he brings in another coach to run the team in a local summer-long tournament. What would have happened if the team won the district championship and advanced to the sectional tournament or beyond? This coach had a commitment to the team and should have seen it through regardless if the team won or not. The repercussions were extreme from this broken commitment. Other players decided

they too, didn't have the time for this team. New players had to be recruited. Their parents, two of whom were coaches on this team also left. Parents with little or no coaching experience had to be used. The remaining players lost their manager, coaches, and arguably three of their best players. Their expectations for the summer included a high level of training, playing with their friends, and playing for a particular manager. Commitments were broken all around. The remaining players suffered the most.

Consider the parent who felt that their daughter wasn't getting enough playing time during a tournament. In the first game, the player was hit by two pitches and got hit by a bat when she was catching. The manager had her sit the next game and act as a pinch runner. The expectation was for this player to slowly get back in the game. The parent got in the coach's face in the third inning of the second game and pulled the player out of the game and left. The parent broke many commitments and forced the player to break others. They both let the team down.

As you can see, broken commitments in youth team sports affect many people in different ways. Almost always, the kids end up being most affected. Players, parents, and candidate coaches must carefully consider the commitments they are making and make sure they can

honor them before accepting any involvement with youth team sports. If you have any comments or good examples of people who have either honored commitments during challenging conditions or did not honor their commitments please email me at: fastpitch2001@optonline.net.

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 fastpitch2001@optonline.net.



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