



SOFTBALL ACADEMY

with Mitch Alexander

Coaches Can Be King Makers or Drop Out Makers

I recently overheard a coach talking to a player, Jessica, in a batting cage during a practice. “This isn’t a competition. I just want you to know that. This thing between you and Mary as catchers has nothing to do with anything. This is a place where you can take free swings and don’t feel bad about making errors.” Mary is the coach’s daughter and was standing outside the cage waiting her turn to hit. A few swings later, the coach told Jessica, “Your swing is terrible. You will never be a good hitter. The only way you will ever hit the ball is to chop down on it.” The coach is a recent addition to a high level team after fall tryouts. Jessica is a veteran on the team and had a great batting average and provided many clutch hits during summer tournaments and showcases. While it’s true she wasn’t having her best day at this particular practice, she had been the number four batter on several teams. Jessica and Mary only just met a couple of weeks ago and have only had a few practices together.

Later in the same batting cage session, the coach had Jessica exit the cage and watch how Mary hit the ball. The coach told Jessica, “Be more like Mary. Do everything like Mary.” The batting cage was



the last station of the practice for Jessica. I watched Jessica exit the practice. She had her head down and looked sad and defeated. This scenario is not uncommon. I have a feeling it happens all the time on many teams in many sports. There are so many things wrong with this scenario. I have addressed some of these issues in past articles, but perhaps the most important issue is the way the coach berated Jessica which ruined her self-confidence.

One of the most important skills a coach must have is the ability to improve and boost their players' self-confidence. Clearly the coach's comments in this scenario do not boost Jessica's self-confidence. They created conflict between Jessica and Mary. They caused Jessica to doubt her batting skills and even her ability to play softball in the future. Dr. Patrick Cohn, a youth sports psychology expert, has linked self-confidence to performance in sports and in a player's enjoyment of sports. Most coaches and parents have heard the statistic that 75% of athletes drop out of organized sports by the age of 13-14. The number one reason players drop out is lack of enjoyment. They aren't having fun anymore. They usually don't have fun because of their coach.

How do you think Jessica felt after working with this coach? She may hate the coach. She may not want to be coached by him any longer. She may not want to interact with him in the future. She may doubt her softball skills. She may have said to herself: Maybe I'm not that good. Maybe I don't belong on this high performing team. Maybe I made a mistake coming here. Maybe I should quit softball. If Mary is that much better than I am, I must really be bad.

I spoke with Jessica the next day and asked her to talk to me



about her experience with this coach. Less than 24 hours after working with this coach, Jessica was sure of one thing – she was quitting softball forever! She completely doubted herself and had no self-confidence at all. She spoke about not wanting to go to college since she is so bad at softball. I have seen Jessica play and she is a fantastic softball player. One coach's comments had a severe impact on this young student athlete. An impact that could change the course of this kid's life. I bet the coach went home and never even gave Jessica a second thought.

It's up to us as coaches to do our best for each and every kid on our team. Sure we have to train them and improve their skills, but we are just as responsible for helping to instill a love for sports (in this case softball) and to make participating in sports a positive experience. Youth athletes play sports for many different reasons, but at the end of the day, youth sports are voluntary programs and players need to like what they are doing or they won't stay with it. Improving a youth athlete's self-confidence may be all that is necessary for them to enjoy participating in sports.

In this scenario, clearly Jessica's self-confidence was destroyed in just a few minutes in a batting cage by a coach with little or no understanding of sports psychology or how to work with youth female athletes. This caused Jessica to decide she wasn't enjoying playing softball, which in turn resulted in the decision to quit playing. The disastrous effect of a few words potentially could have ruined a kid's life. In 2001, Biddle and Mutrie, sports researchers, found that coaches are the single most influential factor in determining a player's sustained participation in sports.



Some coaches do not want to understand the soft side of sports or understand anything about sports psychology. This is a mistake. Some coaches treat their teams as businesses. They look at individual and team performance in similar ways that managers view employees and project teams. For those coaches, there is another way to view this. It's simple, if you want more performance out of your players, build up their self-confidence and make sure your players like coming to practice and playing in games with you as a coach.

Coaches have the ability to build champion players and teams. Even players with excellent skills will fail if they believe they will. The same applies to teams. How many times has your team played an opponent that was hyped to be "the best" or a "superior" team and then your team just handed them the game, fulfilling their own prophecy and beliefs. If they had self-confidence that the other team could be beaten and that you and your coaching staff had prepared them to be successful against this kind of team, they might have won that game. I'm sure you've heard the saying that the game of softball is mostly mental. I've heard estimates of 20% physical and 80% mental, or variants close to these numbers. In the end, coaches have a lot of control over their players' ability to perform. They can create "kings" or "failures."

I checked back on Jessica a week later. The conversation I had with her took root. She decided to return to the team and play softball. Her self-confidence returned. She had a few more practices with the coach who berated her. Jessica was instructed to be polite but not to allow anyone, coaches included to destroy her self-confidence. It seems to have worked and Jessica is now doing fine and



excelling on this team.

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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