

## First (and worst) coach I ever had

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During my childhood and into high school I played a variety of sports and was on many teams. Through all of those teams, both recreational and school-affiliated, I had some average coaches, some good ones, and a few who were excellent. But I also had one really poor one. And he happened to be my very first coach ever.

My grade school friend, Steve, told me his dad was getting a basketball team together and asked if I wanted to play. I was eight, and I believe the league was for 8-10 year-olds. Steve, another friend, Butch, and I were the youngest on the team. There were only six of us total. The three older kids and Steve played every minute, though Steve, to put it charitably, was not much of an athlete. He and I ended up going to junior high and high school together and he never played another team sport. Coach Walt split the remaining two halves down the middle between Butch and me. Butch played a half of each game and I played the other half.

You would think that my first ever sports experience would be etched in my mind, full of positive moments. But instead I have only two specific memories and one general recollection from my time on the team. I can't remember if we wore uniforms, where we played, if we won or lost. But I can remember Walt's incensed, shouting face. You see, he tried to approach this team as if he were a big-time college coach. Screaming. Calling angry timeouts when a player messed up, so he could chew him out. I can only theorize that he was emulating real coaches he'd seen on TV. This was the early 70's and we were in Indiana, maybe he idolized Bobby Knight. But I have a feeling if Knight had seen Walt coaching little kids this way, he'd have stuffed him in a trash can.

The two specific memories are these: One game, I came off the bench to start the second half and they in-bounded the ball to me. I launched up a beautiful shot from the baseline. It would have been a three if there were such a thing back then. Swish. It was by far my best (and luckiest) shot of the season. I can still recall the feeling of immense pride as I began to jog back down court. However, that sensation was short-lived. Walt was screaming for a timeout, yelling for me to get over there, red-faced, eyes blazing in anger. I realized then that we'd switched baskets at halftime and my greatest shot ever counted *for the other team*. As I approached the coach, our opponent's best player jogged behind and patted me on the rear. I don't think he was doing it to be a wiseguy, but more that he felt sorry for me; hitting that beautiful bucket that cost our team two points, now about to face a tongue-lashing.

The second mental souvenir is actually fairly funny, and came from one of the game's halftime breaks. If you're as old as I am, you might remember the very first "energy bars" called "Space Stick Bars". My mom never got those for us at home so the few times I'd tasted them at someone else's house I thought they were the best thing ever. Walt had brought some to give out to the team. Everyone but Butch and I had gotten their bars and there were two left. Walt said, "Here. You two can split this one." He then unwrapped the other one and ate it himself.

The thought never crossed my mind to quit the team. My parents didn't have a "talk" with the coach. You didn't do that back then, and I doubt they even knew anything was amiss because I didn't complain and parents never attended games. But I do know I didn't play much organized basketball after that, choosing instead to only play with my friends on our backyard or driveway hoops. I can't say if that's all Walt's fault, but I know I went through my early childhood thinking I wasn't very good at basketball.

So why am I writing about this all these years later? Because often we, as coaches, get so wrapped up in the moment we don't think about the future. Sometimes we can't see the forest for the trees. Every kid on your team is going to take away memories that will last months, years...or, as I can attest, in some cases, decades. And when you're the coach of young, impressionable kids, they won't remember if you brought the team wins and losses as much as they'll recall if you brought them snacks. But they will remember whether they wanted to be around you. They'll recall how you made them feel about themselves. For youngsters participating in their first few seasons of sports these memories, not your X's and O's, are the legacy you leave